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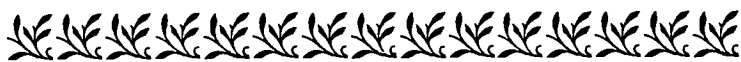
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# The Norton Anthology of English Literature

FOURTH EDITION



M. H. Abrams, *General Editor*

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will recognize, are selections which had been dropped from the first or second editions but are reintroduced by widespread demand. An overview here of the more important changes may help the teacher to appraise the teaching opportunities that this new edition provides.

Medieval selections now include the complete *Pearl* (in a new translation by Marie Borroff); a retranslation of *Piers Plowman*, with two passages on the Deadly Sins replacing "The Harrowing of Hell"; and new translations of three Old English poems. Among the added materials in the 16th century is the text of *Hero and Leander* as, according to the scholar, Louis L. Martz, it was originally written in a complete form, by Christopher Marlowe, with Chapman's unwarranted division into "Sestiads" deleted. The *Mutabilitie Cantos* of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* are now printed in their entirety, thereby providing a possible alternative to assigning the complete Book I, which is retained in this edition. The sections of More's *Utopia* are presented in Robert M. Adams's cogent new translation. There are new prose selections from Thomas Nashe's *Pierce Penniless* and from Hoby's influential translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier*. There are also additions to the lyrics by various poets and, in response to insistent demands, a number of changes in our representation of Shakespeare's sonnets. In a major innovation, Ben Jonson's *Volpone* has been added to the four Elizabethan and Jacobean plays in the previous edition, thereby creating a mini-anthology of the golden age of English dramatic literature. Other new items in the 17th century are Donne's complete *Anatomy of the World*; a number of songs from the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher; poems by Donne, Jonson, various Cavalier lyrists, Traherne, and Cowley; five poems by Herbert (attesting to the great current interest in that craftsman in verse); as well as a number of poems by Andrew Marvell (several on a single, related subject). The writings in prose now include Bacon's essay on *Masques and Triumphs*, and, to demonstrate the development of a prose adapted to practical and scientific exposition, selections from Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* and Isaac Newton's letter to the Society announcing his "New Theory about Light and Colors." The selections from *Paradise Lost* (already including four complete Books) have also been augmented so as to clarify the evolving relations between Adam and Eve, by Book V, lines 377-505 (before the Fall) and the concluding section of Book X (after the Fall).

In accord with many recommendations, Congreve's *The Way of The World* has been replaced by his more simply and coherently plotted *Love for Love*. Two poems by Lady Wortley Montagu, hitherto known mainly through footnotes to the writings of Alexander Pope, show her to have been a trenchant exponent of what women are, as against what male poets suppose them to be. There

is an added poem by Jonathan Swift (*Stella's Birthday*, 1721), and Pope's *Essay on Criticism* is now printed in its entirety. Additional essays are included from the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, while Dr. Johnson's writings have been supplemented by his *Brief to Free a Slave* and by materials from his great achievement, *A Dictionary of the English Language*—important sections of the Preface, as well as some of the more notable definitions. The selections from Thomson's *Seasons* and Cowper's *Task* have been improved. We have also added the "Peter Grimes" story from Crabbe's *The Borough*, as well as new odes by Thomson, Gray, and Collins.

To the Romantic section have been added two writers: Mary Wollstonecraft (the central sections from her pioneering treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, together with selections from her *Letters Written in Sweden*) and Mary Shelley (her remarkable Introduction to *Frankenstein* and a Gothic tale of the supernatural, *Transformation*). Two additional long works are Byron's complete *Manfred* and Shelley's urbane dialogue with Byron in his poem *Julian and Maddalo*. In response to numerous suggestions, we have added Burns's poem of homely realism, *To a Louse*, as well as several early Romantic poems written in the deliberately simple style—two more of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and another of Wordsworth's lyrical ballads, *Simon Lee*, in the version of 1798. We have also included three short items by Blake on natural religion and deism, added a third letter, and replaced the excerpts from *Jerusalem* by a complete and more readily intelligible instance of Blake's prophetic mode, *America: A Prophecy*. Wordsworth's *Prelude* is still represented (though in newly edited texts) by its first and last versions of 1799 (complete) and 1850; but the latter has been supplemented by some 300 lines, so as to reveal the complex internal design of that poem. Two new poems by Wordsworth exemplify moments of vision: *The Two April Mornings* and *Nutting*. The selections from Coleridge include an added section of *Biographia Literaria* on "rustic" language, and two excerpts from *The Statesman's Manual* on "Symbol and Allegory" and the "Satanic Hero." Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* has been supplemented by a passage on Prometheus's temptation by the Furies (Act I); Byron's *Childe Harold* has been expanded; and in his *Don Juan*, while Canto XVI (infrequently assigned) has been deleted, other Cantos have been supplemented: Canto II, for example, now includes Byron's description of cannibalism at sea. In the writings by Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey, furthermore, some essays have been replaced by others which, on the testimony of instructors, will be of greater use and interest to students.

The most conspicuous addition in the Victorian period is a complete play, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but there are numerous other innovations. Among the prose writ-

ings, we now have selections from Carlyle's *French Revolution*, an added passage from Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, and Pater's *The Child in the House*, which serves as a revealing introduction to that writer's characteristic concerns and literary artistry. *St. Agnes' Eve* has been added to Tennyson's poems; in response to persistent demand, there are also five new passages from *Maud*, and six additional sections from *In Memoriam* (6, 8, 12, 29, 105, 113) which clarify the structure, and bring the total selections to more than two-thirds of the entire poem. Other poets whose works are more fully represented are Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Meredith (six additional sonnets from *Modern Love*), Dante and Christina Rossetti, and William Morris. W. S. Gilbert has been added to the group now entitled "Light Verse." In a major reorganization, the section on "The Nineties" has been transferred from "The Twentieth Century" to the end of the Victorian section (where it belongs); it is strengthened not only by adding to the poems of Wilde and Dowson, but also by representing more fully the "heartly" writers of that decade—Rudyard Kipling and a new writer, William Ernest Henley.

The writers in "The Twentieth Century," like those in "The Victorian Age," have been reordered so as to make them more readily locatable. Conrad's long (and, to most students, too familiar) *Heart of Darkness* has been replaced by two short stories and a passage of critical comment on fiction; similarly, D.H. Lawrence's *The Fox* has been replaced by a new story, *The Princess*, a selection from the travel book *Mornings in Mexico*, and several often-demanded poems. As befits a major writer, the representation of Virginia Woolf has been signally increased; to *The Mark on the Wall* we add the title sketch from the one volume of short fiction she herself published, *Monday or Tuesday*, as well as *An Unwritten Novel* and several pieces of social and literary criticism, including an excerpt from *A Room of One's Own*. For the earlier selections from Yeats's autobiographic writings, we have substituted others which are more central to his life and work, and have replaced Joyce's short story, *Clay*, by his more lucid *Counterparts*. In line with a strong current interest, there is a substantial new section of "Poetry of World War I" which, in addition to poets in the previous edition (Brooke, Edward Thomas, Owen, Jones), now includes Siegfried Sassoon, Ivor Gurney, and Isaac Rosenberg. Other writers of verse and prose added in the present edition are Edith Sitwell, Katherine Mansfield, F. R. Leavis (a complete essay), Stevie Smith, and George Orwell. Shaw's *Major Barbara* has been replaced by the more teachable (and in its vigorous feminism, a very topical) play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. Samuel Beckett is now represented by a most characteristic short story, *The End*; and we have added to our long array of dramas Harold Pinter's very "modern" play,

*The Dumb Waiter*. The selections from Robert Graves and Hugh MacDiarmid have been altered. Finally, the passage of time and an emerging critical consensus have provided greater assurance in the choice of writers and writings for "Poetry after Mid-Century." The reconstituted section now includes two new poets, Molly Holden and Elaine Feinstein, as well as more recent selections by Donald Davie, Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Seamus Heaney.

It should be noted that the number and variety of the works included in the anthology make possible not only a chronological approach to major writers, but also generic or topical ways of organizing a course, or parts of a course. English poetry, in all its species and magnitudes, is of course represented fully, and now supplemented by the diversely useful sections on "Poems in Process." The broad spectrum of plays, augmented by four new titles, constitutes an overview of English drama in its various modes, starting with *The Second Shepherds' Play and Everyman*, ranging through Marlowe, Shakespeare (a history play and a tragedy), Jonson, Webster, two masques (Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* and Dryden's *Secular Masque*), a Restoration comedy of manners, two Romantic closet dramas (*Manfred*, complete, and *Prometheus Unbound*), Wilde's great farce, and Shaw's satiric social drama, and ending with a contemporary play by Harold Pinter. It is also possible to study the evolution of shorter forms of prose fiction, from *Pilgrim's Progress* through the narrative papers in the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, Defoe's *Mrs. Veal*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Johnson's *Rasselas*, and a great variety of short stories, including a Gothic tale by Mary Shelley and the diverse stories by Conrad, Forster, Woolf, Joyce, Mansfield, Beckett, and Lessing.

The third edition of the anthology undertook to redress the neglect of women in traditional literary study; the present edition has enlarged the representation of these authors, as well as of writings that deal with women in western culture. Literature centrally concerned with the social and sexual roles of women may be studied in a range from "the marriage group" in the *Canterbury Tales*, through many intervening works (e.g., *Paradise Lost*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *Rasselas*); to a number of poems and stories in our own age. Social and literary criticism specifically addressed to the situation of women is represented by selections from two classic works, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women*; by documents by George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, and other Victorians in the new section "The Woman Question," and by selections from Virginia Woolf. And the earlier list of women poets and writers of fiction has been enlarged by the inclusion of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Mary Shelley, Molly Holden, and Elaine Feinstein.

Many other topics can be profitably studied from materials in the present anthology, including such matters of current interest as (1) the imaginative response of writers to the changing aspects of war, from *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, to the many poems in "Poetry of World War I"; (2) the visionary mode in literature, as exemplified by Spenser's *Mutabilitie Cantos*, several 17th-century visionary poets, Christopher Smart, William Blake, a number of Romantic and Victorian representations, in verse and prose, of visions and dreams, and the poems and autobiographic writings of Yeats; (3) the persistent but ever-altering form of spiritual autobiography, crisis, and the quest for identity, as represented in Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, De Quincey's *Confessions*, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, Mill's *Autobiography*, Pater's *Child in the House*, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, and Eliot's *Little Gidding*.

The organization of the contents in each period of English literature has been simplified by putting in chronological order the authors, whether they wrote in verse or prose, as well as the titles written by each author; there are a few exceptions to this principle, most of them instances when it has seemed helpful to group short, related items under such headings as "Sixteenth-Century Lyrics," Victorian "Light Verse," or "Poetry of World War I."

In accord with our policy to adopt improved texts as they become available, we now print Jonathan Wordsworth's revised versions of *The Prelude* of 1799 and 1850 (from *Wordsworth's Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850: A Norton Critical Edition*, edited by Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill, 1979); Jack Stilling's new edition of Keats's *Poems* (Harvard University Press, 1978); the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins as edited by W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie (Oxford University Press, 4th edition, 1970); and the stories from Joyce's *Dubliners* in the definitive edition by Robert Scholes (1968). To make texts as accessible as possible to student readers, we have normalized spelling and capitalization (and, very sparingly, punctuation) according to modern American usage. There are two kinds of exceptions to this procedure. (1) We have left unaltered texts in which modernization would change semantic, phonological, or metric qualities, or would affect distinctive features of the original publications. Thus the verse of Spenser, Burns, Hopkins, MacDiarmid, and David Jones, as well as the prose of Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals* and of the writings of Carlyle, Joyce, and Shaw have been reproduced exactly. Only minor changes required for ready intelligibility (mainly in punctuation) have been made in the poems etched by William Blake. The works of Chaucer and other writers in Middle English that are not too difficult for the novice have also been left in the

original language; each word, however, is consistently spelled in that variant of its scribal forms which is closest to modern English.

(2) We have also left unaltered certain texts for which we use specially edited versions (identified in a headnote or footnote): Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* and *Letters from Sweden*, the two versions of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, all the verse and prose of Shelley and Keats, and the selections from Mary Shelley.

Each editor has reconsidered and rewritten (in some instances, radically) his introductory essays and headnotes and has revised his footnotes, both to take advantage of recent scholarship and in a continuing effort to make them as informative and clear as possible. In selected instances editorial headnotes or footnotes briefly indicate interpretations of a difficult work or passage. The reason for this procedure is a practical one. The anthology includes some of the most complex and difficult writings in the language, and the normal procedure is to assign some texts which there is not time to discuss adequately—or sometimes, to discuss at all—in the classroom. We therefore undertake to give an essential modicum of guidance to the student, but to present it in such a way as to open out possibilities for independent judgment and to provide, not definitive readings, but points of departure for dialogue in the classroom.

We continue other editorial procedures which have proved their usefulness in earlier editions. The historical and biographical introductions, although succinct, are informative enough to eliminate the need for supplementary books on the lives of authors and on the literary, social, and cultural history of England. In most introductions we identify at the beginning a few dates which are important for orienting the student. After each work we cite (when known) the date of composition on the left and the date of first publication on the right; in some instances the latter is followed by the date of a revised reprinting. Texts which include a large proportion of unfamiliar words are glossed in the margin, so that readers may assimilate the translation without interrupting the flow of their reading. In the limited instances when part of a work has been omitted, that fact is indicated by the word *From* before the title, and the place of the omission in the text is indicated by three asterisks.

The selected bibliographical guides at the end of each volume are designed to encourage students to read further on their own, and also to serve as points of departure in assigned essays. In this edition all the bibliographies have been brought up to date, and the authors and subgroups within each period have been put in alphabetic order. In both volumes a brief glossary of terms is provided under the title "Poetic Forms and Literary Terminology."

We have also added, in Volume 1, illustrations of two subjects in



which graphic representations are of special value: a drawing of the universe according to Ptolemy, and exterior and interior views of a London playhouse of Shakespeare's time (drawn especially for us by C. Walter Hodges, author of *The Globe Restored*).

To the hundreds of teachers throughout the United States and Canada who have helped us to design and improve these volumes, the editors express their deep gratitude; we cannot name every one of them here, but all will recognize the changes that they have suggested. A separate list of "Acknowledgments" names advisors who provided detailed critiques of the anthology as a whole or of particular periods, or were especially helpful in the preparation of texts and editorial matter. We wish to mention here the assistance of Jennifer Sutherland, Valerie Eads, John W. N. Francis, and of Diane O'Connor, Marjorie Flock, Nelda Freeman, Marian Johnson, Tam Putnam, Josepha Gutelius, Roy Tedoff, Hugh O'Neill, and James Mairs of Norton's production department; we also owe thanks to Norman McAfee; to Julie Aidelberg of Cornell University; to Susan Metzger of the Harvard University Press; to Barbara Zimmerman; and to Barbara and Paul Bodin. Our greatest debt is to George P. Brockway and John Benedict of W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., who have helped mitigate the chronic dilemmas in the continuing process of representing, justly, accurately, and in accord with changing interests and advancing knowledge, the immense scope of English literature within a single book.

M. H. ABRAMS





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The Norton Anthology  
of English Literature

FOURTH EDITION

VOLUME 1






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# The Middle Ages

( to 1485 )

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- ca. 450: Anglo-Saxon Conquest.  
597: St. Augustine arrives in Kent; beginning of Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity.  
871–899: Reign of King Alfred.  
1066: Norman Conquest.  
ca. 1200: Beginnings of Middle English literature.  
1360–1400: The summit of Middle English literature: Geoffrey Chaucer; *Piers Plowman*; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.  
1485: William Caxton's printing of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, one of the first books printed in England.

The medieval period in English literature extends for more than 800 years, from Cædmon's *Hymn* at the end of the 7th century to *Everyman* at the end of the 15th. Historians used to divide this period into two parts, calling the earlier centuries the Dark Ages in order to distinguish their quality from that of the later centuries, when European culture attained one of the summits of its history. Though this distinction is misleading—for the Dark Ages were only relatively dark—it is nevertheless true that the English Middle Ages embraced two quite different periods of literary history, the Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) and the Middle English, sharply divided from each other by the Norman duke William's conquest of the island in 1066. Both English culture and the English language changed radically in the years following this event, and English literature was given a new spirit.

Because it is impossible to read the Old English language without a great deal of study, Old English texts printed in this book are given in translation. Middle English texts such as Chaucer's, written in a dialect which is the ancestor of Modern Standard English, appear in the original, but have been spelled in a way that it is hoped will aid the reader. Middle English texts written in the more difficult regional dialects are given in translation. Analyses of the sounds and grammar of Middle English, and of Old and Middle English prosody, appear at the end of this introduction.

## THE ANGLO-SAXONS AND THE HEROIC IDEAL

The Anglo-Saxon invasion of the island of Britain which began in the first half of the 5th century was a phase of a great folk migration that had started some centuries earlier and was to continue for several more—the movement of the Germanic tribes from the northeast of Europe into the areas of the Roman Empire to the west, south, and southeast. The so-called Anglo-Saxon invaders of Britain actually consisted of three tribes, the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. Although each was independent, through their common Germanic heritage these tribes were closely allied with one another and with the many other tribes that already had or would in the future overrun much of the old Roman Empire. They shared the same pre-historic ancestors: even in historical times their individual tongues amounted to little other than variant dialects of a common language, while the customs of one tribe differed little from those of another.

In its earliest period Germanic society had been organized by families: the head of the family was the chief of his close kinsmen, and the family formed an independent political entity. With the passing of time, the unit of society tended to grow larger as a number of families united under a single superior chieftain or “king,” to use the word derived from the Old Germanic name for chief. But the unit grew to be very large only rarely, when some particularly successful king attracted others to him in order to perform some specific exploit; and such larger unions rarely endured long after the completion of the venture for which they had been formed. The normal order of society was made up of a number of small bands, which, while they did not always live at peace with one another, still shared a sense of community and kinship, especially in the face of a common enemy such as the people whose lands they were invading; but when they had conquered, their natural political divisiveness reasserted itself. Thus long after the Anglo-Saxons had become settled in Britain, the island was still broken up into a bewildering number of kingdoms, some of them very short-lived, and a coherent union of all Englishmen was not achieved until after the Norman conquest.

The same general organization of many kings coexisting within a common culture had been characteristic of that other migratory people, the Greeks (or, more accurately, Achaeans), who centuries earlier had overrun the region of the eastern Mediterranean. And both to the Achaeans and to the Germanic peoples the ideal of kingly behavior was enormously important—indeed, it was perhaps the chief spiritual force behind the civilizations they both developed, the creative power that, in their earliest periods, shaped their history and their literature. It is generally called the heroic ideal; and put most simply, the heroic ideal was excellence. The hero-king strove to do better than anyone else the things that an essentially migratory life demanded: to sail a ship through a storm, to swim a river or a bay, to tame a horse, to choose a campsite and set firm defenses, in times of peace even to plow a field or build a hall, but always and above all, to fight. Skill and courage were the primary qualities of a king who should successfully lead his people in battle and sustain them during peace.

In its oldest form, the ideal was appropriate only to kings, but because society was so closely knit, all the more important male members of the tribe tended to imitate it. (Germanic society was wholly dominated by



males: women are rarely mentioned in the surviving records of it, and only if they are the wives or daughters of kings.) In general, of course, the heroic ideal of conduct was aristocratic, restricted to the king and his immediate retainers, though without that quality of unreality and remoteness from daily life that we associate with later medieval aristocracy. The king was the active leader of a small number of fellow warriors who, as members of his household, beheld all that he did. A successful king won from his retainers complete loyalty. It was their duty to defend him in battle, to give up their own lives while defending or avenging his. In return the king gave his retainers gifts from the spoil that had been accumulated in warfare. Royal generosity was one of the most important aspects of heroic behavior, for it symbolized the excellence of the king's rule, implying on the one hand that the retainers deserved what they were given because of their loyalty to him, and, on the other, showing that he himself was worthy of such loyalty. The heroic ideal had a very practical bearing on the life of the people whom the king ruled.

While the heroic ideal would win practical success for a king, it had also another, perhaps more important end—enduring fame. In cultures whose religion, unlike Christianity, offers no promise of an afterlife, a name that will live on after one's death serves as the closest substitute for immortality. From this arises the heroic paradox, still latent in our own civilization, that by dying gloriously one may achieve immortality. The poet who could sing the story of his heroic life was, of course, the agent upon whom the hero depended for his fame, and a good poet—or bard, to use the customary term for the poet of heroic life—was a valued member of a primitive court. Alexander is said to have expressed envy of Achilles because he had had a Homer to celebrate his deeds. The poetic form which primitive bards evolved for their heroic narratives is called "epic"; it is characterized by a solemn dignity of tone and elevation of style. Their poems were not written down, but recited aloud from memory, and hence most of them have been lost: in Greek there have survived Homer's two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, while from Germanic culture the chief survivor is the Old English *Beowulf*. But enough has been preserved to show the enduring popularity of heroic stories throughout the migratory phase of the two peoples, who never tired of hearing the deeds of their folk heroes. Thus the immortality that the old heroes had sought was achieved through poetry, and poetry in turn gave inspiration to later men in leading their own lives.

#### CHRISTIANITY AND OLD ENGLISH CULTURE

Whatever literary materials the Anglo-Saxons brought with them when they came to Britain existed only in their memories, for the making of written records was something they learned only when they were converted to Christianity. The Celtic inhabitants whose land they were seizing were Christians, as had been the Romans whose forces had occupied the island since the 1st century and whose withdrawal at the beginning of the 5th had opened the way to the Anglo-Saxons; but for 150 years after the beginning of the invasion Christianity was maintained only in the remoter regions where the Anglo-Saxons failed to penetrate. In the year 597, however, St. Augustine was sent by Pope Gregory as a missionary to King Ethelbert of Kent, one of the most southerly of the kingdoms into which England was divided, and about the same time missionaries from Ireland began to preach

Christianity in the north. Within 75 years the island was once more predominantly Christian. Ethelbert himself was one of the first Englishmen to be converted, and it is indicative of the relationship between Christianity and writing that the first written specimen of the Old English (Anglo-Saxon) language is a code of laws promulgated by the first English Christian king.

In the centuries that followed up till the Norman Conquest England produced a large number of distinguished, highly literate churchmen. One of the earliest of these was Bede, whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in Latin, was completed in 731; this remains our most important source of knowledge about the Anglo-Saxon period. In the next generation Alcuin, a man of wide culture, became the friend and advisor of the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne, whom he assisted in making the Frankish court a great center of learning: thus by the year 800 English culture had developed so richly that it overflowed its insular boundaries. But the greatest impetus on English culture came from a man who was not of the clergy: Alfred, king of the West Saxons from 871 to 899, who for a time united all the kingdoms of southern England and beat off those new Germanic invaders, the Vikings. This most active king was an enthusiastic patron of literature. He himself translated various works from Latin, the most important of which was Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, the early 6th-century Roman work whose heroic stoicism has proved continually congenial to the English temperament. Apparently under Alfred's direction Bede's *History* was also translated into Old English, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was begun: this year-by-year record of important events in England was maintained until the middle of the 12th century. Furthermore, the preservation of many of the surviving earlier English works, including *Beowulf*, is due to the fact that copies of them were made in the West Saxon dialect because, in large part, of the impetus Alfred gave to literary studies. Though the political stability that Alfred achieved was not long-lived, the culture he nourished so lovingly was maintained at a high level until the very end of the Old English period.

#### OLD ENGLISH POETRY

The genius for heroic poetry the Anglo-Saxons brought with them when they came to Britain, as they probably also brought with them the alliterative form (see the section on "Old and Middle English Prosody") in which all the Old English poetry that has survived was composed. Since they wrote nothing down until they had become Christianized, and since in many respects Christian ideals and heroic ideals are antipathetic, it is natural that very little poetry has survived that is surely pre-Christian in composition. But much of *Beowulf*, the greatest of Germanic epics, is evidently pre-Christian, even though the author of the particular form of the poem that has come down to us was a Christian who refers to events of the Old (but not of the New) Testament. Several other short pieces or fragments also seem to reflect the pagan period without Christian coloring. Yet the vast bulk of Old English poetry is specifically Christian, devoted to religious subjects. Interestingly enough, however, it is almost all in the heroic mode: while the Anglo-Saxons adapted themselves readily to the ideals of Christianity, they did not do so without adapting Christianity to their own heroic ideal. In order to make the alien world of the Bible intelligible to their

hearers, Old English poets (almost all of whom are nameless) infused it with many of the values that they had inherited from their own history. Thus Moses and St. Andrew, Christ and God the Father share the attributes of a *Beowulf*, are represented as heroes who performed famous deeds. In the *Dream of the Rood*, the Cross speaks of Christ as "the young hero, . . . strong and stouthearted," whose crucifixion is less a passion than an heroic action. In *Cædmon's Hymn* the creation of heaven and earth is seen as a mighty deed, an "establishment of wonders" not altogether unlike Hrothgar's building of the hall Heorot in *Beowulf*. The sad consciousness of the transience of all earthly good combined with the compulsion to go on striving—so characteristic of the heroic spirit—appears most poignantly in two Christian laments, the *Wanderer* and the *Seafarer*. That the heroic ideal held its value down to the end of the Old English period is shown by the *Battle of Maldon*, in which the defeat of English defenders by a band of marauding Vikings is described in the highest tradition of Germanic heroism. Against doom, there is only courage.

The world of Old English poetry is a dark one, and to a modern reader it may also seem a narrow one with narrow laws that exclude all but sardonic laughter. Men in the mead-hall are said to be cheerful, but even there they think of struggle in war, of possible triumph but more possible failure. Romantic love—one of the principal topics of later literature—appears hardly at all. Men seem seldom to relax: clothed in their armor, they are always preparing to test their courage against fate. (They are, indeed, so habitually seen as warriors that in the earlier poetry the words for "man" and "warrior" are often interchangeable.) Depressing as this world may seem, it is recreated in Old English poetry with extraordinary intensity, with high spiritual excitement. This excitement is achieved in part by the frequent use of ironic understatement. Actions and things are spoken of as less than they really are because, apparently, the speaker wishes to suggest that they are more—or perhaps other—than they are. "They cared not for battle," says the author of the *Battle of Maldon* about those cowardly Englishmen who fled the fight. Even the "kenning," that highly formalized compound metaphor common to Old Germanic poetry, often seems to suggest potentials ironically—"whale's road" or "swan's path" for a sea so perilous for men lacking the physical equipment of whales and swans. The dignity the Anglo-Saxons assigned to poetry—which was the repository of the ancient traditions by which they lived—apparently prevented the humor latent in ironic understatement from reaching any expression more overt than a grim smile. Yet despite its somberness, Old English poetry goes about its business of depicting harsh reality with an extraordinary subtlety and intensity.

#### THE NORMAN CONQUEST AND ITS EFFECTS.

In the year 1066 England was once more invaded and conquered by a Germanic people, though one whose culture was widely different from the Anglo-Saxons. The Normans—the name is actually a form of "Norsemen"—were the descendants of Scandinavian adventurers who at the beginning of the 10th century had seized a wide part of northern France. A highly adaptable nation, they had adopted the language of the land they had settled in and had set up a powerful state; while its ruler was technically a duke subject to the king of France, Normandy was actually an independent

political entity. The invasion of England was led by the energetic Duke William. The English were divided and irresolute; at the decisive Battle of Hastings they were defeated by the Normans and their leader Harold was killed. Thereafter William's forces overran much of England, and the Norman duke became its king and insured the succession to his descendants. But, kings of England though they were, he and his followers were not as much interested in the country he had won (though they were constantly fighting the Welsh, the Scots, and their own barons for control of parts or the whole of it) as they were in their continental possessions. The first seven English kings were mostly absentee rulers—and their presence within the kingdom was seldom less troublesome for it than their absence from it. It was not, indeed, until the 13th century, with the reign of Henry III (1216–72) that England became the principal concern of its kings. And it was not until the very end of the Middle Ages that English monarchs finally gave up trying to make good their continental claims and became, perforce, purely English.

The immediate effect of the Norman Conquest upon English literature was to remove it from the care of the aristocracy—the spiritual if not actual descendants of the Anglo-Saxon kings and their retainers—and to deprive it of that cohesive spirit that it had previously possessed. The great aristocratic households, which were the centers of pre-Conquest cultural activity, were broken up or parceled out to the Conqueror's Norman barons, and the English aristocracy was either displaced or forced into service with the invaders. For a considerable time, even the English language seems to have fallen into disuse as a vehicle for written literature, for very little survives of English between the Conquest and the year 1200. Initially, men of education who continued to produce literary works wrote either in Latin or in Anglo-Norman, the dialect of French that was spoken by the new rulers of England. But since the practical Normans were less preoccupied with culture than the English, the literature in Anglo-Norman was not very distinguished and was not very long-enduring, hardly surviving the reign of Edward I (1272–1307). Latin, which had always been and continued to be the language of the international church, produced a fairly rich literature in England during this period—especially in the 12th century. But throughout the Middle Ages, Latin literature remained essentially conservative and remote, not much dealing with the subjects that are of importance in the development of vernacular literature. Thus for more than a century the twin snobberies—social on the part of Anglo-Norman, intellectual on the part of Latin—probably pre-empted the energies of educated men who might at an earlier or a later time have written in English.

But even if the educated were writing literature in other languages, the uneducated were undoubtedly continuing to compose—if not to write—in English. When written English literature begins to reappear at the end of the 12th century, the larger part of it carries the stamp of popular or at least semi-popular origin; indeed, considered in its bulk, Middle English literature is a popular literature. Its origin in the orders of society below the top provides its most striking contrast with Old English literature: most of the latter seems to be uttered by a single aristocratic voice, grave, decorous, responsible, speaking in terms of high communal aspirations. Middle English literature, on the other hand, is uttered by a medley of different voices,

dealing with a wide range of topics in a great diversity of styles and tones and genres. Originality of thought, to be sure, is a rare feature of this literature, for no matter how diverse the voices may be, they often seem to be saying precisely the same things as each other. Yet Middle English literature has virtues not found in Old English. Because its writers addressed themselves to a popular audience, they achieved a greater immediacy, a greater recognizability; a modern reader experiences little difficulty in understanding the world they are talking about. The change is perhaps most obvious in the narrative of adventure, where the idealized hero of Old English yields place to the more sympathetic if less admirable man who not only fights and fights again, but also laughs and cries, plays games, and, above all, falls in and out of love—the non-aristocratic man was the readier to supplant the epic hero because a mature Christianity places as much value on a plain man's soul as it does on an epic hero's. In dealing with this new kind of hero the writer's imaginative perspective was broadened as much, perhaps, as his ability to see deeply was decreased. And the perspective now included women, who became, finally, recognized as half of the human race. True, they appear ordinarily as stereotypes, whether in romance and love lyric or in anti-feminist satire—that enormous body of literature that had its foundation in the monastic culture that dominated so much of European thought in the Middle Ages. But woman's place in society was, in any case, recognized in literature, and this recognition undoubtedly reflects a changing attitude in history itself. There are no arch-feminists in literature before Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, but she could never have been invented, even by a Chaucer, unless she had had recognizable forebears, with independent minds and incomes, in Bath and elsewhere before Chaucer's time.

While the portrayal of life in Middle English literature is often shallow, it is nevertheless a life in which we find much that evokes our sympathy. Sometimes, when it is portrayed as lively and gay, colorful, full of surprise, its attractiveness earns our active appreciation, and even when some austere moralist reduces human experience to mere wretchedness we may experience amid the overlying gloom the sudden charm of poignancy. Lack of profound vision does not prevent an accurate presentation of the details of life from being pleasing and sometimes moving. And humor—the chief virtue of Middle English literature—is apt to flash anywhere, even in the most solemn and foreboding of moralizations.

The lack of originality in Middle English literature is partly due to the attempt by many writers, both religious and secular, to make their works reflect the unchanging principles of medieval Christian doctrine. Until almost the end of the 14th century Christian teaching was primarily concerned with the issue of personal salvation, putting more emphasis on the moral and spiritual responsibilities of the individual than it did on his ethical or social responsibilities. Medieval religious idealism characteristically looked to the world to come for the only answer to men's troubles and considered the reformation of this world neither possible nor especially desirable. So constant is the attitude that life in this world is only a waiting period before we enter something better (or worse) that the modern reader is apt to get the impression that the Middle Ages was a period of intellectual and social stasis, a period in which time was standing still. And the

fact is that not only in specifically moral and doctrinal literature, whose premises are timeless, but also in ephemeral literature designed merely to provide entertainment one senses this unchangingness: a romance written at the beginning of the 13th century differs little from one written in the 15th (with which it shares its plot), and at the very end of the period Malory is still peopling with his knights a never-never land of chivalry that had its origin in 12th-century France.

It is clear enough that between 1066 and 1485 England underwent large political and social changes—in the developments in feudalism, the gradual evolution of Parliament, the growth of cities and of the middle class along with the increase in foreign trade, and in many other similar phenomena. But apparently the changes occurred too slowly to produce much intellectual awareness of them on the part of writers. The great exception—to this and to all other generalizations—is Chaucer, whose pages are informed, especially in his handling of the bourgeois, by an excited sense of the novelty of social life in his own times. Langland's *Piers Plowman* also possesses something of this quality—though without Chaucer's tone of approval. But in an age where most people were born in the same village where their grandparents had been born and lived virtually the same lives, doing the same work with the same tools, enjoying the same sports and the same festivals, large slow-moving change is probably bound to be imperceptible to all but the most acute observers—imperceptible and, if perceived, disapproved.

But if in a broad historical sense change was imperceptible, in the daily lives of medieval men it was all too visible. Indeed, the inevitability of change—for the worse, even in the lives of people already apparently wholly wretched—is one of the most insistently repetitive themes of Middle English literature. Nor is this theme to be thought of merely as another expression of the world-hating doctrine. Rather, the theme and the world-hating doctrine itself are both results of the violence of life in the Middle Ages, a violence not matched again in western history until our own times. Famine, war, pestilence, and death—these are the riders who passed through the streets of medieval cities and villages by night and by day. The fact that eight of the eighteen kings who ruled England between 1066 and 1485 died deaths of violence or deaths resulting from violent activity is characteristic of the times. Men hardly less august were also constantly meeting death in battles, or by murder, or by accident, or, not infrequently, on the scaffold before a fascinated populace. The chroniclers who record these events say little of the lower orders of society, but constant warfare against enemies at home and abroad, the depredations of the powerful in supplying themselves from the fruits of the toil of the poor, the fearful severity of the laws combined with the failure to enforce them against the strong, and, especially after the middle of the 14th century, recurrent pestilence compounded by famine—all these explain why change for the worse seems to have been the unchanging expectation of medieval people. And, even in the temporary absence of these events, the coldness and darkness of an English winter for people living in badly insulated dwellings with only minimal heat and light might well seem to make life a bleak perpetual twilight.

In view of the violence prevalent during most of the period, it is perhaps extraordinary that so much literature was produced. But even in the worst of times things are not always and everywhere at their worst; spring does

come, and some people get through life almost untouched by disasters that seem historically to be omnipresent. And the fact is that, except in its most ruthlessly world-hating forms, Middle English literature is often permeated by a curious normality, and is, indeed, less preoccupied with its age's violence than we are with ours, probably because people then never conceived of a time when violence was not a fact of life. Despite being constantly warned to expect change for the worse, people in the Middle Ages seem, in their daily lives, to have pursued the same pleasures that we pursue today—pursued them with rather more relish because they were rarer: this is clear from the accounts both of those who approved of the pursuit and of those who did not. As the general atmosphere of violence suggests, medieval society was in some ways more primitive than our own—or more frankly primitive—and may thus seem to us more childlike. People took tremendous pleasure in color, in dress, in ritual, in parades, in spectacles, in elaborate food and drink (when they could get them), in all those aspects of life that children especially love, and most adults do not scorn. Like children, medieval people were subject to emotional extremes—they wept more quickly than we do, went more quickly from weeping to laughter and back again, were headstrong and hasty, quick to sin zestily and to repent heartily and then to sin and repent again. Yet it is a mistake to overemphasize this childishness: their life was physically more limited than ours, without our comforts, our mobility, our communications; it was even more precarious, more uncertain; but as it is reflected in the best writers, they lived their life very richly and perhaps with greater awareness and greater savor than we do ours.

#### MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

It has been said earlier that from the century and a half after the Conquest very little English literature has survived; and it is probable that in that period very little was written. But that literature was still being composed, if not written down, during the period is suggested by the first considerable Middle English poem to have come down to us: this is Layamon's *Brut*, written about 1205 in an alliterative prosody that is clearly directly descended from the Old English poetic measure, though the subtleties of the older measure have disappeared. Apparently, at least for oral purposes, alliterative poetry never ceased to be composed, as is further suggested by its reappearance later in written form in the so-called "alliterative revival" of the 14th century, which culminated in *Piers Plowman* and *Sir Gawayn and the Green Knight*. Layamon's *Brut* is also interesting because it contains the first treatment in English of the Arthurian legend, the story that was to catch the imagination of so many English writers of later times. Layamon's source was a Norman work by the poet Wace, which was in turn based on the Englishman Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *History of the Kings of Britain*. According to the old tradition, England had been founded by one Brutus who was a descendant of the Trojan Aeneas, the founder of Rome, and after whom Britain was named (hence the title *Brut*). Of Brutus' descendants the most distinguished was Arthur, who according to the legend freed Britain from the Roman yoke and successfully defended it from the Anglo-Saxon invaders. It is a double curiosity about the Arthurian legend that not only did the British (Celtic) Arthur become in later centuries the great legendary hero of Englishmen—whose ancestors he was presumably successful in beating off the island—but also that the Arthurian

legend itself reached its fullest development in France, whither it may have been brought by Celts crossing the channel to Brittany—some of them perhaps fleeing from the Anglo-Saxons. In any case, after Geoffrey and Layamon, England produced no original writers on Arthur—as opposed to translators from the French—until the poet of *Gawain* (whom some critics suspect of translating) and Malory—also a translator, but on so grand a scale as to rank as truly original.

Both Layamon and the poet of *Beowulf* dealt with legendary materials which they thought of as history. Layamon's treatment, however, is different from (and far less impressive than) the epic mode of *Beowulf*: it moves toward the genre, so characteristic of the later Middle Ages, known as "romance." The romance has certain typical features: it generally concerns knights and involves a large amount of fighting as well as a number of miscellaneous adventures; it makes liberal use of the improbable, often of the supernatural; it is often—though not always—involved with romantic love; characterization is standardized, so that heroes, heroines, and wicked stewards could easily move from one romance to another without causing any disturbance in the narrative; the plots generally consist of a great number of events, and the same event is apt to occur several times within the same romance; and the style is apt to be easy and colloquial—not infrequently loose and repetitious.

Although it was enormously popular in medieval England—it makes up a large fraction of the total of preserved Middle English literature—Middle English romance is apt to disappoint the modern reader. Unfortunately, very few accomplished poets—the *Gawain*-poet and Chaucer are two of the principal exceptions—turned their hand to romance; it was apparently left largely to minstrels and other uncultivated versifiers addressing a semi-literate audience, often in dog-trot verse full of windy clichés. The great age of medieval romance had been the 12th and early 13th centuries, and its chief breeding ground had been aristocratic society in France, where such poets as Chrétien de Troyes spun their marvelously sophisticated tales. The Middle English purveyors of romance, functioning before non-aristocratic audiences in the second half of the 13th and in the 14th century, introduced the French romances into English (the majority of the surviving English romances are either proved or suspected adaptations from the French). The result of the lag in time and change in audience is artistically unfortunate, though often unintentionally amusing. Aristocratic ideals of behavior of a different era and an alien society were replaced by patterns of behavior that could be easily comprehended by bourgeois and lower-class Englishmen. Heroes who have all the accouterments of the most chivalrous of knights are apt to behave in the crudest fashion, whether they are fighting, eating, or making love: they act as a petty bourgeois might if suddenly given an opportunity to enjoy the high scale of living of chivalric aristocracy with no education in how such a life should be conducted. Nevertheless, it is often agreeable to watch the blunt Englishman who replaced the aristocratic hero react with practical common sense to the extravagant situations in which the poem has placed him. And there is one very charming exception to the rule that translation brings deterioration: *Sir Orfeo*, apparently based on a lost French poem recasting the classical legend of Orpheus and Eurydice, transmits much of that delicacy and magic which the reader who first approaches medieval romance expects to find in it.



By far the larger proportion of surviving Middle English literature is religious, though it is not necessarily true that an equal proportion of the literature actually composed in Middle English was religious. The church had a virtual monopoly on literacy during much of the Middle Ages, for the average person who had learned to read and write probably had done so because he had signified his intention (not always fulfilled) of becoming a cleric—that is, an ecclesiast, performing one of the many functions of the church: otherwise, he would probably not have received any but the most elementary kind of education. Furthermore, the church not only had this direct claim upon the services of the majority of literate men but also was itself a large producer of books in the physical sense (books were actually hand-written manuscripts) as well as a maintainer (especially in monasteries) of libraries. Therefore it is quite natural that religious literature should bulk large. But the literature that has been lost probably contained a very large number of secular items. Professional storytellers such as minstrels committed to memory tales that they had heard others recite or had composed themselves and did not trouble to write down—if, indeed, they could write. Their stories depended for survival on some literate hearer who thought them worth recording—and perhaps few clerics would take the trouble. And even secular literature that had been recorded might sometimes be lost because of the low esteem in which it was held by austere churchmen who would enforce St. Paul's precept that everything that is written ought to express specific Christian doctrine: when library shelves became crowded, it was probably the secular works that were removed to make room for books more beneficial to the spirit.

Unfortunately, good doctrine is not necessarily good literature, and the larger part of Middle English religious writing is literature at all only in the broadest sense of that word: sermons, homilies, saints' lives, penitential tracts, manuals for priests, mystical writings, lyric poems, moral allegories, stories of miracles—all the possible genres of religious writing are represented profusely, though not, in quality, richly. An occasional individual work distinguishes itself strikingly from the surrounding drabness—for instance, the very early *Ancrene Riwle*, or "Rule for Anchoresses" (female religious recluses), or a late lyric like *I Sing of a Maiden*. But the brilliant exceptions are few and far between: few minds were able to sustain originality amid the oppressive conventionality of doctrine and response to doctrine. And few educated people before the time of Chaucer seem to have had the temerity to venture into the secular. We are fortunate that the work of one such person, the author of the early *Owl and the Nightingale*, has survived, for this humorous debate between birds is the most original and Chaucer-like poem before Chaucer himself.

During the last quarter of the 14th century Middle English literature flowered suddenly and inexplicably in three great poets, writing at almost the same time and giving supreme artistic expression to almost all the characteristic genres of Middle English. The author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* not only produced the best romance of the entire period, but also wrote some of its best religious poetry; his Biblical narrative in alliterative verse, *Patience*, the story of Jonah, is rivaled only by certain Old English poems. In the *Pearl* he combined elegy with theology to produce the most moving religious poem—and the most finely wrought poem—of the

\* Paul never said that. He was taken out of context & misinterpreted.

English later Middle Ages. William Langland's achievement in *Piers Plowman* is important both in literature and in history, since he faced squarely the great religious and social issues of his day—and these became the great issues of the following century and a half: imitations of *Piers Plowman* which borrow both Piers himself and Langland's anti-ecclesiastical satire played an important part in bringing on the reformation of the church which Langland prophesied but would have deplored. Needless to say, no imitator approaches Langland in the extraordinary originality of his weaving together of all sorts of genres of religious literature, from the most menacing sermon to the most dazzling lyric. Geoffrey Chaucer's achievement was greatest of all. The new perspective which English literature after the Conquest had attained had revealed broader horizons, but they were too broad and too clouded with distractions to enable the average writer to bring everything into clear focus. It takes a powerfully disciplined mind to comprehend infinite variety in a single artistic vision. Such a mind was Chaucer's. While he was entirely rooted in the soil of the Middle Ages and tried his hand at a large number of medieval genres, his art is so fully realized as to carry him out of the Middle Ages and make him one of the two or three greatest poets in English.

This sudden florescence in the *Gawain*-poet, Langland, and Chaucer may have been partly due to patronage of literature by the well-to-do. Chaucer was a "court" poet who seems to have been encouraged not only by John of Gaunt but perhaps also by Gaunt's father, Edward III (died 1377), as well as by his nephew Richard II (deposed 1399), and, in the last year of the poet's life, by Gaunt's son, Henry IV. The *Gawain*-poet probably wrote for a provincial aristocratic court, remote from London but no less interested in literary art. Even William Langland seems to have enjoyed patronage, but from what source it is hard to be sure; it is probable that at one time or another he was sheltered by monasteries, and it is not unlikely that he ended his life in one. In any case English literature is fortunate that these three great contemporary poets all found encouragement from one source or another.

But patronage does not assure great poetry. Chaucer's friend, the poet John Gower, also enjoyed royal patronage, but he has not proved much of a threat to Chaucer's reputation. He seems a far more typically medieval writer than Chaucer: he wrote three works which, linguistically at least, summarized the English Middle Ages: one in Latin, one in Norman French, and one, *Confessio Amantis* ("The Lover's Confession"), in English. Were it not for its proximity to Chaucer, this last would probably be rated somewhat higher than it has been, for it is a work of considerable skill and interest. And it is certainly infinitely superior to anything produced by the English poets of the next century, some of whom enjoyed patronage but all of whom seem, after Chaucer, to represent regression into the worst vices of medieval literature. The most Chaucerian of Chaucer's followers are, indeed, Scotsmen, and the best of them, Robert Henryson and William Dunbar, who often reflect Chaucer's satirical spirit and his liveliness, belong not to the medieval period but to the Renaissance.

Yet if the 15th century in England lacks great names (Thomas Malory alone enjoys a high reputation as a literary artist), it is nevertheless a period in which popular literature flourished. Some of the best lyrics, religious and

secular, date from this time; and this was also the century in which many of the ballads were composed. It was also the period of much activity in drama. The mystery plays, which had probably become established in the previous century, continued to be performed widely, and the cycles of these religious dramas that have been preserved from York, Chester, and Wakefield date from the 15th century. The same century saw the development of the morality play, culminating in *Everyman*. The authors of the plays, ballads, and lyrics of the century are nameless; aside from the plays, manuscripts of which were kept only by the towns in which the performances were given, these anonymous works were probably transmitted orally and only haphazardly written down. Fortunately for the future history of English literature, Malory's *Morte Darthur*, written during its author's long sojourn in prison, did not have to depend on the chance survival of a manuscript; it was printed in 1485 by William Caxton, who had introduced printing by movable type to England less than ten years earlier. Malory's is the last great medieval work of literature. Using mostly French sources, Malory put together a history of King Arthur and his knights which, while wholly fictional, has received much the same honor from later Englishmen that earlier Englishmen accorded *Beowulf*.

### MEDIEVAL ENGLISH

The medieval works in this book were composed in two different states of our language: Old English, the language which took shape among the Germanic settlers of England and preserved its integrity until the Norman Conquest radically altered English civilization; and Middle English, the earliest records of which date from the early 12th century and which gave way to Modern English shortly after the introduction of printing at the end of the 15th century. Old English is a very heavily inflected language (that is, the words change form to indicate changes in usage, such as person, number, tense, case, mood, etc. Most languages have some inflection—for example, the personal pronouns in Modern English have different forms when used as objects—but a "heavily inflected" language is one in which almost all classes of words undergo elaborate patterns of change). Its vocabulary is almost entirely Germanic. In Middle English, the inflectional system was weakened; and a large number of words were introduced into it from France, so that many of the older native words disappeared. Because of the difficulty of Old English, all selections from it in this book have been given in translation. In order that the reader may see an example of the language, *Cædmon's Hymn* has been printed in the original, together with an interlinear translation. The present discussion, then, is concerned only with Middle English.

The chief difficulty with Middle English for the modern reader is caused not by its inflections so much as by its spelling, which may be described as a rough-and-ready phonetic system, and by the fact that it is not a single standardized language, but consists of a number of regional dialects each with its own peculiarities of sound and its own systems for representing sounds in writing. The Midland dialect—the dialect of London and of Chaucer, and the ancestor of our own standard speech—differs greatly from the dialect spoken in the west of England (the original

dialect of *Piers Plowman*), and from that of the northwest (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), and from that of the north (*The Second Shepherds' Play*), and these dialects differ from one another. In this book, the long texts composed in the more difficult dialects have been translated or modernized; and those which, like Chaucer, *Everyman*, the lyrics, and the ballads, appear in the original, have been respelled in a way that it is hoped will aid the reader. The remarks which follow apply chiefly to Chaucer's Midland English, though certain non-Midland dialectal variations are noted if they occur in some of the other selections.

#### I. THE SOUNDS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH: GENERAL RULES

The following general analysis of the sounds of Middle English will enable the reader who has not time for detailed study to read Middle English aloud so as to preserve some of its most essential characteristics, without, however, giving heed to many important details. Section II, Detailed Analysis, is designed for the reader who wishes to go more deeply into the pronunciation of Middle English.

Middle English differs from Modern English in three principal respects: 1. the pronunciation of the long vowels *a*, *e*, *i* (or *y*), *o*, and *u* (spelled *ou*, *ow*); 2. the fact that Middle English final *e* is often sounded; 3. the fact that all Middle English consonants are sounded.

##### 1. Long Vowels

Middle English vowels are long when they are doubled (*aa*, *ee*, *oo*) or when they are terminal (*he*, *to*, *holy*); *a*, *e*, and *o* are long when followed by a single consonant plus a vowel (*name*, *mete*, *note*). Middle English vowels are short when they are followed by two consonants.

Long *a* is sounded like the *a* in Modern English "father": *maken*, *maad*.

Long *e* may be sounded like the *a* in Modern English "name" (ignoring the distinction between the close and open vowel): *be*, *sweete*.

Long *i* (or *y*) is sounded like the *i* in Modern English "machine": *lif*, *whit*; *myn*, *holy*.

Long *o* may be sounded like the *o* in Modern English "note" (again ignoring the distinction between the close and open vowel): *do*, *soone*.

Long *u* (spelled *ou*, *ow*) is sounded like the *oo* in Modern English "goose": *hous*, *flowr*.

Note that in general Middle English long vowels are pronounced like long vowels in modern languages other than English. Short vowels and diphthongs, however, may be pronounced as in Modern English.

##### 2. Final *e*

In Middle English syllabic verse, final *e* is sounded like the *a* in "sofa" to provide a needed unstressed syllable: *Another Nonnë with hire haddë she*. But (cf. *hire* in the example) final *e* is suppressed when not needed for the meter. It is commonly silent before words beginning with a vowel or *h*.

##### 3. Consonants

Middle English consonants are pronounced separately in all combinations—*gnat*: *g-nat*; *knave*: *k-nave*; *write*: *w-rite*; *folk*: *fol-k*. In a simplified system of pronunciation the combination *gh* as in *night* or *thought* may be treated as if it were silent.

II. THE SOUNDS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH: DETAILED ANALYSIS

1. Simple Vowels

Sound	Pronunciation	Example
long <i>a</i> (spelled <i>a</i> , <i>aa</i> )	<i>a</i> in "father"	<i>maken, maad</i>
short <i>a</i>	<i>o</i> in "hot"	<i>cappe</i>
long <i>e</i> close (spelled <i>e</i> , <i>ee</i> )	<i>a</i> in "name"	<i>be, sweete</i>
long <i>e</i> open (spelled <i>e</i> , <i>ee</i> )	<i>e</i> in "there"	<i>mete, heeth</i>
short <i>e</i>	<i>e</i> in "set"	<i>setten</i>
final <i>e</i>	<i>a</i> in "sofa"	<i>large</i>
long <i>i</i> (spelled <i>i</i> , <i>y</i> )	<i>i</i> in "machine"	<i>lif, myn</i>
short <i>i</i>	<i>i</i> in "wit"	<i>wit</i>
long <i>o</i> close (spelled <i>o</i> , <i>oo</i> )	<i>o</i> in "note"	<i>do, soone</i>
long <i>o</i> open (spelled <i>o</i> , <i>oo</i> )	<i>oa</i> in "broad"	<i>go, goon</i>
short <i>o</i>	<i>o</i> in "oft"	<i>pot</i>
long <i>u</i> when spelled <i>ou</i> , <i>ow</i>	<i>oo</i> in "goose"	<i>hous, flowr</i>
long <i>u</i> when spelled <i>u</i>	<i>u</i> in "pure"	<i>vertu</i>
short <i>u</i> (spelled <i>u</i> , <i>o</i> )	<i>u</i> in "full"	<i>ful, love</i>

Doubled vowels and terminal vowels are always long, while single vowels before two consonants other than *th*, *ch* are always short. The vowels *a*, *e*, and *o* are long before a single consonant followed by a vowel: *nāmē*, *sēkē* (sick), *hōly*. In general, words that have descended into Modern English reflect their original Middle English quantity: *liven* (to live), but *lif* (life).

The close and open sounds of long *e* and long *o* may often be identified by the Modern English spellings of the words in which they appear. Original long close *e* is generally represented in Modern English by *ee*: "sweet," "knee," "teeth," "see" have close *e* in Middle English, but so does "be"; original long open *e* is generally represented in Modern English by *ea*: "meat," "heath," "sea," "great," "breath" have open *e* in Middle English. Similarly, original long close *o* is now generally represented by *oo*: "soon," "food," "good," but also "do," "to"; original long open *o* is represented either by *oa* or by *o*: "coat," "boat," "moan," but also "go," "bone," "foe," "home." Notice that original close *o* is now almost always pronounced like the *oo* in "goose," but that original open *o* is almost never so pronounced; thus it is often possible to identify the Middle English vowels through Modern English sounds.

The nonphonetic Middle English spelling of *o* for short *u* has been preserved in a number of Modern English words ("love," "son," "come"), but in others *u* has been restored: "sun" (*sonne*), "run" (*ronne*).

For the treatment of final *e*, see above, General Rules, section 2.

2. Diphthongs

Sound	Pronunciation	Example
<i>ai</i> , <i>ay</i> , <i>ei</i> , <i>ay</i>	between <i>ai</i> in "aisle" and <i>ay</i> in "day"	<i>saide, day, veine, preye</i>
<i>au</i> , <i>aw</i>	<i>ou</i> in "out"	<i>chaunge, bawdy</i>
<i>eu</i> , <i>ew</i>	<i>ew</i> in "few"	<i>newe</i>

oi, oy  
ou, ow

oy in "joy"  
ou in "thought"

joye, point  
thought, lowe

Note that in words with *ou*, *ow* which in Modern English are sounded with the *ou* of "about," the combination indicates not the diphthong but the simple vowel long *u* (see above, Simple Vowels).

### 3. Consonants

In general, all consonants except *h* were always sounded in Middle English, including consonants that have become silent in Modern English, such as the *g* in *gnaw*, the *k* in *knight*, the *l* in *folk*, and the *w* in *write*. In noninitial *gn*, however, the *g* was silent as in Modern English "sign." Initial *h* was silent in short common English words and in words borrowed from French, and may have been almost silent in all words. The combination *gh* as in *night* or *thought* was sounded like the *ch* of German *ich* or *nach*. Note that Middle English *gg* represents both the hard sound of "dagger" and the soft sound of "bridge."

## III. PARTS OF SPEECH AND GRAMMAR

### 1. Nouns

The plural and possessive of nouns end in *es*, formed by adding *s* or *es* to the singular: *knight*, *knightes*; *roote*, *rootes*; a final consonant is frequently doubled before *es*: *bed*, *beddes*. A common irregular plural is *yēn*, from *yē*, eye.

### 2. Pronouns

The chief differences from Modern English are as follows:

Modern English	Middle English
I	<i>I</i> , <i>ich</i> ( <i>ik</i> is a northern form)
you (singular)	<i>thou</i> (subjective); <i>thee</i> (objective)
her	<i>hir(e)</i> , <i>her(e)</i>
its	<i>his</i>
you (plural)	<i>ye</i> (subjective); <i>you</i> (objective)
their	<i>hir</i>
them	<i>hem</i>

In formal speech, the second person plural is often used for the singular. The possessive adjectives *my*, *thy* take *n* before a word beginning with a vowel or *h*: *thyn yē*, *myn host*.

### 3. Adjectives

Adjectives ending in a consonant add final *e* when they stand before the noun they modify and after another modifying word such as *the*, *this*, *that*, or nouns or pronouns in the possessive: *a good hors*, but *the (this, my, the kinges) goode hors*. They also generally add *e* when standing before and modifying a plural noun, a noun in the vocative, or any proper noun: *goode men*, *oh goode man*, *faire Venus*.

Adjectives are compared by adding *er(e)* for the comparative, *est(e)* for the superlative. Sometimes the stem vowel is shortened or altered in the process: *sweete*, *swettere*, *swettest*; *long*, *lenger*, *lengest*.

### 4. Adverbs

Adverbs are formed from adjectives by adding *e*, *ly*, or *liche*; the adjective *fair* thus yields *faire*, *fairly*, *fairliche*.

## 5. Verbs

Middle English verbs, like Modern English verbs, are either "weak" or "strong." Weak verbs form their preterites and past participles with a *t* or *d* suffix and preserve the same stem vowel throughout their systems, though it is sometimes shortened in the preterite and past participle: *love, loved; bend, bent; hear, heard; meet, met*. Strong verbs do not use the *t* or *d* suffix, but vary their stem vowel in the preterite and past participle: *take, took, taken; begin, began, begun; find, found, found*.

The inflectional endings are the same for Middle English strong verbs and weak verbs except in the preterite singular and the imperative singular. In the following paradigms, the weak verbs *loven* (to love) and *heeren* (to hear), and the strong verbs *taken* (to take) and *ginnen* (to begin) serve as models.

	Present Indicative	Preterite Indicative
I	<i>love, heere</i> <i>take, ginne</i>	<i>loved(e), herde</i> <i>took, gan</i>
thou	<i>lovest, heerest</i> <i>takest, ginnest</i>	<i>lovedest, herdest</i> <i>tooke, gonne</i>
he, she, it	<i>loveth, heereth</i> <i>taketh, ginneth</i>	<i>loved(e), herde</i> <i>took, gan</i>
we, ye, they	<i>love(n) (th), heere(n) (th)</i> <i>take(n) (th), ginne(n) (th)</i>	<i>loved(e) (en), herde(n)</i> <i>tooke(n), gonne(n)</i>

The present plural ending *eth* is southern, while the *e(n)* ending is Midland and characteristic of Chaucer. In the north, *s* may appear as the ending of all persons of the present. In the weak preterite, when the ending *e* gave a verb three or more syllables, it was frequently dropped. Note that in certain strong verbs like *ginnen* there are two distinct stem vowels in the preterite: even in Chaucer's time, however, one of these had begun to replace the other, and Chaucer occasionally writes *gan* for all persons of the preterite.

	Present Subjunctive	Preterite Subjunctive
Singular	<i>love, heere</i> <i>take, ginne</i>	<i>lovede, herde</i> <i>tooke, gonne</i>
Plural	<i>love(n), heere(n)</i> <i>take(n), ginne(n)</i>	<i>lovede(n), herde(n)</i> <i>tooke(n), gonne(n)</i>

In verbs like *ginnen*, which have two stem vowels in the indicative preterite, it is the vowel of the plural and of the second person singular that is used for the preterite subjunctive.

The imperative singular of most weak verbs is *e*: (*thou*) *love*, but of some weak verbs and all strong verbs, the imperative singular is without termination: (*thou*) *heer, taak, gin*. The imperative plural of all verbs is either *e* or *eth*: (*ye*) *love(th), heere(th), take(th), ginne(th)*.

The infinitive of verbs is *e* or *en*: *love(n), heere(n), take(n), ginne(n)*.

The past participle of weak verbs is the same as the preterite without inflectional ending: *loved, herd*. In strong verbs the ending is either *e* or *en*: *take(n), gonne(n)*. The prefix *y* often appears on past participles: *yloved, yherd, ytake(n)*.

## OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH PROSODY

All the poetry of Old English is in the same verse form. The verse unit is the single line, since rhyme was not used to link one line to another, except very occasionally in late Old English. The organizing device of the line is alliteration, the beginning of several words with the same sound ("Foemen fled"). The Old English alliterative line contains four principal stresses, and is divided into two half-lines of two stresses each by a strong medial caesura, or pause. These two half-lines are linked to each other by the alliteration: at least one of the two stressed words in the first half-line, and often both of them, begin with the same sound as the first stressed word of the second half-line (the second stressed word is generally non-alliterative). The fourth line of *Beowulf* is an example:

Oft Scyld Scefing      sceaþena þreatum.

For further examples, see *Cædmon's Hymn*, printed below. It will be noticed that any vowel alliterates with any other vowel. In addition to the alliteration, the length of the unstressed syllables and their number and pattern is governed by a highly complex set of rules. When sung or intoned—as it was—to the rhythmic strumming of a harp, Old English poetry must have been wonderfully impressive in the dignified, highly formalized way which aptly fits both its subject matter and tone.

The majority of Middle English verse is either in alternately stressed rhyming verse, adapted from French after the Conquest, or in alliterative verse that is descended from Old English. The latter preserves the caesura of Old English and in its purest form the same alliterative system, the two stressed words of the first half-line (or at least one of them) alliterating with the first stressed word in the second half-line. But most of the alliterative poets allowed themselves a number of deviations from the norm. All four stressed words may alliterate, as in the first line of *Piers Plowman*:

In a summer season      when soft was the sun.

Or the line may contain five, six, or even more stressed words, of which all or only the basic minimum may alliterate:

A fair field full of folk      found I therebetween.

There is no rule determining the number of unstressed syllables, and at times some poets are apt to ignore alliteration entirely. As in Old English, any vowel may alliterate with any other vowel; furthermore, since initial *h* was silent or lightly pronounced in Middle English, words beginning with *h* are treated as though they began with the following vowel.

There are two general types of stressed verse with rhyme. In the more common, stressed and unstressed syllables alternate regularly: *x X x X x X*; or, with two unstressed syllables intervening: *x x X x x X x x X*; or a combination of the two: *x x X x X x x X* (of the reverse patterns, only *X x X x X x* is common in English). There is also a line which can only be defined as containing a predetermined number of stressed syllables but an



irregular number and pattern of unstressed syllables. Much Middle English verse has to be read without expectation of regularity: some of this was evidently composed in the irregular meter, but some was probably originally composed according to a strict metrical system which has been obliterated by scribes careless of fine points. One receives the impression that many of the lyrics—as well as the *Second Shepherd's Play*—were at least composed with regular syllabic alternation. In the ballads, on the other hand, and in the play *Everyman*, only the number of stresses is pre-determined (and perhaps not even this in *Everyman*), but not the number or placement of unstressed syllables.

In pre-Chaucerian verse the number of stresses, whether regularly or irregularly alternated, was most often four, though sometimes the number was three, and rose in some poems to seven. Rhyme in Middle English as in Modern English may be either between adjacent or alternate lines, or may occur in more complex patterns. The *Canterbury Tales* are in rhymed couplets, the line containing five stresses with regular alternation—technically known as iambic pentameter, the standard English poetic line, perhaps introduced into English by Chaucer. In reading Chaucer and much pre-Chaucerian verse one must remember that the final *e*, which is silent in Modern English, was pronounced at any time in order to provide a needed unstressed syllable. Evidence seems to indicate that it was also pronounced at the end of the line, even though it thus produced a line with eleven syllables. Although he was a very regular metricist, Chaucer used various conventional devices which are apt to make the reader stumble until he understands them. Final *e* is often not pronounced before a word beginning with a vowel or *h*, and may be suppressed whenever metrically convenient. The same medial and terminal syllables that are slurred in Modern English are apt to be suppressed in Chaucer's English: *Canterb'ry* for *Canterbury*; *ev'r* (perhaps *e'er*) for *ever*. The plural in *es* may either be syllabic or reduced to *s* as in Modern English. Despite these seeming irregularities, Chaucer's verse is not difficult to read if one constantly bears in mind the basic pattern of the iambic pentameter line.

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# Old English Poetry

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## CÆDMON'S HYMN

Cædmon's *Hymn* is one of the oldest of preserved English poems, having been written between 658 and 680. Bede, the great cleric of Old English times, tells the story of its composition in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (completed in 731). Cædmon, a Northumbrian layman, had all his life felt himself incompetent in the art of verse, and when, according to the custom that was used at feasts, the harp was passed around the table so that each guest might entertain the others with a song, Cædmon always found a pretext to take himself from the table before the harp reached him. One night when he had thus avoided singing, he fell asleep in the stable where he had gone to tend the animals. He dreamed that someone came to him and said, "Cædmon, sing me something," and when Cædmon excused himself, the other insisted that he sing, directing him to celebrate the beginning of created things. Cædmon at once sang the *Hymn*. On waking, he remembered his verses; and thereafter, Bede tells us, he was able to express any given sacred topic in excellent poetry after only a few hours of work. He became a monk and devoted his life to the composition of Christian verse, but none of the religious poetry in Old English that has been preserved may surely be ascribed to him except his first short work.

The poem is given here in a West Saxon form with a literal interlinear translation. In Old English spelling, æ (as in Cædmon's name and line 3) is a vowel symbol that has not survived; it represented both a short *a* sound and a long open *e* sound. þ (line 2) and ð both represented the sound *th*. The large space in the middle of the line indicates the caesura.

### Cædmon's Hymn

Nu sculon herigean  
Now we must praise

Meotodes meahthe  
the Creator's might

weorc Wuldor-Fæder  
the work of the Glory-Father,

heofonrices Weard  
heaven-kingdom's Guardian,

and his modgepanc  
and his mind-plans,

swa he wundra gehwæs  
when he of wonders of every one,

ece Drihten  
eternal Lord.

He ærest scop  
He first created

heofon to hrofe  
heaven as a roof,

ða middangeard  
then middle-earth

ece Drihten  
eternal Lord,

frum foldan  
for men earth,

or onstealde  
the beginning established.<sup>1</sup>

ielda<sup>2</sup> bearnum  
for men's sons

halig Scyppend  
holy Creator;

moncynnes Weard  
mankind's Guardian,

æfter teode  
afterwards made—

Frea aelmihtig  
Master almighty.

1. I.e., "established the beginning of every one of wonders."

2. The later manuscript copies read

*eorþan*, "earth," for *ælda* (West Saxon *ielda*), "men's."

## THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

The *Dream of the Rood* (i.e., of the Cross) is the finest of a rather large number of religious poems in Old English. Neither its author nor its date of composition is known. It appears in a late 10th-century manuscript located in Vercelli in northern Italy, a manuscript made up of Old English religious poems and sermons. The poet Cynewulf, about whom nothing is surely known except that he wrote four Old English homiletic poems (two of them found in the Vercelli manuscript), has sometimes been credited with the *Dream*, but on no very convincing evidence. The poem may antedate its manuscript by almost three centuries, for some passages from the Rood's speech were carved, with some variations, in runes on a stone cross early in the 8th century: this is the famous Ruthwell Cross, which is preserved near Dumfries in southern Scotland. The precise relation of the poem to this cross is, however, uncertain.

The homiletic tone of the Dreamer's meditation may seem anticlimactic after the intensity, so terse and exciting, of the Rood's address to him, but the former is nevertheless an admirable frame for the latter. The experience of the Cross—its humiliation at the hands of those who changed it from tree to instrument of punishment for criminals, its humility when the young hero Christ mounts upon it, and its pride as the restored "tree of glory"—has a suggestive relevance to the condition of the sad, lonely, sin-stained Dreamer. In the Cross's experience, hope has replaced torment; when, at the end of the poem, the Dreamer describes Christ's triumphant progress from hell to heaven, the verse recaptures some of the excitement of the Cross's address, reflecting the Dreamer's response to the hope that has been brought him.

## The Dream of the Rood<sup>1</sup>

Listen, I will speak of the best of dreams, of what I dreamed at midnight when men and their voices were at rest. It seemed to me that I saw a most rare tree reach high aloft, wound in light, brightest of beams. All that beacon<sup>2</sup> was covered with gold; gems stood fair where it met the ground, five were above about the crosspiece. Many hosts of angels gazed on it, fair in the form created for them. This was surely no felon's gallows, but holy spirits beheld it there, men upon earth, and all this glorious creation. Wonderful was the triumph-tree, and I stained with sins, wounded with wrongdoings. I saw the tree of glory shine splendidly, adorned with garments, decked with gold: jewels had worthily covered the Lord's tree. Yet through that gold I might perceive ancient agony of wretches, for now it began to bleed on the right side.<sup>3</sup> I was all afflicted with sorrows, I was afraid for that fair sight. I saw that bright beacon change in clothing and color: now it was wet with moisture, drenched with flowing of blood, now adorned with treasure. Yet I, lying there a long while troubled, beheld the Saviour's tree until I heard it give voice: the best of trees began to speak words.

"It was long ago—I remember it still—that I was hewn down at the wood's edge, taken from my stump. Strong foes seized me there, hewed me to the shape they wished to see, commanded me to lift their criminals. Men carried me on their shoulders, then set me on a hill; foes enough fastened me there. Then I saw the Lord of mankind hasten with stout heart, for he would climb upon me. I dared not bow or break against God's word when I saw earth's surface tremble. I might have felled all foes, but I stood fast. Then the young Hero stripped himself—that was God Almighty—strong and stouthearted. He climbed on the high gallows, bold in the sight of many, when he would free mankind. I trembled when the Warrior embraced me, yet I dared not bow to earth, fall to the ground's surface; but I must stand fast. I was raised up, a cross; I lifted up the Mighty King, Lord of the Heavens: I dared not bend. They pierced me with dark nails: the wounds are seen on me, open gashes of hatred. Nor did I dare harm any of them. They mocked us both together. I was all wet with blood, drenched from the side of that Man after he had sent forth his spirit. I had endured many bitter happenings on that hill. I saw the God of Hosts cruelly racked. The shades of night had covered the Ruler's body with their mists, the

1. This new prose translation, by the present editor, has been based in general on the edition of the poem by John C. Pope, *Seven Old English Poems* (1966).

2. The Old English word *beacen* means

also "token" or "sign" and "battle standard."

3. The wound Christ received on the Cross was supposed to have been on the right side.

bright splendor. Shadow came forth, dark beneath the clouds. All creation wept, bewailed the King's fall; Christ was on Cross.

"Yet from afar some came hastening to the Lord.<sup>4</sup> All that I beheld. I was sore afflicted with griefs, yet I bowed to the men's hands, meekly, eagerly. Then they took Almighty God, lifted him up from his heavy torment. The warriors left me standing, covered with blood. I was all wounded with arrows. They laid him down weary of limb, stood at the body's head, looked there upon Heaven's Lord; and he rested there a while, tired after the great struggle. Then warriors began to build him an earth-house in the sight of his slayer,<sup>5</sup> carved it out of bright stone; they set there the Wielder of Triumphs. Then they began to sing him a song of sorrow, desolate in the evening. Then they wished to turn back, weary, from the great Prince; he remained with small company.<sup>6</sup> Yet we<sup>7</sup> stood in our places a good while, weeping. The voice of the warriors departed. The body grew cold, fair house of the spirit. Then some began to fell us to earth—that was a fearful fate! Some buried us in a deep pit. Yet thanes<sup>8</sup> of the Lord, friends, learned of me there. . . . decked me in gold and silver.<sup>9</sup>

"Now you might understand, my beloved man, that I had endured the work of evildoers, grievous sorrows. Now the time has come that men far and wide upon earth honor me—and all this glorious creation—and pray to this beacon. On me God's Son suffered a while; therefore I tower now glorious under the heavens, and I may heal every one of those who hold me in awe. Of old I became the hardest of torments, most loathed of men, before I opened the right road of life to those who have voices. Behold, the Lord of Glory honored me over all the trees of the wood, the Ruler of Heaven, just as also he honored his mother Mary, Almighty God for all men's sake, over all woman's kind.

"Now I command you, my beloved man, that you tell men of this vision. Disclose with your words that it is of the tree of glory on which Almighty God suffered for mankind's many sins and the deeds Adam did of old. He tasted death there; yet the Lord arose again to help mankind in his great might. Then he climbed to the heavens. He will come again hither on this earth to seek mankind on Doomsday, the Lord himself, Almighty God, and his angels with him, for then he will judge, he who has power to judge, each one just as in this brief life he has deserved. Nor may any one be unafraid of the word the Ruler will speak. Before his host he will ask

4. According to John xix. 38-39, it was Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who received Christ's body from the Cross.

5. I.e., the Cross.

6. I.e., alone (an understatement).

7. I.e., Christ's Cross and those on

which the two thieves were crucified.

8. Members of the king's body of warriors.

9. A number of lines describing the finding of the Cross have apparently been lost here.

where the man is who in the name of the Lord would taste bitter death as he did on the Cross. But then they will be afraid, and will think of little to begin to say to Christ. There need none be afraid who bears on his breast the best of tokens, but through the Cross shall the kingdom be sought by each soul on this earthly journey that thinks to dwell with the Lord."

Then I prayed to the tree, blithe-hearted, confident, there where I was alone with small company. My heart's thoughts were urged on the way hence. I endured many times of longing. Now is there hope of life for me, that I am permitted to seek the tree of triumph, more often than other men honor it well, alone. For it my heart's desire is great, and my hope of protection is directed to the Cross. I do not possess many powerful friends on earth, but they have gone hence from the delights of the world, sought for themselves the King of Glory. They live now in the heavens with the High Father, dwell in glory. And every day I look forward to when the Lord's Cross that I beheld here on earth will fetch me from this short life and bring me then where joy is great, delight in the heavens, where the Lord's folk are seated at the feast, where bliss is eternal. And then may it place me where thenceforth I may dwell in glory, fully enjoy bliss with the saints. May the Lord be my friend, who once here on earth suffered on the gallows-tree for man's sins: he freed us and granted us life, a heavenly home. Hope was renewed, with joys and with bliss, to those who endured fire.<sup>1</sup> The Son was victorious in that foray, mighty and successful. Then he came with his multitude, a host of spirits, into God's kingdom, the Almighty Ruler; and the angels and all the saints who dwelt then in glory rejoiced when their Ruler, Almighty God, came where his home was.

1. This and the following sentences refer to the Harrowing (i.e., pillaging) of Hell: after His death upon the Cross, Christ descended into hell, from

which He released the souls of certain of the patriarchs and prophets, conducting them triumphantly to heaven.

*in the apocrypha only!*

## BEOWULF

*Beowulf*, the oldest of the great long poems written in English, was probably composed more than twelve hundred years ago, in the first half of the eighth century. Its author may have been a native of what was then West Mercia; the West Midlands of England today, though the late tenth-century manuscript, which alone preserves the poem, originated in the south in the kingdom of the West Saxons. In 1731, before any modern transcription of the text had been made, the manuscript was seriously damaged in the fire that destroyed the building in London which housed the extraordinary collection of medieval English manuscripts made by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton (1571-1631). As a result of the fire and of subsequent deterioration of the manuscript, a number of lines and words have been lost from the poem, but even if the manuscript had not been damaged, the poem would still have been

difficult, because the poetic Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) in which it was written is itself hard, the style is allusive, the ideas often seem remote and strange to modern perceptions, and because the text was inevitably corrupted during the many transcriptions which must have intervened in the two and a half centuries between the poem's composition and the copying of the extant manuscript. Yet despite its difficulty, the somber grandeur of *Beowulf* is still capable of stirring the hearts of readers, and because of its excellence as well as its antiquity, the poem merits the high position that it is generally assigned in the study of English poetry.

While the poem itself is English in language and origin, it deals not with native Englishmen, but with their Germanic forebears, especially with two south Scandinavian tribes, the Danes and the Geats, who lived on the Danish island of Zealand and in southern Sweden, respectively. Thus, the historical period it concerns—insofar as it may be said to refer to history at all—is some two centuries before the poem was written; that is, it concerns a time following the initial invasion of England by Germanic tribes in 449, but before the Anglo-Saxon migration was completed, and perhaps before the arrival of the ancestors of the audience to whom the poem was sung: this audience may have considered itself to be of the same Geatish stock as the hero, Beowulf. The one datable fact of history mentioned in the poem is a raid on the Franks made by Hygelac, the king of the Geats at the time Beowulf was a young man, and this raid occurred in the year 520. Yet despite their antiquity, the poet's materials must have been very much alive to his audience, for the elliptical way in which he alludes to events not directly concerned with his plot demands of the listener a wide knowledge of traditional Germanic history. This knowledge was probably kept alive by other heroic poetry, of which little has been preserved in English, though much must once have existed. As it stands, *Beowulf* is not only unique as an example of the Old English epic, but is also the greatest of the surviving epics composed by the Germanic peoples.

It is generally agreed that the poet who put the old materials into their present form was a Christian, and that his poem reflects a Christian tradition: the conversion of the Germanic settlers in England had largely been completed during the century preceding the one in which the poet wrote. But there is little general agreement as to how clearly *Beowulf* reflects a Christian tradition or, conversely, the actual nature of the Christian tradition that it is held to reflect. Many specifically Christian references occur, especially to the Old Testament: God is said to be the Creator of all things and His will seems recognized (sporadically if not systematically) as being identical with Fate (*wyrd*); Grendel is described as a descendant of Cain, and the sword that Beowulf finds in Grendel's mother's lair has engraved on it the story of the race of giants and their destruction by flood; the dead await God's judgment, and Hell and the Devil are ready to receive the souls of Grendel and his mother, while believers will find the Father's embrace; Hrothgar's speech of advice to Beowulf (section XXV) seems to reflect patristic doctrine in its emphasis on conscience and the Devil's lying in wait for the unwary. Yet there is no reference to the New Testament—to Christ and His Sacrifice which are the real bases of Christianity in any intelligible sense of the term. Furthermore, readers may well feel that the poem achieves rather little of its emotional power through invocation of Christian values or of values that are consonant with Christian doctrine as we know it. Perhaps

the sense of tragic waste which pervades the Finnsburg episode (section XVI) springs from a Christian perception of the insane futility of the primitive Germanic thirst for vengeance; and the facts that Beowulf's chief adversaries are not men but monsters and that before his death he is able to boast that as king of the Geats he did not seek wars with neighboring tribes may reflect a Christian's appreciation for peace among men. But while admitting such values, the poet also invokes many others of a very different order, values that seem to belong to an ancient, pagan, warrior society of the kind described by the Roman historian Tacitus at the end of the first century. It should be noted that even Hrothgar's speech about conscience is directed more toward making Beowulf a good Germanic leader of men than a good Christian. One must, indeed, draw the conclusion from the poem itself that while Christian is a correct term for the religion of the poet and of his audience, it was a Christianity that had not yet by any means succeeded in obliterating an older pagan tradition, which still called forth powerful responses from men's hearts, despite the fact that many aspects of this tradition must be abhorrent to a sophisticated Christian. In this connection it is well to recall that the missionaries from Rome who initiated the conversion of the English proceeded in a conciliatory manner, not so much uprooting paganism in order to plant Christianity as planting Christianity in the faith that it would ultimately choke out the weeds of paganism. And the English clung long to some of their ancient traditions: for instance, the legal principle of the payment of *wergild* (defined below) remained in force until the Norman Conquest, four centuries after the conversion of the English.

In the warrior society whose values the poem constantly invokes, the most important of human relationships was that which existed between the warrior—the thane—and his lord, a relationship based less on subordination of one man's will to another's than on mutual trust and respect. When a warrior vowed loyalty to his lord, he became not so much his servant as his voluntary companion, one who would take pride in defending him and fighting in his wars. In return, the lord was expected to take affectionate care of his thanes and to reward them richly for their valor: a good king, one like Hrothgar or Beowulf, is referred to by such poetic epithets as "protector of warriors" and "dispenser of treasure" or "ring-giver," and the failure of bad kings is ascribed to their ill-temper and avarice, both of which alienate them from their retainers. The material benefit of this arrangement between lord and thane is obvious, yet under a good king the relationship seems to have had a significance more spiritual than material. Thus the treasure that an ideal Germanic king seizes from his enemies and rewards his retainers with is regarded as something more than mere wealth that will serve the well-being of its possessor; rather, it is a kind of visible proof that all parties are realizing themselves to the full in a spiritual sense—that the men of this band are congenially and successfully united with one another. The symbolic importance of treasure is illustrated by the poet's remark that the gift Beowulf gave the Danish coast-guard brought the latter honor among his companions, and even more by the fact that although Beowulf dies while obtaining a great treasure for his people, such objects as are removed from the dragon's hoard are actually buried with him as a fitting sign of his ultimate achievement.

The relationship between kinsmen was also of deep significance to this



society and provides another emotional value for Old English heroic poetry. If one of his kinsmen had been slain, a man had the special duty of either killing the slayer or exacting from him the payment of *wergild* ("man-price"): each rank of society was evaluated at a definite price, which had to be paid to the dead man's kinsmen by the killer who wished to avoid their vengeance—even if the killing had been accidental. Again, the money itself had less significance as wealth than as a proof that the kinsmen had done what was right. Relatives who failed either to exact *wergild* or to take vengeance could never be happy, having found no practical way of satisfying their grief for their kinsmen's death. "It is better for a man to avenge his friend than much mourn," Beowulf says to the old Hrothgar, who is bewailing Aeschere's killing by Grendel's mother. And one of the most poignant passages in the poem describes the sorrow of King Hrethel after one of his sons had accidentally killed another: by the code of kinship Hrethel was forbidden to kill or to exact compensation from a kinsman, yet by the same code he was required to do one or the other in order to avenge the dead. Caught in this curious dilemma, Hrethel became so disconsolate that he could no longer face life.

It is evident that the need to take vengeance would create never-ending feuds, which the practice of marrying royal princesses to the kings or princes of hostile tribes did little to mitigate, though the purpose of such marriages was to replace hostility by alliance. Hrothgar wishes to make peace with the Heatho-Bards by marrying his daughter to their king, Ingeld, whose father was killed by the Danes; but as Beowulf predicts, sooner or later the Heatho-Bards' desire for vengeance on the Danes will erupt, and there will be more bloodshed. And the Danish princess Hildeburh, married to Finn of the Jutes, will see her son and her brother both killed while fighting on opposite sides in a battle at her own home, and ultimately will see her husband killed by the Danes in revenge for her brother's death. Beowulf himself is, for a Germanic hero, curiously free of involvement in feuds of this sort, though he does boast that he avenged the death of his king, Heardred, on his slayer Onela. Yet the potentiality—or inevitability—of sudden attack, sudden change, swift death is omnipresent in *Beowulf*: men seem to be caught in a vast web of reprisals and counterreprisals from which there is little hope of escape. This is the aspect of the poem which is apt to make the most powerful impression on the reader—its strong sense of doom.

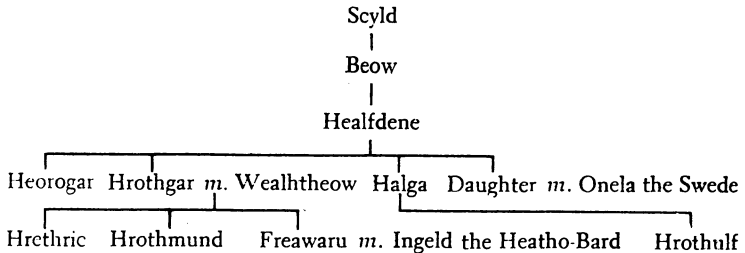
Beowulf himself is chiefly concerned not with tribal feuds but with fatal evil both less and more complex. Grendel and the dragon are threats to the security of the lands they infest just as human enemies would be, but they are not part of the social order and presumably have no one to avenge their deaths (that Grendel's mother appeared as an avenger seems to have been a surprise both to Beowulf and to the Danes). On the other hand, because they are outside the normal order of things, they require of their conqueror something greater than normal warfare requires. In each case, it is the clear duty of the king and his companions to put down the evil. But the Danish Hrothgar is old and his companions unenterprising, and excellent though Hrothgar has been in the kingship, he nevertheless lacks the quality that later impels the old Beowulf to fight the dragon that threatens his people. The poem makes no criticism of Hrothgar for this lack; he merely seems not to be the kind of man—one might almost say he was not fated—to develop his human potential to the fullest extent that Fate would permit: that is

Beowulf's role. In undertaking to slay Grendel, and later Grendel's mother, Beowulf is testing his relationship with unknowable destiny. At any time, as he is fully aware, his luck may abandon him and he may be killed, as, indeed, he is in the otherwise successful encounter with the dragon. But whether he lives or dies, he will have done all that any man could do to develop his character heroically. It is this consciousness of testing Fate that probably explains the boasting that modern readers of heroic poetry often find offensive. When he boasts, Beowulf is not only demonstrating that he has chosen the heroic way of life, but is also choosing it, for when he invokes his former courage as pledge of his future courage, his boast becomes a vow; the hero has put himself in a position from which he cannot withdraw.

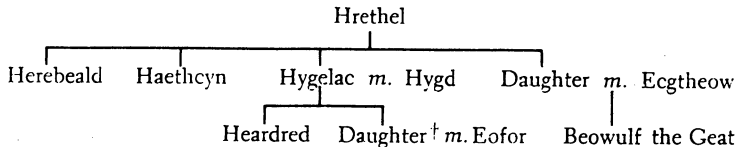
Courage is the instrument by which the hero realizes himself. "Fate often saves an undoomed man when his courage is good," says Beowulf in his account of his swimming match: that is, if Fate has not entirely doomed a man in advance, courage is the quality that can perhaps influence Fate against its natural tendency to doom him now. It is this complex statement (in which it is hard to read the will of God for Fate) that Beowulf's life explores: he will use his great strength in the most courageous way by going alone, even unarmed, against monsters. Doom, of course, ultimately claims him, but not until he has fulfilled to its limits the pagan ideal of a heroic life. And despite the desire he often shows to Christianize pagan virtues, the Christian poet remains true to the older tradition when, at the end of his poem, he leaves us with the impression that Beowulf's chief reward is pagan immortality: the memory in the minds of later men of a hero's heroic actions. The poem itself is, indeed, a noble expression of that immortality.

#### TRIBES AND GENEALOGIES

I. The Danes (Bright-, Half-, Ring-, Spear-, North-, East-, South-, West-Danes; Scyldings, Honor-, Victor-, War-Scyldings; Ing's friends).

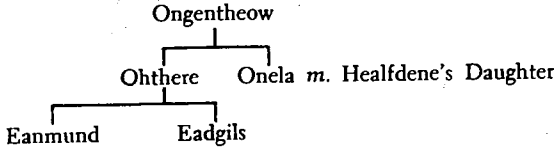


II. The Geats (Sea-, War-, Weather-Geats)



† The daughter of Hygelac who was given to Eofor may have been born to him by a former wife, older than Hygd.

## III. The Swedes.



## IV. Miscellaneous.

A. The Half-Danes (also called Scyldings) involved in the fight at Finnsburg may represent a different tribe from the Danes of paragraph I, above. Their king Hoc had a son, Hnaef, who succeeded him, and a daughter Hildeburh, who married Finn, king of the Jutes.

B. The Jutes or Frisians are represented as enemies of the Danes in the fight at Finnsburg and as allies of the Franks or Hugas at the time Hygelac the Geat made the attack in which he lost his life and from which Beowulf swam home. Also allied with the Franks at this time were the Hetware.

C. The Heatho-Bards (i.e., "Battle-Bards") are represented as inveterate enemies of the Danes. Their king Froda had been killed in an attack on the Danes, and Hrothgar's attempt to make peace with them by marrying his daughter Freawaru to Froda's son Ingeld failed when the latter attacked Heorot. The attack was repulsed, though Heorot was burned.

Beowulf<sup>1</sup>*[Prologue: The Earlier History of the Danes]*

Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes' kings in the old days—how the princes of that people did brave deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing<sup>2</sup> took mead-benches away from enemy bands, from many tribes, terrified their nobles—after the time that he was first found helpless.<sup>3</sup> He lived to find comfort for that, became great under the skies, prospered in honors until every one of those who lived about him, across the whale-road, had to obey him, pay him tribute. That was a good king.

Afterwards a son was born to him, a young boy in his house, whom God sent to comfort the people: He had seen the sore need they had suffered during the long time they lacked a king. Therefore the Lord of Life, the Ruler of Heaven, gave him honor in the world: Beow<sup>4</sup> was famous, the glory of the son of

1. The translation into modern English, by the editor (1966), is based on F. Klaeber's third edition of the poem (1950); in general, the emendations suggested by J. C. Pope, *The Rhythm of Beowulf*, second edition (1966), have been adopted. The division into sections headed by roman numerals is that of the manuscript, which makes, however, no provision for Section XXX.

2. The meaning is probably "son of Scef," although Scyld's origins are mysterious.

3. As is made clear shortly below, Scyld arrived in Denmark as a child alone in a ship loaded with treasures.

4. Although the manuscript reads "Beowulf," most scholars now agree that it should read "Beow." Beow was the grandfather of the Danish king Hrothgar.

Scyld spread widely in the Northlands. In this way a young man ought by his good deeds, by giving splendid gifts while still in his father's house, to make sure that later in life beloved companions will stand by him, that people will serve him when war comes. Through deeds that bring praise, a man shall prosper in every country.

Then at the fated time Scyld the courageous went away into the protection of the Lord. His dear companions carried him down to the sea-currents, just as he himself had bidden them do when, as protector of the Scyldings,<sup>5</sup> he had ruled them with his words—long had the beloved prince governed the land. There in the harbor stood the ring-prowed ship, ice-covered and ready to sail, a prince's vessel. Then they laid down the ruler they had loved, the ring-giver, in the hollow of the ship, the glorious man beside the mast. There was brought great store of treasure, wealth from lands far away. I have not heard of a ship more splendidly furnished with war-weapons and battle-dress, swords and mail-shirts. On his breast lay a great many treasures that should voyage with him far out into the sea's possession. They provided him with no lesser gifts, treasure of the people, than those had done who at his beginning first sent him forth on the waves, a child alone. Then also they set a golden standard high over his head, let the water take him, gave him to the sea. Sad was their spirit, mournful their mind. Men cannot truthfully say who received that cargo, neither counsellors in the hall nor warriors under the skies.

(I) Then in the cities was Beow of the Scyldings beloved king of the people, long famous among nations (his father had gone elsewhere, the king from his land), until later great Healfdene was born to him. As long as he lived, old and fierce in battle, he upheld the glorious Scyldings: To him all told were four children born into the world, to the leader of the armies: Heorogar and Hrothgar and the good Halga. I have heard tell that [ . . . was On]ela's queen,<sup>6</sup> beloved bed-companion of the Battle-Scylfing.

[*Beowulf and Grendel*]

[THE HALL HEOROT IS ATTACKED BY GRENDEL]

Then Hrothgar was given success in warfare, glory in battle, so that his retainers gladly obeyed him and their company grew into a great band of warriors. It came to his mind that he would command men to construct a hall, a mead-building large[r]

5. I.e., the Danes ("descendants of Scyld").  
6. The text is faulty, so that the name of Healfdene's daughter has been lost; her husband Onela was a Swedish (Scylfing) king.

than the children of men had ever heard of, and therein he would give to young and old all that God had given him, except for common land and men's bodies.<sup>7</sup> Then I have heard that the work was laid upon many nations, wide through this middle-earth, that they should adorn the folk-hall. In time it came to pass—quickly, as men count it—that it was finished, the largest of hall-dwellings. He gave it the name of Heorot,<sup>8</sup> he who ruled wide with his words. He did not forget his promise: at the feast he gave out rings, treasure. The hall stood tall, high and wide-gabled: it would wait for the fierce flames of vengeful fire;<sup>9</sup> the time was not yet at hand for sword-hate between son-in-law and father-in-law to awaken after murderous rage.

Then the fierce spirit<sup>1</sup> painfully endured hardship for a time, he who dwelt in the darkness, for every day he heard loud mirth in the hall; there was the sound of the harp, the clear song of the scop.<sup>2</sup> There he spoke who could relate the beginning of men far back in time, said that the Almighty made earth, a bright field fair in the water that surrounds it, set up in triumph the lights of the sun and the moon to lighten land-dwellers, and adorned the surfaces of the earth with branches and leaves, created also life for each of the kinds that move and breathe.—Thus these warriors lived in joy, blessed, until one began to do evil deeds, a hellish enemy. The grim spirit was called Grendel, known as a rover of the borders, one who held the moors, fen and fastness. Unhappy creature, he lived for a time in the home of the monsters' race, after God had condemned them as kin of Cain. The Eternal Lord avenged the murder in which he slew Abel. Cain had no pleasure in that feud, but He banished him far from mankind, the Ruler, for that misdeed. From him sprang all bad breeds, trolls and elves and monsters—likewise the giants who for a long time strove with God: He paid them their reward for that.

(II.) Then, after night came, Grendel went to survey the tall house—how, after their beer-drinking, the Ring-Danes had disposed themselves in it. Then he found therein a band of nobles asleep after the feast: they felt no sorrow, no misery of men. The creature of evil, grim and fierce, was quickly ready, savage and cruel, and seized from their rest thirty thanes. From there he turned to go back to his home, proud of his plunder, sought his dwelling with that store of slaughter.

7. Or "men's lives." Apparently slaves, along with public land, were not in the king's power to give away.

8. I.e., "Hart."

9. The destruction by fire of Heorot occurred at a later time than that of the poem's action, probably during the otherwise unsuccessful attack of the

Heatho-Bard Ingeld on his father-in-law Hrothgar, mentioned in the next clause.

1. I.e., Grendel.

2. The "scop" was the Anglo-Saxon minstrel, who recited poetic stories to the accompaniment of a harp.

Then in the first light of dawning day Grendel's war-strength was revealed to men: then after the feast weeping arose, great cry in the morning. The famous king, hero of old days, sat joyless; the mighty one suffered, felt sorrow for his thanes, when they saw the track of the foe, of the cursed spirit: that hardship was too strong, too loathsome and long-lasting. Nor was there a longer interval, but after one night Grendel again did greater slaughter—and had no remorse for it—vengeful acts and wicked: he was too intent on them. Thereafter it was easy to find the man who sought rest for himself elsewhere, farther away, a bed among the outlying buildings—after it was made clear to him, told by clear proof, the hatred of him who now controlled the hall.<sup>3</sup> Whoever escaped the foe held himself afterwards farther off and more safely. Thus Grendel held sway and fought against right, one against all, until the best of houses stood empty. It was a long time, the length of twelve winters, that the lord of the Scyldings suffered grief, all woes, great sorrows. Therefore, sadly in songs, it became well-known to the children of men that Grendel had fought a long time with Hrothgar, for many half-years maintained mortal spite, feud, and enmity—constant war. He wanted no peace with any of the men of the Danish host, would not withdraw his deadly rancor, or pay compensation: no counselor there had any reason to expect splendid repayment at the hands of the slayer.<sup>4</sup> For the monster was relentless, the dark death-shadow, against warriors old and young, lay in wait and ambushed them. In the perpetual darkness he held to the misty moors: men do not know where hell-demons direct their footsteps.

Thus many crimes the enemy of mankind committed, the terrible walker-alone, cruel injuries one after another. In the dark nights he dwelt in Heorot, the richly adorned hall. He might not approach the throne, [receive] treasure, because of the Lord; He had no love for him.<sup>5</sup>

This was great misery to the lord of the Scyldings, a breaking of spirit. Many a noble sat often in council, sought a plan, what would be best for strong-hearted men to do against the awful attacks. At times they vowed sacrifices at heathen temples, with their words prayed that the soul-slayer<sup>6</sup> would give help for the distress of the people. Such was their custom, the hope of heathens;

3. I.e., Grendel.

4. According to old Germanic law, a slayer could achieve peace with his victim's kinsmen only by paying them *wergild*, i.e., compensation for the life of the slain man.

5. Behind this obscure passage seems to lie the idea that Grendel, unlike

Hrothgar's thanes, could not approach the throne to receive gifts from the king, having been condemned by God as an outlaw.

6. I.e., the Devil. Despite this assertion that the Danes were heathen, their king, Hrothgar, speaks consistently as a Christian.

in their spirits they thought of Hell, they knew not the Ruler, the Judge of Deeds, they recognized not the Lord God, nor indeed did they know how to praise the Protector of Heaven, the glorious King. Woe is him who in terrible trouble must thrust his soul into the fire's embrace, hope for no comfort, not expect change. Well is the man who after his death-day may seek the Lord and find peace in the embrace of the Father.

[THE COMING OF BEOWULF TO HEOROT]

(III.) So in the cares of his times the son of Healfdene constantly brooded, nor might the wise warrior set aside his woe. Too harsh, hateful and long-lasting was the hardship that had come upon the people, distress dire and inexorable, worst of night-horrors.

A thane of Hygelac,<sup>7</sup> a good man among the Geats, heard in his homeland of Grendel's deeds: of mankind he was the strongest of might in the time of this life, noble and great. He bade that a good ship be made ready for him, said he would seek the war-king over the swan's road, the famous prince, since he had need of men. Very little did wise men blame him for that adventure, though he was dear to them; they urged the brave one on, examined the omens. From the folk of the Geats the good man had chosen warriors of the bravest that he could find; one of fifteen he led the way, the warrior sought the wooden ship, the sea-skilled one the land's edge. The time had come: the ship was on the waves, the boat under the cliff. The warriors eagerly climbed on the prow—the sea-currents eddied, sea against sand; men bore bright weapons into the ship's bosom, splendid armor. Men pushed the well-braced ship from shore, warriors on a well-wished voyage. Then over the sea-waves, blown by the wind, the foam-necked boat traveled, most like a bird, until at good time on the second day the curved prow had come to where the seafarers could see land, the sea-cliffs shine, towering hills, great headlands. Then was the sea crossed, the journey at end. Then quickly the men of the Geats climbed upon the shore, moored the wooden ship; mail-shirts rattled, dress for battle. They thanked God that the wave-way had been easy for them.

Then from the wall the Scyldings' guard who should watch over the sea-cliffs saw bright shields borne over the gangway, armor ready for battle; strong desire stirred him in mind to learn what the men were. He went riding on his horse to the shore, thane of Hrothgar, forcefully brandished a great spear in his hands, with formal words questioned them:

7. I. e., Beowulf the Geat, whose king was Hygelac.

“What are you, bearers of armor, dressed in mail-coats, who thus have come bringing a tall ship over the sea-road, over the water to this place? Lo, for a long time I have been guard of the coast, held watch by the sea so that no foe with a force of ships might work harm on the Danes’ land: never have shield-bearers more openly undertaken to come ashore here; nor did you know for sure of a word of leave from our warriors, consent from my kinsmen. I have never seen a mightier warrior on earth than is one of you, a man in battle-dress. That is no retainer made to seem good by his weapons—unless his appearance belies him, his unequalled form. Now I must learn your lineage before you go any farther from here, spies on the Danes’ land. Now you far-dwellers, sea-voyagers, hear what I think: you must straightway say where you have come from.”

(IV.) To him replied the leader, the chief of the band unlocked his word-hoard: “We are men of the Geatish nation and Hygelac’s hearth-companions. My father was well-known among the tribes, a noble leader named Ecgtheow. He lived many winters before he went on his way, an old man, from men’s dwellings. Every wise man wide over the earth readily remembers him. Through friendly heart we have come to seek your lord, the son of Healfdene, protector of the people. Be good to us and tell us what to do: we have a great errand to the famous one, the king of the Danes. And I too do not think that anything ought to be kept secret: you know whether it is so, as we have indeed heard, that among the Scyldings I know not what foe, what dark doer of hateful deeds in the black nights, shows in terrible manner strange malice, injury and slaughter. In openness of heart I may teach Hrothgar remedy for that, how he, wise and good, shall overpower the foe—if change is ever to come to him, relief from evil’s distress—and how his surging cares may be made to cool. Or else ever after he will suffer tribulations, constraint, while the best of houses remains there on its high place.”

The guard spoke from where he sat on his horse, brave officer: “A sharp-witted shield-warrior who thinks well must be able to judge each of the two things, words and works. I understand this: that here is a troop friendly to the Scyldings’ king. Go forward, bearing weapons and war-gear. I will show you the way; I shall also bid my fellow-thanes honorably to hold your boat against all enemies, your new-tarred ship on the sand, until again over the sea-streams it bears its beloved men to the Geatish shore, the wooden vessel with curved prow. May it be granted by fate that one who behaves so bravely pass whole through the battle-storm.”

Then they set off. The boat lay fixed, rested on the rope, the



deep-bosomed ship, fast at anchor. Boar-images<sup>8</sup> shone over cheek-guards gold-adorned, gleaming and fire-hardened—the war-minded boar held guard over fierce men. The warriors hastened, marched together until they might see the timbered hall, stately and shining with gold; for earth-dwellers under the skies that was the most famous of buildings in which the mighty one waited—its light gleamed over many lands. The battle-brave guide pointed out to them the shining house of the brave ones so that they might go straight to it. Warrior-like he turned his horse, then spoke words: “It is time for me to go back. The All-Wielding Father in His grace keep you safe in your undertakings. I shall go back to the sea to keep watch against hostile hosts.”

(V.) The road was stone-paved, the path showed the way to the men in ranks. War-corselet shone, hard and hand-wrought, bright iron rings sang on their armor when they first came walking to the hall in their grim gear. Sea-weary they set down their broad shields, marvelously strong protections, against the wall of the building. Then they sat down on the bench—mail-shirts, warrior’s clothing, rang out. Spears stood together, seamen’s weapons, ash steel-gray at the top. The armed band was worthy of its weapons.

Then a proud-spirited man<sup>9</sup> asked the warriors there about their lineage: “Where do you bring those gold-covered shields from, gray mail-shirts and visored helmets, this multitude of battle-shafts? I am Hrothgar’s herald and officer. I have not seen strangers—so many men—more bold. I think that it is for daring—not for refuge, but for greatness of heart—that you have sought Hrothgar.” The man known for his courage replied to him; the proud man of the Geats, hardy under helmet, spoke words in return: “We are Hygelac’s table-companions. Beowulf is my name. I will tell my errand to Healfdene’s son, the great prince your lord, if, good as he is, he will grant that we might address him.” Wulfgar spoke—he was a man of the Wendels, his bold spirit known to many, his valor and wisdom: “I will ask the lord of the Danes about this, the Scyldings’ king, the ring-giver, just as you request—will ask the glorious ruler about your voyage, and will quickly make known to you the answer the good man thinks best to give me.”

He returned at once to where Hrothgar sat, old and hoary, with his company of earls. The man known for his valor went forward till he stood squarely before the Danes’ king: he knew the custom of tried retainers. Wulfgar spoke to his lord and

8. Carved images of boars (sometimes represented as clothed like human warriors) were placed on helmets in the

belief that they would protect the wearer in battle.

9. Identified below as Wulfgar.

friend: "Here have journeyed men of the Geats, come far over the sea's expanse. The warriors call their chief Beowulf. They ask that they, my prince, might exchange words with you. Do not refuse them your answer, gracious Hrothgar. From their war-gear they seem worthy of earls' esteem. Strong indeed is the chief who has led the warriors here."

(VI.) Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings: "I knew him when he was a boy. His father was called Ecgtheow: Hrethel of the Geats<sup>1</sup> gave him his only daughter for his home. Now has his hardy offspring come here, sought a fast friend. Then, too, seafarers who took gifts there to please the Geats used to say that he has in his handgrip the strength of thirty men, a man famous in battle. Holy God of His grace has sent him to us West-Danes, as I hope, against the terror of Grendel. I shall offer the good man treasures for his daring. Now make haste, bid them come in together to see my company of kinsmen. In your speech say to them also that they are welcome to the Danish people."

Then Wulfgar went to the hall's door, gave the message from within: "The lord of the East-Danes, my victorious prince, has bidden me say to you that he knows your noble ancestry, and that you brave-hearted men are welcome to him over the sea-swells. Now you may come in your war-dress, under your battle helmets, to see Hrothgar. Let your war-shields, your wooden spears, await here the outcome of the talk."

Then the mighty one rose, many a warrior about him, a company of strong thanes. Some waited there, kept watch over the weapons as the brave one bade them. Together they hastened, as the warrior directed them, under Heorot's roof. The war-leader, hardy under helmet, advanced till he stood on the hearth. Beowulf spoke, his mail-shirt glistened, armor-net woven by the blacksmith's skill: "Hail, Hrothgar! I am kinsman and thane of Hygelac. In my youth I have set about many brave deeds. The affair of Grendel was made known to me on my native soil: sea-travelers say that this hall, best of buildings, stands empty and useless to all warriors after the evening-light becomes hidden beneath the cover of the sky. Therefore my people, the best wise earls, advised me thus, lord Hrothgar, that I should seek you because they know what my strength can accomplish. They themselves looked on when, bloody from my foes, I came from the fight where I had bound five, destroyed a family of giants, and at night in the waves slain water-monsters, suffered great pain, avenged an affliction of the Weather-Geats on those who had asked for trouble—ground enemies to bits. And now alone I shall settle affairs with Grendel, the monster, the demon. Therefore, lord of the Bright-Danes, protector of the

1. Hrethel was the father of Hygelac and Beowulf's grandfather and guardian.

Scyldings, I will make a request of you, refuge of warriors, fair friend of nations, that you refuse me not, now that I have come so far, that alone with my company of earls, this band of hardy men, I may cleanse Heorot. I have also heard say that the monster in his recklessness cares not for weapons. Therefore, so that my liege lord Hygelac may be glad of me in his heart, I scorn to bear sword or broad shield, yellow wood, to the battle, but with my grasp I shall grapple with the enemy and fight for life, foe against foe. The one whom death takes can trust the Lord's judgment. I think that if he may accomplish it, unafraid he will feed on the folk of the Geats in the war-hall as he has often done on the flower of men. You will not need to hide my head<sup>2</sup> if death takes me, for he will have me blood-smeared; he will bear away my bloody flesh meaning to savor it, he will eat ruthlessly, the walker alone, will stain his retreat in the moor; no longer will you need trouble yourself to take care of my body. If battle takes me, send to Hygelac the best of war-clothes that protects my breast, finest of mail-shirts. It is a legacy of Hrethel, the work of Weland.<sup>3</sup> Fate always goes as it must."

(VII.) Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings: "For deeds done, my friend Beowulf, and for past favors you have sought us. A fight of your father's brought on the greatest of feuds. With his own hands he became the slayer of Heatholaf among the Wylfings. After that the country of the Weather-Geats might not keep him, for fear of war. From there he sought the folk of the South-Danes, the Honor-Scyldings, over the sea-swell. At that time I was first ruling the Danish people and, still in my youth, held the wide kingdom, hoard-city of heroes. Heorogar had died then, gone from life, my older brother, son of Healfdene—he was better than I. Afterwards I paid blood-money to end the feud; over the sea's back I sent to the Wylfings old treasures; he<sup>4</sup> swore oaths to me.

"It is a sorrow to me in spirit to say to any man what Grendel has brought me with his hatred—humiliation in Heorot, terrible violence. My hall-troop, warrior-band, has shrunk; fate has swept them away into Grendel's horror. (God may easily put an end to the wild ravager's deeds!) Full often over the ale-cups warriors made bold with beer have boasted that they would await with grim swords Grendel's attack in the beer-hall. Then in the morning this mead-hall was a hall shining with blood, when the day lightened, all the bench-floor blood-wet, a gore-hall. I had fewer faithful men, beloved retainers, for death had destroyed them. Now sit down to the feast and unbind your thoughts, your famous victories, as heart inclines."

2. I.e., "bury my body."

3. The blacksmith of the Norse gods.

4. Ecgtheow, whose feud with the Wylfings Hrothgar had settled.

## [THE FEAST AT HEOROT]

Then was a bench cleared in the beer-hall for the men of the Geats all together. Then the stout-hearted ones went to sit down, proud in their might. A thane did his work who bore in his hands an embellished ale-cup, poured the bright drink. At times a scop sang, clear-voiced in Heorot. There was joy of brave men, no little company of Danes and Weather-Geats.

(VIII.) Unferth spoke, son of Ecglaaf, who sat at the feet of the king of the Scyldings, unbound words of contention—to him was Beowulf's undertaking, the brave seafarer, a great vexation, for he would not allow that any other man of middle-earth should ever achieve more glory under the heavens than himself: "Are you that Beowulf who contended with Breca, competed in swimming on the broad sea, where for pride you explored the water, and for foolish boast ventured your lives in the deep? Nor might any man, friend nor enemy, keep you from the perilous venture of swimming in the sea. There you embraced the sea-streams with your arms, measured the sea-ways, flung forward your hands, glided over the ocean; the sea boiled with waves, with winter's swell. Seven nights you toiled in the water's power. He overcame you at swimming, had more strength. Then in the morning the sea bore him up among the Heathoraemas; from there he sought his own home, dear to his people, the land of the Brondings, the fair stronghold, where he had folk, castle, and treasures. All his boast against you the son of Beanstan carried out in deed. Therefore I expect the worse results for you—though you have prevailed everywhere in battles, in grim war—if you dare wait near Grendel a night-long space."

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "Well, my friend Unferth, drunk with beer you have spoken a great many things about Breca—told about his adventures. I maintain the truth that I had more strength in the sea, hardship on the waves, than any other man. Like boys we agreed together and boasted—we were both in our first youth—that we would risk our lives in the salt sea, and that we did even so. We had naked swords, strong in our hands, when we went swimming; we thought to guard ourselves against whale-fishes. He could not swim at all far from me in the flood-waves, be quicker in the water, nor would I move away from him. Thus we were together on the sea for the time of five nights until the flood drove us apart, the swelling sea, coldest of weathers, darkening night, and the north wind battle-grim turned against us: rough were the waves. The anger of the sea-fishes was roused. Then my body-mail, hard and hand-linked, gave me help against my foes; the woven war-garment, gold-adorned, covered my breast. A fierce cruel attacker dragged me

to the bottom, held me grim in his grasp, but it was granted me to reach the monster with my sword-point, my battle-blade. The war-stroke destroyed the mighty sea-beast—through my hand.

(IX.) “Thus often loathsome assailants pressed me hard. I served them with my good sword, as the right was. They had no joy at all of the feast, the malice-workers, that they should eat me, sit around a banquet near the sea-bottom. But in the morning, sword-wounded they lay on the shore, left behind by the waves, put to sleep by the blade, so that thereafter they would never hinder the passage of sea-voyagers over the deep water. Light came from the east, bright signal of God, the sea became still so that I might see the headlands, the windy walls of the sea. Fate often saves an undoomed man when his courage is good. In any case it befell me that I slew with my sword nine sea-monsters. I have not heard tell of a harder fight by night under heaven’s arch, nor of a man more hard-pressed in the sea-streams. Yet I came out of the enemies’ grasp alive, weary of my adventure. Then the sea bore me onto the lands of the Finns, the flood with its current, the surging waters.

“I have not heard say of you any such hard matching of might, such sword-terror. Breca never yet in the games of war—neither he nor you—achieved so bold a deed with bright swords (I do not much boast of it), though you became your brothers’ slayer, your close kin; for that you will suffer punishment in hell, even though your wit is keen. I tell you truly, son of Ecglaf, that Grendel, awful monster, would never have performed so many terrible deeds against your chief, humiliation in Heorot, if your spirit, your heart, were so fierce in fight as you claim. But he has noticed that he need not much fear the hostility, not much dread the terrible sword-storm of your people, the Victory-Scyldings. He exacts forced levy, shows mercy to none of the Danish people; but he is glad, kills, carves for feasting, expects no fight from the Spear-Danes. But I shall show him soon now the strength and courage of the Geats, their warfare. Afterwards he will walk who may, glad to the mead, when the morning light of another day, the bright-clothed sun, shines from the south on the children of men.”

Then was the giver of treasure in gladness, gray-haired and battle-brave. The lord of the Bright-Danes could count on help. The folk’s guardian had heard from Beowulf a fast-resolved thought.

There was laughter of warriors, voices rang pleasant, words were cheerful. Wealhtheow came forth, Hrothgar’s queen, mindful of customs, gold-adorned, greeted the men in the hall; and the noble woman offered the cup first to the keeper of the land of

the East-Danes, bade him be glad at the beer-drinking, beloved of the people. In joy he partook of feast and hall-cup, king famous for victories. Then the woman of the Helmings went about to each one of the retainers, young and old, offered them the costly cup, until the time came that she brought the mead-bowl to Beowulf, the ring-adorned queen, mature of mind. Sure of speech she greeted the man of the Geats, thanked God that her wish was fulfilled, that she might trust in some man for help against deadly deeds. He took the cup, the warrior fierce in battle, from Wcalthew, and then spoke, one ready for fight—Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "I resolved, when I set out on the sea, sat down in the sea-boat with my band of men, that I should altogether fulfill the will of your people or else fall in slaughter, fast in the foe's grasp. I shall achieve a deed of manly courage or else have lived to see in this mead-hall my ending day." These words were well-pleasing to the woman, the boast of the Geat. Gold-adorned, the noble folk-queen went to sit by her lord.

Then there were again as at first strong words spoken in the hall, the people in gladness, the sound of a victorious folk, until, in a little while, the son of Healfdene wished to seek his evening rest. He knew of the battle in the high hall that had been plotted by the monster, plotted from the time that they might see the light of the sun until the night, growing dark over all things, the shadowy shapes of darkness, should come gliding, black under the clouds. The company all arose. Then they saluted each other, Hrothgar and Beowulf, and Hrothgar wished him good luck, control of the wine-hall, and spoke these words: "Never before, since I could raise hand and shield, have I entrusted to any man the great hall of the Danes, except now to you. Hold now and guard the best of houses: remember your fame, show your great courage, keep watch against the fierce foe. You will not lack what you wish if you survive that deed of valor."

[THE FIGHT WITH GRENDEL]

(X.) Then Hrothgar went out of the hall with his company of warriors, the protector of the Scyldings. The war-chief would seek the bed of Wealhtheow the queen. The King of Glory—as men had learned—had appointed a hall-guard against Grendel; he had a special mission to the prince of the Danes: he kept watch against monsters.

And the man of the Geats had sure trust in his great might, the favor of the Ruler. Then he took off his shirt of armor, the helmet from his head, handed his embellished sword, best of irons, to an attendant, bade him keep guard over his war-gear. Then the good warrior spoke some boast-words before he

went to his bed, Beowulf of the Geats: "I claim myself no poorer in war-strength, war works, than Grendel claims himself. Therefore I will not put him to sleep with a sword, so take away his life, though surely I might. He knows no good tools with which he might strike against me, cut my shield in pieces, though he is strong in fight. But we shall forgo the sword in the night—if he dare seek war without weapon—and then may wise God, Holy Lord, assign glory on whichever hand seems good to Him."

The battle-brave one laid himself down, the pillow received the earl's head, and about him many a brave seaman lay down to hall-rest. None of them thought that he would ever again seek from there his dear home, people or town where he had been brought up; for they knew that bloody death had carried off far too many men in the wine-hall, folk of the Danes. But the Lord granted to weave for them good fortune in war, for the folk of the Weather-Geats, comfort and help that they should quite overcome their foe through the might of one man, through his sole strength: the truth has been made known that mighty God has always ruled mankind.

There came gliding in the black night the walker in darkness. The warriors slept who should hold the horned house—all but one. It was known to men that when the Ruler did not wish it the hostile creature might not drag them away beneath the shadows. But he, lying awake for the fierce foe, with heart swollen in anger awaited the outcome of the fight.

(XI.) Then from the moor under the mist-hills Grendel came walking, wearing God's anger. The foul ravager thought to catch some one of mankind there in the high hall. Under the clouds he moved until he could see most clearly the wine-hall, treasure-house of men, shining with gold. That was not the first time that he had sought Hrothgar's home. Never before or since in his life-days did he find harder luck, hardier hall-thanes. The creature deprived of joy came walking to the hall. Quickly the door gave way, fastened with fire-forged bands, when he touched it with his hands. Driven by evil desire, swollen with rage, he tore it open, the hall's mouth. After that the foe at once stepped onto the shining floor, advanced angrily. From his eyes came a light not fair, most like a flame. He saw many men in the hall, a band of kinsmen all asleep together, a company of war-men. Then his heart laughed: dreadful monster, he thought that before the day came he would divide the life from the body of every one of them, for there had come to him a hope of full-feasting. It was not his fate that when that night was over he should feast on more of mankind.

The kinsman of Hygelac, mighty man, watched how the evil-

doer would make his quick onslaught. Nor did the monster mean to delay it, but, starting his work, he suddenly seized a sleeping man, tore at him ravenously, bit into his bone-locks, drank the blood from his veins, swallowed huge morsels; quickly he had eaten all of the lifeless one, feet and hands. He stepped closer, then felt with his arm for the brave-hearted man on the bed, reached out towards him, the foe with his hand; at once in fierce response Beowulf seized it and sat up, leaning on his own arm. Straightway the fosterer of crimes knew that he had not encountered on middle-earth, anywhere in this world, a harder hand-grip from another man. In mind he became frightened, in his spirit: not for that might he escape the sooner. His heart was eager to get away, he would flee to his hiding-place, seek his rabble of devils. What he met there was not such as he had ever before met in the days of his life. Then the kinsman of Hygelac, the good man, thought of his evening's speech, stood upright and laid firm hold on him: his fingers cracked. The giant was pulling away, the earl stepped forward. The notorious one thought to move farther away, wherever he could, and flee his way from there to his fen-retreat; he knew his fingers' power to be in a hateful grip. That was a painful journey that the loathsome despoiler had made to Heorot. The retainers' hall rang with the noise—terrible drink<sup>5</sup> for all the Danes, the house-dwellers, every brave man, the earls. Both were enraged, fury-filled, the two who meant to control the hall. The building resounded. Then was it much wonder that the wine-hall withstood them joined in fierce fight, that it did not fall to the ground, the fair earth-dwelling; but it was so firmly made fast with iron bands, both inside and outside, joined by skillful smith-craft. There started from the floor—as I have heard say—many a mead-bench, gold-adorned, when the furious ones fought. No wise men of the Scyldings ever before thought that any men in any manner might break it down, splendid with bright horns, have skill to destroy it, unless flame should embrace it, swallow it in fire. Noise rose up, sound strange enough. Horrible fear came upon the North-Danes, upon every one of those who heard the weeping from the wall, God's enemy sing his terrible song, song without triumph—the hell-slave bewail his pain. There held him fast he who of men was strongest of might in the days of this life.

(XII.) Not for anything would the protector of warriors let the murderous guest go off alive: he did not consider his life-days of use to any of the nations. There more than enough of Beowulf's earls drew swords, old heirlooms, wished to protect

5. The metaphor reflects the idea that the chief purpose of a hall such as Heorot was as a place for men to feast in.



the life of their dear lord, famous prince, however they might. They did not know when they entered the fight, hardy-spirited warriors, and when they thought to hew him on every side, to seek his soul, that not any of the best of irons on earth, no war-sword, would touch the evil-doer: for with a charm he had made victory-weapons useless, every sword-edge. His departure to death from the time of this life was to be wretched; and the alien spirit was to travel far off into the power of fiends. Then he who before had brought trouble of heart to mankind, committed many crimes—he was at war with God—found that his body would do him no good, for the great-hearted kinsman of Hygelac had him by the hand. Each was hateful to the other alive. The awful monster had lived to feel pain in his body, a huge wound in his shoulder was exposed, his sinews sprang apart, his bone-locks broke. Glory in battle was given to Beowulf. Grendel must flee from there, mortally sick, seek his joyless home in the fen-slopes. He knew the more surely that his life's end had come, the full number of his days. For all the Danes was their wish fulfilled after the bloody fight. Thus he who had lately come from far off, wise and stout-hearted, had purged Heorot, saved Hrothgar's house from affliction. He rejoiced in his night's work, a deed to make famous his courage. The man of the Geats had fulfilled his boast to the East-Danes; so too he had remedied all the grief, the malice-caused sorrow that they had endured before, and had had to suffer from harsh necessity, no small distress. That was clearly proved when the battle-brave man set the hand up under the curved roof—the arm and the shoulder: there all together was Grendel's grasp.

[CELEBRATION AT HEOROT]

(XIII.) Then in the morning, as I have heard, there was many a warrior about the gift-hall. Folk-chiefs came from far and near over the wide-stretching ways to look on the wonder, the foot-prints of the foe. Nor did his going from life seem sad to any of the men who saw the tracks of the one without glory—how, weary-hearted, overcome with injuries, he moved on his way from there to the mere<sup>6</sup> of the water-monsters with life-failing footsteps, death-doomed and in flight. There the water was boiling with blood, the horrid surge of waves swirling, all mixed with hot gore, sword-blood. Doomed to die he had hidden, then, bereft of joys, had laid down his life in his fen-refuge, his heathen soul: there hell took him.

From there old retainers—and many a young man, too—turned back in their glad journey to ride from the mere, high-

6. Lake.

spirited on horseback, warriors on steeds. There was Beowulf's fame spoken of; many a man said—and not only once—that, south nor north, between the seas, over the wide earth, no other man under the sky's expanse was better of those who bear shields, more worthy of ruling. Yet they found no fault with their own dear lord, gracious Hrothgar, for he was a good king. At times battle-famed men let their brown horses gallop, let them race where the paths seemed fair, known for their excellence. At times a thane of the king, a man skilled at telling adventures, songs stored in his memory, who could recall many of the stories of the old days, wrought a new tale in well-joined words; this man undertook with his art to recite in turn Beowulf's exploit, and skillfully to tell an apt tale, to lend words to it.

He spoke everything that he had heard tell of Sigemund's valorous deeds, many a strange thing, the strife of Waels's son,<sup>7</sup> his far journeys, feuds and crimes, of which the children of men knew nothing—except for Fitela with him, to whom he would tell everything, the uncle to his nephew, for they were always friends in need in every fight. Many were the tribes of giants that they had laid low with their swords. For Sigemund there sprang up after his death-day no little glory—after he, hardy in war, had killed the dragon, keeper of the treasure-hoard: under the hoary stone the prince's son had ventured alone, a daring deed, nor was Fitela with him. Yet it turned out well for him, so that his sword went through the gleaming worm and stood fixed in the wall, splendid weapon: the dragon lay dead of the murdering stroke. Through his courage the great warrior had brought it about that he might at his own wish enjoy the ring-hoard. He loaded the sea-boat, bore into the ship's bosom the bright treasure, offspring of Waels. The hot dragon melted.

He was adventurer most famous, far and wide through the nations, for deeds of courage—he had prospered from that before, the protector of warriors—after the war-making of Heremod had come to an end, his strength and his courage.<sup>8</sup> Among the Jutes Heremod came into the power of his enemies, was betrayed, quickly dispatched. Surging sorrows had oppressed him too long: he had become a great care to his people, to all his princes; for many a wise man in former times had bewailed the journey of the fierce-hearted one—people who had counted on him as a relief from affliction—that that king's son should prosper, take the rank of his father, keep guard over the folk, the treasure and stronghold, the kindgom of heroes, the home of the Scyldings. The kinsman of Hygelac became dearer to his friends, to all man-

7. Waels was Sigemund's father.

8. Heremod was an unsuccessful king of the Danes, one who began brilliantly but became cruel and avaricious, ul-

timately having to take refuge among the Jutes, who put him to death. His reputation was thus overshadowed by that of Sigemund.

kind: crime took possession of Heremod.

Sometimes racing their horses they passed over the sand-covered ways. By then the morning light was far advanced, hastening on. Many a stout-hearted warrior went to the high hall to see the strange wonder. The king himself walked forth from the women's apartment, the guardian of the ring-hoards, secure in his fame, known for his excellence, with much company; and his queen with him passed over the path to the mead-hall with a troop of attendant women.

(XIV.) Hrothgar spoke—he had gone to the hall, taken his stand on the steps, looked at the high roof shining with gold, and at Grendel's hand: "For this sight may thanks be made quickly to the Almighty: I endured much from the foe, many griefs from Grendel: God may always work wonder upon wonder, the Guardian of Heaven. It was not long ago that I did not expect ever to live to see relief from any of my woes—when the best of houses stood shining with blood, stained with slaughter, a far-reaching woe for each of my counselors, for every one, since none thought he could ever defend the people's stronghold from its enemies, from demons and evil spirits. Now through the Lord's might a warrior has accomplished the deed that all of us with our skill could not perform. Yes, she may say, whatever woman brought forth this son among mankind—if she still lives—that the God of Old was kind to her in her child-bearing. Now, Beowulf, best of men, in my heart I will love you as a son: keep well this new kinship. To you will there be no lack of the good things of the world that I have in my possession. Full often I have made reward for less, done honor with gifts to a lesser warrior, weaker in fighting. With your deeds you yourself have made sure that your glory will be ever alive. May the Almighty reward you with good—as just now he has done."

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "With much good will we have achieved this work of courage, that fight, have ventured boldly against the strength of the unknown one. I should have wished rather that you might have seen him, your enemy brought low among your furnishings. I thought quickly to bind him on his deathbed with hard grasp, so that because of my hand-grip he should lie struggling for life—unless his body should escape. I could not stop his going, since the Lord did not wish it, nor did I hold him firmly enough for that, my life-enemy: he was too strong, the foe in his going. Yet to save his life he has left his hand behind to show that he was here—his arm and shoulder; nor by that has the wretched creature bought any comfort; none the longer will the loathsome ravager live, hard-pressed by his crimes, for a wound has clutched him hard in its strong grip, in deadly bonds. There, like a man outlawed for guilt, he shall

await the great judgment, how the bright Lord will decree for him."

Then was the warrior more silent in boasting speech of warlike deeds, the son of Ecglaf,<sup>9</sup> after the nobles had looked at the hand, now high on the roof through the strength of a man, the foe's fingers. The end of each one, each of the nail-places, was most like steel; the hand-spurs of the heathen warrior were monstrous spikes. Everyone said that no hard thing would hurt him, no iron good from old times would harm the bloody battle-hand of the monster.

(XV.) Then was it ordered that Heorot be within quickly adorned by hands. Many there were, both men and women, who made ready the wine-hall, the guest-building. The hangings on the walls shone with gold, many a wondrous sight for each man who looks on such things. That bright building was much damaged, though made fast within by iron bonds, and its door-hinges sprung; the roof alone came through unharmed when the monster, outlawed for his crimes, turned in flight, in despair of his life. That is not easy to flee from—let him try it who will—but driven by need one must seek the place prepared for earth-dwellers, soul-bearers, the sons of men, the place where, after its feasting, one's body will sleep fast in its death-bed.

Then had the proper time come that Healfdene's son should go to the hall; the king himself would share in the feast. I have never heard that a people in a larger company bore themselves better about their treasure-giver. Men who were known for courage sat at the benches, rejoiced in the feast. Their kinsmen, stout-hearted Hrothgar and Hrothulf, partook fairly of many a mead-cup in the high hall. Heorot within was filled with friends: the Scylding-people had not then known treason's web.<sup>1</sup>

Then the son of Healfdene gave Beowulf a golden standard to reward his victory—a decorated battle-banner—a helmet and mail-shirt: many saw the glorious, costly sword borne before the warrior. Beowulf drank of the cup in the mead-hall. He had no need to be ashamed before fighting men of those rich gifts. I have not heard of many men who gave four precious, gold-adorned things to another on the ale-bench in a more friendly way. The rim around the helmet's crown had a head-protection, wound of wire, so that no battle-hard sharp sword might badly hurt him when the shield-warrior should go against his foe. Then the people's protector commanded eight horses with golden bridles to be led into the hall, within the walls. The saddle of one of them stood shining with hand-ornaments, adorned with jewels: that had been

9. I.e., Unferth, who had taunted Beowulf the night before.

1. A reference to the later history of the Danes, when, after Hrothgar's death,

his nephew Hrothulf apparently drove his son and successor Hrethric from the throne.

the war-seat of the high king when the son of Healfdene would join sword-play: never did the warfare of the wide-known one fail when men died in battle. And then the prince of Ing's friends<sup>2</sup> yielded possession of both, horses and weapons, to Beowulf: he bade him use them well. So generously the famous prince, guardian of the hoard, repaid the warrior's battle-deeds with horses and treasure that no man will ever find fault with them—not he that will speak truth according to what is right.

(XVI.) Then further the lord gave treasure to each of the men on the mead-bench who had made the sea-voyage with Beowulf, gave heirlooms; and he commanded that gold be paid for the one whom in his malice Grendel had killed—as he would have killed more if wise God and the man's courage had not forestalled that fate. The Lord guided all the race of men then, as he does now. Yet is discernment evcrywhere best, forethought of mind. Many a thing dear and loath he shall live to see who here in the days of trouble long makes use of the world.

There was song and music together before Healfdene's battle-leader, the wooden harp touched, tale oft told, when Hrothgar's scop should speak hall-pastime among the mead-benches . . . [of] Finn's retainers when the sudden disaster fell upon them. . . .<sup>3</sup>

The hero of the Half-Danes, Hnaef of the Scyldings, was fated to fall on Frisian battlefield. And no need had Hildeburh<sup>4</sup> to praise the good faith of the Jutes: blameless she was deprived of her dear ones at the shield-play, of son and brother; wounded by spears they fell to their fate. That was a mournful woman. Not without cause did Hoc's daughter lament the decree of destiny when morning came and she might see, under the sky, the slaughter of kinsmen—where before she had the greatest of world's joy. The fight took away all Finn's thanes except for only a few, so that he could in no way continue the battle on the field against Hengest, nor protect the survivors by fighting against the prince's thane. But they offered them peace-terms,<sup>5</sup> that they should clear

2. Ing was a legendary Danish king, and his "friends" are the Danes.

3. The lines introducing the scop's song seem faulty. The story itself is recounted in a highly allusive way, and many of its details are obscure, though some help is offered by an independent version of the story given in a fragmentary Old English lay called *The Fight at Finnsburg*.

4. Hildeburh, daughter of the former Danish king Hoc and sister of the ruling Danish king Hnaef, was married to Finn, king of the Jutes (Frisians). Hnaef with a party of Danes made what was presumably a friendly visit to Hildeburh and Finn at their home Finnsburg, but during a feast a quarrel broke out between the Jutes and the

Danes (since the scop's sympathies are with the Danes, he ascribes the cause to the bad faith of the Jutes), and in the ensuing fight Hnaef and his nephew, the son of Finn and Hildeburh, were killed, along with many other Danes and Jutes.

5. It is not clear who proposed the peace terms, but in view of the teller's Danish sympathies, it was probably the Jutes that sought the uneasy truce from Hengest, who became the Danes' leader after Hnaef's death. The truce imposed upon Hengest and the Danes the intolerable condition of having to dwell in peace with the Jutish king who was responsible for the death of their own king.

another building for them, hall and high seat, that they might have control of half of it with the sons of the Jutes; and at givings of treasure the son of Folcwalda<sup>6</sup> should honor the Danes each day, should give Hengest's company rings, such gold-plated treasure as that with which he would cheer the Frisians' kin in the high hall. Then on both sides they confirmed the fast peace-compact. Finn declared to Hengest, with oaths deep-sworn, unfeigned, that he would hold those who were left from the battle in honor in accordance with the judgment of his counselors, so that by words or by works no man should break the treaty nor because of malice should ever mention that, princeless, the Danes followed the slayer of their own ring-giver, since necessity forced them. If with rash speech any of the Frisians should insist upon calling to mind the cause of murderous hate, then the sword's edge should settle it.

The funeral pyre was made ready and gold brought up from the hoard. The best of the warriors of the War-Scyldings<sup>7</sup> was ready on the pyre. At the fire it was easy to see many a blood-stained battle-shirt, boar-image all golden—iron-hard swine—many a noble destroyed by wounds: more than one had died in battle. Then Hildeburh bade give her own son to the flames on Hnaef's pyre, burn his blood vessels, put him in the fire at the shoulder of his uncle. The woman mourned, sang her lament. The warrior took his place.<sup>8</sup> The greatest of death-fires wound to the skies, roared before the barrow. Heads melted as blood sprang out—wounds opened wide, hate-bites of the body. Fire swallowed them—greediest of spirits—all of those whom war had taken away from both peoples: their strength had departed.

(XVII.) Then warriors went to seek their dwellings, bereft of friends, to behold Friesland, their homes and high city.<sup>9</sup> Yet Hengest stayed on with Finn for a winter darkened with the thought of slaughter, all desolate. He thought of his land, though he might not drive his ring-prowed ship over the water—the sea boiled with storms, strove with the wind, winter locked the waves in ice-bonds—until another year came to men's dwellings, just as it does still, glorious bright weather always watching for its time. Then winter was gone, earth's lap fair, the exile was eager to go, the guest from the dwelling: [yet] more he thought of revenge for his wrongs than of the sea-journey—if he might bring about a fight where he could take account of the sons of the Jutes with his iron. So he made no refusal of the world's

6. I.e., Finn.

7. I.e., Hnaef.

8. The line is obscure, but it perhaps means that the body of Hildeburh's son

was placed on the pyre.

9. This seems to refer to the few survivors on the Jutish side.

custom when the son of Hunlaf<sup>1</sup> placed on his lap Battle-Bright, best of swords: its edges were known to the Jutes. Thus also to war-minded Finn in his turn cruel sword-evil came in his own home, after Guthlaf and Oslaf complained of the grim attack, the injury after the sea-journey, assigned blame for their lot of woes: breast might not contain the restless heart. Then was the hall reddened from foes' bodies, and thus Finn slain, the king in his company, and the queen taken. The warriors of the Scyldings bore to ship all the hall-furnishings of the land's king, whatever of necklaces, skillfully wrought treasures, they might find at Finn's home. They brought the noble woman on the sea-journey to the Danes, led her to her people.

The lay was sung to the end, the song of the scop. Joy mounted again, bench-noise brightened, cup-bearers poured wine from wonderful vessels. Then Wealththeow came forth to walk under gold crown to where the good men sat, nephew and uncle: their friendship was then still unbroken, each true to the other.<sup>2</sup> There too Unferth the spokesman sat at the feet of the prince of the Scyldings: each of them trusted his spirit, that he had much courage, though he was not honorable to his kinsmen at sword-play. Then the woman of the Scyldings spoke:

"Take this cup my noble lord, giver of treasure. Be glad, gold-friend of warriors, and speak to the Geats with mild words, as a man ought to do. Be gracious to the Geats, mindful of gifts [which]<sup>3</sup> you now have from near and far. They have told me that you would have the warrior for your son. Heorot is purged, the bright ring-hall. Enjoy while you may many rewards, and leave to your kinsmen folk and kingdom when you must go forth to look on the Ruler's decree. I know my gracious Hrothulf, that he will hold the young warriors in honor if you, friend of the Scyldings, leave the world before him. I think he will repay our sons with good if he remembers all the favors we did to his pleasure and honor when he was a child."

Then she turned to the bench where her sons were, Hrethric and Hrothmund, and the sons of the warriors, young men together. There sat the good man Beowulf of the Geats beside the two brothers.

(XVIII.) The cup was borne to him and welcome offered

1. The text is open to various interpretations. The one adopted here assumes that the Dane Hunlaf, brother of Guthlaf and Oslaf, had been killed in the fight, and that ultimately Hunlaf's son demanded vengeance by the symbolical act of placing his father's sword in Hengest's lap, while at the same time Guthlaf and Oslaf reminded

Hengest of the Jutes' treachery. It is not clear whether the subsequent fight in which Finn was killed was waged by the Danish survivors alone, or whether the party first went back to Denmark and then returned to Finnsburg with reinforcements.

2. See section XV, note 1, above.

3. The text seems corrupt.

in friendly words to him, and twisted gold courteously bestowed on him, two arm-ornaments, a mail-shirt and rings, the largest of necklaces of those that I have heard spoken of on earth. I have heard of no better hoard-treasure under the heavens since Hama carried away to his bright city the necklace of the Brosings,<sup>4</sup> chain and rich setting: he fled the treacherous hatred of Eormenric, got eternal favor. This ring Hygelac of the Geats,<sup>5</sup> grandson of Swerting, had on his last venture; when beneath his battle-banner he defended his treasure, protected the spoils of war: fate took him when for pride he sought trouble, feud with the Frisians. Over the cup of the waves the mighty prince wore that treasure, precious stone. He fell beneath his shield; the body of the king came into the grasp of the Franks, his breast-armor and the neck-ring together. Lesser warriors plundered the fallen after the war-harvest: people of the Geats held the place of corpses.

The hall was filled with noise. Wealhtheow spoke, before the company she said to him: "Wear this ring, beloved Beowulf, young man, with good luck, and make use of this mail-shirt from the people's treasure, and prosper well; make yourself known with your might, and be kind of counsel to these boys: I shall remember to reward you for that. You have brought it about that, far and near, for a long time all men shall praise you, as wide as the sea surrounds the shores, home of the winds. While you live, prince, be prosperous. I wish you well of your treasure. Much favored one, be kind of deeds to my son. Here is each earl true to other, mild of heart, loyal to his lord; the thanes are at one, the people obedient, the retainers cheered with drink do as I bid."

Then she walked to her seat. There was the best of feasts, men drank wine. They did not know the fate, the grim decree made long before, as it came to pass to many of the earls after evening had come and Hrothgar had gone to his chambers, the noble one to his rest. A great number of men remained in the hall, just as they had often done before. They cleared the benches from the floor. It was spread over with beds and pillows. One of the beer-drinkers, ripe and fated to die, lay down to his hall-rest. They set at their heads their battle-shields, bright wood; there on the bench it was easy to see above each man his helmet that towered in battle, his ringed mail-shirt, his great spear-wood. It was their custom to be always ready for war whether at home or in the

4. The Brosings' (Brosings') necklace had been worn by the goddess Freya. Nothing more is known of this story of Hama, who seems to have stolen the necklace from the famous Gothic king Eormenric.

5. Beowulf is later said to have pre-

sent the necklace to Hygelac's queen, Hygd, though here Hygelac is said to have been wearing it on his ill-fated expedition against the Franks and Frisians, into whose hands it fell at his death.



field, in any case at any time that need should befall their liege lord: that was a good nation.

[GRENDDEL'S MOTHER'S ATTACK]

(XIX.) Then they sank to sleep. One paid sorely for his evening rest, just as had often befallen them when Grendel guarded the gold-hall, wrought wrong until the end came, death after misdeeds. It came to be seen, wide-known to men, that after the bitter battle an avenger still lived for an evil space: Grendel's mother, woman, monster-wife, was mindful of her misery, she who had to dwell in the terrible water, the cold currents, after Cain became sword-slayer of his only brother, his own father's son. Then Cain went as an outlaw to flee the cheerful life of men, marked for his murder, held to the wasteland. From him sprang many a devil sent by fate. Grendel was one of them, hateful outcast who at Heorot found a waking man waiting his warfare. There the monster had laid hold upon him, but he was mindful of the great strength, the large gift God had given him, and relied on the Almighty for favor, comfort and help. By that he overcame the foe, subdued the hell-spirit. Then he went off wretched, bereft of joy, to seek his dying-place, enemy of mankind. And his mother, still greedy and gallows-grim, would go on a sorrowful venture, avenge her son's death.

Then she came to Heorot where the Ring-Danes slept throughout the hall. Then change came quickly to the earls there, when Grendel's mother made her way in. The attack was the less terrible by just so much as is the strength of women, the war-terror of a wife, less than an armed man's when a hard blade, forge-hammered, a sword shining with blood, good of its edges, cuts the stout boar on a helmet opposite. Then in the hall was hard-edged sword raised from the seat, many a broad shield lifted firmly in hand: none thought of helmet, of wide mail-shirt, when the terror seized him. She was in haste, would be gone out from there, protect her life after she was discovered. Swiftly she had taken fast hold on one of the nobles, then she went to the fen. He was one of the men between the seas most beloved of Hrothgar in the rank of retainer, a noble shield-warrior whom she destroyed at his rest, a man of great repute. Beowulf was not there, for earlier, after the treasure-giving, another lodging had been appointed for the renowned Geat. Outcry arose in Heorot: she had taken, in its gore, the famed hand. Care was renewed, come again on the dwelling. That was not a good bargain, that on both sides they had to pay with the lives of friends.

Then was the old king, the hoary warrior, of bitter mind when he learned that his chief thane was lifeless, his dearest man dead. Quickly Beowulf was fetched to the bed-chamber, man happy in victory. At daybreak together with his earls he went, the

noble champion himself with his retainers, to where the wise one was, waiting to know whether after tidings of woe the All-Wielder would ever bring about change for him. The worthy warrior walked over the floor with his retainers—hall-wood resounded—that he might address words to the wise prince of Ing's friends, asked if the night had been pleasant according to his desires.

(XX.) Hrothgar spoke, protector of the Scyldings: "Ask not about pleasure. Sorrow is renewed to the people of the Danes: Aeschere is dead, Yrmenlaf's elder brother, my speaker of wisdom and my bearer of counsel, my shoulder-companion when we used to defend our heads in battle, when troops clashed, beat on boar-images. Whatever an earl should be, a man good from old times, such was Aeschere. Now a wandering murderous spirit has slain him with its hands in Heorot. I do not know by what way the awful creature, glorying in its prey, has made its retreat, gladdened by its feast. She has avenged the feud—that last night you killed Grendel with hard hand-grips, savagely, because too long he had diminished and destroyed my people. He fell in the fight, his life forfeited, and now the other has come, a mighty worker of wrong, would avenge her kinsman, and has carried far her revenge—as many a thane may think who weeps in his spirit for his treasure-giver, bitter sorrow in heart. Now the hand lies lifeless that was strong in support of all your desires.

"I have heard landmen, my people, hall-counselors, say this, that they have seen two such huge walkers in the wasteland holding to the moors, alien spirits. One of them, so far as they could clearly discern, was the likeness of a woman. The other wretched shape trod the tracks of exile in the form of a man, except that he was bigger than any other man. Land-dwellers in the old days named him Grendel. They know of no father, whether in earlier times any was begotten for them among the dark spirits. They hold to the secret land, the wolf-slopes, the windy headlands, the dangerous fen-paths where the mountain stream goes down under the darkness of the hills, the flood under the earth. It is not far from here, measured in miles, that the mere stands; over it hang frost-covered woods, trees fast of root close over the water. There each night may be seen fire on the flood, a fearful wonder. Of the sons of men there lives none, old of wisdom, who knows the bottom. Though the heath-stalker, the strong-horned hart, harassed by hounds makes for the forest after long flight, rather will he give his life, his being, on the bank than save his head by entering. That is no pleasant place. From it the surging waves rise up black to the heavens when the wind stirs up awful storms, until the air becomes gloomy, the skies weep. Now once again is the cure in you alone. You do not yet know the

land, the perilous place, where you might find the seldom-seen creature: seek if you dare. I will give you wealth for the feud, old treasure, as I did before, twisted gold—if you come away.”

(XXI.) Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: “Sorrow not, wise warrior. It is better for a man to avenge his friend than much mourn. Each of us must await his end of the world’s life. Let him who may get glory before death: that is best for the warrior after he has gone from life. Arise, guardian of the kingdom, let us go at once to look on the track of Grendel’s kin. I promise you this: she will not be lost under cover, not in the earth’s bosom nor in the mountain woods nor at the bottom of the sea, go where she will. This day have patience in every woe—as I expect you to.”

Then the old man leapt up, thanked God, the mighty Lord, that the man had so spoken. Then was a horse bridled for Hrothgar, a curly-maned mount. The wise king moved in state; the band of shield-bearers marched on foot. The tracks were seen wide over the wood-paths where she had gone on the ground, made her way forward over the dark moor, borne lifeless the best of retainers of those who watched over their home with Hrothgar. The son of noble forebears<sup>6</sup> moved over the steep rocky slopes, narrow paths where only one could go at a time, an unfamiliar trail, steep hills many a lair of water-monsters. He went before with a few wise men to spy out the country, until suddenly he found mountain trees leaning out over hoary stone, a joyless wood: water lay beneath, bloody and troubled. It was pain of heart for all the Danes to suffer, for the friends of the Scyldings, for many a thane, grief to each earl when on the cliff over the water they came upon Aeschere’s head. The flood boiled with blood—the men looked upon it—with hot gore. Again and again the horn sang its urgent war-song. The whole troop sat down to rest. Then they saw on the water many a snake-shape, strong sea-serpents exploring the mere, and water-monsters lying on the slopes of the shore such as those that in the morning often attend a perilous journey on the paths of the sea, serpents and wild beasts.

These fell away from the shore, fierce and rage-swollen: they had heard the bright sound, the war-horn sing. One of them a man of the Geats with his bow cut off from his life, his water-warring, after the hard war-arrow stuck in his heart: he was weaker in swimming the lake when death took him. Straightway he was hard beset on the waves with barbed boar-spears, strongly surrounded, pulled up on the shore, strange spawn of the waves. The men looked on the terrible alien thing.

6. I.e., Hrothgar.

Beowulf put on his warrior's dress, had no fear for his life. His war-shirt, hand-fashioned, broad and well-worked, was to explore the mere: it knew how to cover his body-cave so that foe's grip might not harm his heart, or grasp of angry enemy his life. But the bright helmet guarded his head, one which was to stir up the lake-bottom, seek out the troubled water—made rich with gold, surrounded with splendid bands, as the weapon-smith had made it in far-off days, fashioned it wonderfully, set it about with boar-images so that thereafter no sword or battle-blade might bite into it. And of his strong supports that was not the least which Hrothgar's spokesman <sup>7</sup> lent to his need: Hrunting was the name of the hilted sword; it was one of the oldest of ancient treasures; its edge was iron, decorated with poison-stripes, hardened with battle-sweat. Never had it failed in war any man of those who grasped it in their hands, who dared enter on dangerous enterprises, onto the common meeting place of foes: this was not the first time that it should do work of courage. Surely the son of Ecglaf, great of strength, did not have in mind what, drunk with wine, he had spoken, when he lent that weapon to a better sword-fighter. He did not himself dare to risk his life under the warring waves, to engage his courage: there he lost his glory, his name for valor. It was not so with the other when he had armed himself for battle.

[BEOWULF ATTACKS GRENDEL'S MOTHER]

(XXII.) Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "Think now, renowned son of Healfdene, wise king, now that I am ready for the venture, gold-friend of warriors, of what we said before, that, if at your need I should go from life, you would always be in a father's place for me when I am gone: be guardian of my young retainers, my companions, if battle should take me. The treasure you gave me, beloved Hrothgar, send to Hygelac. The lord of the Geats may know from the gold, the son of Hrethel may see when he looks on that wealth, that I found a ring-giver good in his gifts, enjoyed him while I might. And let Unferth have the old heirloom, the wide-known man my splendid-waved sword, hard-edged: with Hrunting I shall get glory, or death will take me."

After these words the man of the Weather-Geats turned away boldly, would wait for no answer: the surging water took the warrior. Then was it a part of a day before he might see the bottom's floor. Straightway that which had held the flood's tract a hundred half-years, ravenous for prey, grim and greedy, saw that some man from above was exploring the dwelling of monsters. Then she groped toward him, took the warrior in her awful

7. I.e., Unferth.

grip. Yet not the more for that did she hurt his hale body within: his ring-armor shielded him about on the outside so that she could not pierce the war-dress, the linked body-mail, with hateful fingers. Then as she came to the bottom the sea-wolf bore the ring-prince to her house so that—no matter how brave he was—he might not wield weapons; but many monsters attacked him in the water, many a sea-beast tore at his mail-shirt with war-tusks, strange creatures afflicted him. Then the earl saw that he was in some hostile hall where no water harmed him at all, and the flood's onrush might not touch him because of the hall-roof. He saw firelight, a clear blaze shine bright.

Then the good man saw the accursed dweller in the deep, the mighty mere-woman. He gave a great thrust to his sword—his hand did not withhold the stroke—so that the etched blade sang at her head a fierce war-song. Then the stranger found that the battle-lightning would not bite, harm her life, but the edge failed the prince in his need: many a hand-battle had it endured before, often sheared helmet, war-coat of man fated to die: this was the first time for the rare treasure that its glory had failed.

But still he was resolute, not slow of his courage, mindful of fame, the kinsman of Hygelac. Then, angry warrior, he threw away the sword, wavy-patterned, bound with ornaments, so that it lay on the ground, hard and steel-edged: he trusted in his strength, his mighty hand-grip. So ought a man to do when he thinks to get long-lasting praise in battle: he cares not for his life. Then he seized by the hair Grendel's mother—the man of the War-Geats did not shrink from the fight. Battle-hardened, now swollen with rage, he pulled his deadly foe so that she fell to the floor. Quickly in her turn she repaid him his gift with her grim claws and clutched at him: then weary-hearted, the strongest of warriors, of foot-soldiers, stumbled so that he fell. Then she sat upon the hall-guest and drew her knife, broad and bright-edged. She would avenge her child, her only son. The woven breast-armor lay on his shoulder: that protected his life, withstood entry of point or of edge. Then the son of Ecgtheow would have fared amiss under the wide ground, the champion of the Geats, if the battle-shirt had not brought help, the hard war-net—and holy God brought about victory in war; the wise Lord, Ruler of the Heavens, decided it with right, easily, when Beowulf had stood up again.

XXIII. Then he saw among the armor a victory-blessed blade, an old sword made by the giants, strong of its edges, glory of warriors: it was the best of weapons, except that it was larger than any other man might bear to war-sport, good and adorned, the work of giants. He seized the linked hilt, he who fought for

the Scyldings, savage and slaughter-bent, drew the patterned-blade; desperate of life, he struck angrily so that it bit her hard on the neck, broke the bone-rings. The blade went through all the doomed body. She fell to the floor, the sword was sweating, the man rejoiced in his work.

The blaze brightened, light shone within, just as from the sky heaven's candle shines clear. He looked about the building; then he moved along the wall, raised his weapon hard by the hilt, Hygelac's thane, angry and resolute: the edge was not useless to the warrior, for he would quickly repay Grendel for the many attacks he had made on the West-Danes—many more than the one time when he slew in their sleep fifteen hearth-companions of Hrothgar, devoured men of the Danish people while they slept, and another such number bore away, a hateful prey. He had paid him his reward for that, the fierce champion, for there he saw Grendel, weary of war, lying at rest, lifeless with the wounds he had got in the fight at Heorot. The body bounded wide when it suffered the blow after death, the hard sword-swing; and thus he cut off his head.

At once the wise men—who were watching the water with Hrothgar saw that the surging waves were troubled, the lake stained with blood. Gray-haired, old, they spoke together of the good warrior, that they did not again expect of the chief that he would come victorious to seek their great king; for many agreed on it, that the sea-wolf had destroyed him.

Then came the ninth hour of the day. The brave Scyldings left the hill. The gold-friend of warriors went back to his home. The strangers sat sick at heart and stared at the mere. They wished—and did not expect—that they would see their beloved lord himself.

Then the blade began to waste away from the battle-sweat, the war-sword into battle-icicles. That was a wondrous thing, that it should all melt, most like the ice when the Father loosens the frost's fetters, undoes the water-bonds—He Who has power over seasons and times: He is the true Ruler. Beowulf did not take from the dwelling, the man of the Weather-Geats, more treasures—though he saw many there—but only the head and the hilt, bright with jewels. The sword itself had already melted, its patterned blade burned away: the blood was too hot for it, the spirit that had died there too poisonous. Quickly he was swimming, he who had lived to see the fall of his foes; he plunged up through the water. The currents were all cleansed, the great tracts of the water, when the dire spirit left her life-days and this loaned world.

Then the protector of seafarers came toward the land, swimming stout-hearted; he had joy of his sea-booty, the great burden

he had with him. They went to meet him, thanked God, the strong band of thanes, rejoiced in their chief that they might see him again sound. Then the helmet and war-shirt of the mighty one were quickly loosened. The lake drowsed, the water beneath the skies, stained with blood. They went forth on the foot-tracks, glad in their hearts, measured the path back, the known ways, men bold as kings. They bore the head from the mere's cliff, toilsomely for each of the great-hearted ones: four of them had trouble in carrying Grendel's head on spear-shafts to the gold-hall—until at last they came striding to the hall, fourteen bold warriors of the Geats; their lord, high-spirited, walked in their company over the fields to the mead-hall.

Then the chief of the thanes, man daring in deeds, enriched by new glory, warrior dear to battle, came in to greet Hrothgar. Then Grendel's head was dragged by the hair over the floor to where men drank, a terrible thing to the earls and the woman with them, an awful sight: the men looked upon it.

[FURTHER CELEBRATION AT HEOROT]

(XXIV.) Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "Yes, we have brought you this sea-booty, son of Healfdene, man of the Scyldings, gladly, as evidence of glory—what you look on here. Not easily did I come through it with my life, the war under water, not without trouble carried out the task. The fight would have been ended straightway if God had not guarded me. With Hrunting I might not do anything in the fight, though that is a good weapon. But the Wielder of Men granted me that I should see hanging on the wall a fair, ancient great-sword—most often He has guided the man without friends—that I should wield the weapon. Then in the fight when the time became right for me I hewed the house-guardians. Then that war-sword, wavy-patterned, burnt away as their blood sprang forth, hottest of battle-sweats. I have brought the hilt away from the foes. I have avenged the evil deeds, the slaughter of Danes, as it was right to do. I promise you that you may sleep in Heorot without care with your band of retainers, and that for none of the thanes of your people, old or young, need you have fear, prince of the Scyldings—for no life-injury to your men on that account, as you did before."

Then the golden hilt was given into the hand of the old man, the hoary war-chief—the ancient work of giants. There came into the possession of the prince of the Danes, after the fall of devils, the work of wonder-smiths. And when the hostile-hearted creature, God's enemy, guilty of murder, gave up this world, and his mother too, it passed into the control of the best of worldly kings between the seas, of those who gave treasure in the Northlands.

Hrothgar spoke—he looked on the hilt, the old heirloom, on

which was written the origin of ancient strife, when the flood, rushing water, slew the race of giants—they suffered terribly: that was a people alien to the Everlasting Lord. The Ruler made them a last payment through water's welling. On the sword-guard of bright gold there was also rightly marked through runestaves, set down and told, for whom that sword, best of irons, had first been made, its hilt twisted and ornamented with snakes. Then the wise man spoke, the son of Healfdene—all were silent: "Lo, this may one say who works truth and right for the folk, recalls all things far distant, an old guardian of the land: that this earl was born the better man. Glory is raised up over the far ways—your glory over every people, Beowulf my friend. All of it, all your strength, you govern steadily in the wisdom of your heart. I shall fulfill my friendship to you, just as we spoke before. You shall become a comfort, whole and long-lasting, to your people, a help to warriors.

"So was not Heremod to the sons of Ecgwela, the Honor-Scyldings. He grew great not for their joy, but for their slaughter, for the destruction of Danish people. With swollen heart he killed his table-companions, shoulder-comrades, until he turned away from the joys of men, alone, notorious king, although mighty God had raised him in power, in the joys of strength, had set him up over all men. Yet in his breast his heart's thought grew blood-thirsty: no rings did he give to the Danes for glory. He lived joyless to suffer the pain of that strife, the long-lasting harm of the people. Teach yourself by him, be mindful of munificence. Old of winters, I tell this tale for you.

"It is a wonder to say how in His great spirit mighty God gives wisdom to mankind, land and carlship—He possesses power over all things. At times He lets the thought of a man of high lineage move in delight, gives him joy of earth in his homeland, a stronghold of men to rule over, makes regions of the world so subject to him, wide kingdoms, that in his unwisdom he may not himself have mind of his end. He lives in plenty; illness and age in no way grieve him, neither does dread care darken his heart, nor does enmity bare sword-hate, for the whole world turns to his will—he knows nothing worse—(XXV.) until his portion of pride increases and flourishes within him; then the watcher sleeps, the soul's guardian; that sleep is too sound, bound in its own cares, and the slayer most near whose bow shoots treacherously. Then is he hit in the heart, beneath his armor, with the bitter arrow—he cannot protect himself—with the crooked dark commands of the accursed spirit. What he has long held seems to him too little, angry-hearted he covets, no plated rings does he give in men's honor, and then he forgets and regards not his destiny because



of what God, Wielder of Heaven, has given him before, his portion of glories. In the end it happens in turn that the loaned body weakens, falls doomed; another takes the earl's ancient treasure, one who recklessly gives precious gifts, does not fearfully guard them.

"Keep yourself against that wickedness, beloved Beowulf, best of men, and choose better—eternal gains. Have no care for pride, great warrior. Now for a time there is glory in your might: yet soon it shall be that sickness or sword will diminish your strength, or fire's fangs, or flood's surge, or sword's swing, or spear's flight, or appalling age; brightness of eyes will fail and grow dark; then it shall be that death will overcome you, warrior.

"Thus I ruled the Ring-Danes for a hundred half-years under the skies, and protected them in war with spear and sword against many nations over middle-earth, so that I counted no one as my adversary underneath the sky's expanse. Well, disproof of that came to me in my own land, grief after my joys, when Grendel, ancient adversary, came to invade my home. Great sorrow of heart I have always suffered for his persecution. Thanks be to the Ruler, the Eternal Lord, that after old strife I have come to see in my lifetime, with my own eyes, his blood-stained head. Go now to your seat, have joy of the glad feast, made famous in battle. Many of our treasures will be shared when morning comes."

The Geat was glad at heart, went at once to seek his seat as the wise one bade. Then was a feast fairly served again, for a second time, just as before, for those famed for courage, sitting about the hall.

Night's cover lowered, dark over the warriors. The retainers all arose. The gray-haired one would seek his bed, the old Scylding. It pleased the Geat, the brave shield-warrior, immensely that he should have rest. Straightway a hall-thane led the way on for the weary one, come from far country, and showed every courtesy to the thane's need, such as in those days seafarers might expect as their due.

Then the great-hearted one rested; the hall stood high, vaulted and gold-adorned; the guest slept within until the black raven, blithe-hearted, announced heaven's joy. Then the bright light came passing over the shadows. The warriors hastened, the nobles were eager to set out again for their people. Bold of spirit, the visitor would seek his ship far thence.

Then the hardy one bade that Hrunting be brought to the son of Ecgla<sup>8</sup>, that he take back his sword, precious iron. He spoke thanks for that loan, said that he accounted it a good war-friend,

8. I.e., Unferth.

strong in battle; in his words he found no fault at all with the sword's edge. he was a thoughtful man. And then they were eager to depart, the warriors ready in their armor. The prince who had earned honor of the Danes went to the high seat where the other was: the man dear to war greeted Hrothgar.

[*Beowulf Returns Home*]

(XXVI.) Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "Now we sea-travelers come from afar wish to say that we desire to seek Hygelac. Here we have been entertained splendidly according to our desire: you have dealt well with us. If on earth I might in any way earn more of your heart's love, prince of warriors, than I have done before with warlike deeds, I should be ready at once. If beyond the sea's expanse I hear that men dwelling near threaten you with terrors, as those who hated you did before, I shall bring you a thousand thanes, warriors to your aid. I know of Hygelac, lord of the Geats, though he is young as a guardian of the people, that he will further me with words and works so that I may do you honor and bring spears to help you, strong support where you have need of men. If Hrethric, king's son, decides to come to the court of the Geats, he can find many friends there; far countries are well sought by him who is himself strong."

Hrothgar spoke to him in answer: "The All-Knowing Lord sent those words into your mind: I have not heard a man of so young age speak more wisely. You are great of strength, mature of mind, wise of words. I think it likely if the spear, sword-grim war, takes the son of Hrethel, sickness or weapon your prince, the people's ruler, and you have your life, that the Sea-Geats will not have a better to choose as their king, as guardian of their treasure, if you wish to hold the kingdom of your kinsmen. So well your heart's temper has long pleased me, beloved Beowulf. You have brought it about that peace shall be shared by the peoples, the folk of the Geats and the Spear-Danes, and enmity shall sleep, acts of malice which they practiced before; and there shall be, as long as I rule the wide kingdom, sharing of treasures, many a man shall greet his fellow with good gifts over the sea-bird's baths; the ring-prowed ship will bring gifts and tokens of friendship over the sea. I know your people, blameless in every respect, set firm after the old way both as to foe and to friend."

Then the protector of earls, the kinsman of Healfdene, gave him there in the hall twelve precious things; he bade him with these gifts seek his own dear people in safety, quickly come back. Then the king noble of race, the prince of the Scyldings, kissed the best of thanes and took him by his neck: tears fell from the gray-haired one. He had two thoughts of the future, the old and wise man, one more strongly than the other—that they would

not see each other again, bold men at council. The man was so dear to him that he might not restrain his breast's welling, for fixed in his heartstrings a deep-felt longing for the beloved man burned in his blood. Away from him Beowulf, warrior glorious with gold, walked over the grassy ground, proud of his treasure. The sea-goer awaited its owner, riding at anchor. Then on the journey the gift of Hrothgar was oft-praised: that was a king blameless in all things until age took from him the joys of his strength—old age that has often harmed many.

(XXVII.) There came to the flood the band of brave-hearted ones, of young men. They wore mail-coats, locked limb-shirts. The guard of the coast saw the coming of the earls, just as he had done before. He did not greet the guests with taunts from the cliff's top, but rode to meet them, said that the return of the warriors in bright armor in their ship would be welcome to the people of the Weather-Geats. There on the sand the broad sea-boat was loaded with armor, the ring-prowed ship with horses and rich things. The mast stood high over Hrothgar's hoard-gifts. He gave the boat-guard a sword wound with gold, so that thereafter on the mead-bench he was held the worthier for the treasure, the heirloom. The boat moved out to furrow the deep water, left the land of the Danes. Then on the mast a sea-cloth, a sail, was made fast by a rope. The boat's beams creaked: wind did not keep the sea-floater from its way over the waves. The sea-goer moved, foamy-necked floated forth over the swell, the ship with bound prow over the sea-currents until they might see the cliffs of the Geats, the well-known headlands. The ship pressed ahead, borne by the wind, stood still at the land. Quickly the harbor-guard was at the sea-side, he who had gazed for a long time far out over the currents, eager to see the beloved men. He<sup>9</sup> moored the deep ship in the sand, fast by its anchor ropes, lest the force of the waves should drive away the fair wooden vessel. Then he bade that the prince's wealth be borne ashore, armor and plated gold. It was not far for them to seek the giver of treasure, Hygelac son of Hrethel, where he dwelt at home near the sea-wall, himself with his retainers.

The building was splendid, its king most valiant, set high in the hall, Hygd<sup>1</sup> most youthful, wise and well-taught, though she had lived within the castle walls few winters, daughter of Hæreth. For she was not niggardly, nor too sparing of gifts to the men of the Geats, of treasures. Modthryth,<sup>2</sup> good folk-queen, did

9. Beowulf.

1. Hygd is Hygelac's young queen. The suddenness of her introduction here is perhaps due to a faulty text.

2. A transitional passage introducing the contrast between Hygd's good behavior and Modthryth's bad behavior as young women of royal blood seems

to have been lost. Modthryth's practice of having those who looked into her face put to death may reflect the folk-motif of the princess whose unsuccessful suitors are executed, though the text does not say that Modthryth's victims were suitors. Modthryth's "great lord" was probably her father.

dreadful deeds [in her youth]: no bold one among her retainers dared venture—except her great lord—to set his eyes on her in daylight, but [if he did] he should reckon deadly bonds prepared for him, arresting hands: that straightway after his seizure the sword awaited him, that the patterned blade must settle it, make known its death-evil. Such is no queenly custom for a woman to practice, though she is peerless—that one who weaves peace<sup>3</sup> should take away the life of a beloved man after pretended injury. However the kinsman of Hemming stopped that:<sup>4</sup> ale-drinkers gave another account, said that she did less harm to the people, fewer injuries, after she was given, gold-adorned, to the young warrior, the beloved noble, when by her father's teaching she sought Offa's hall in a voyage over the pale sea. There on the throne she was afterwards famous for generosity, while living made use of her life, held high love toward the lord of warriors, [who was] of all mankind the best, as I have heard, between the seas of the races of men. Since Offa was a man brave of wars and gifts, wide-honored, he held his native land in wisdom. From him sprang Eomer to the help of warriors, kinsman of Hemming, grandson of Garmund, strong in battle.<sup>5</sup>

(XXVIII.) Then the hardy one came walking with his troop over the sand on the sea-plain, the wide shores. The world-candle shone, the sun moved quickly from the south. They made their way, strode swiftly to where they heard that the protector of earls, the slayer of Ongentheow,<sup>6</sup> the good young war-king, was dispensing rings in the stronghold. The coming of Beowulf was straightway made known to Hygelac, that there in his home the defender of warriors, his comrade in battle, came walking alive to the court, sound from the battle-play. Quickly the way within was made clear for the foot-guests, as the mighty one bade.

Then he sat down with him, he who had come safe through the fight, kinsman with kinsman, after he had greeted his liege lord with formal speech, loyal, with vigorous words. Haereth's daughter moved through the hall-building with mead-cups, cared lovingly for the people, bore the cup of strong drink to the hands of the warriors. Hygelac began fairly to question his companion in the high hall, curiosity pressed him, what the adventures of the

3. Daughters of kings were frequently given in marriage to the king of a hostile nation in order to bring about peace; hence Modthryth may be called "one who weaves peace."

4. Offa, an Angle king who according to legend ruled Mercia in England; who Hemming was—besides being Offa's forebear—is not known.

5. Offa, the only person that may be identified as English in this English

poem, receives high praise; apparently the names of his father Garmund and son Eomer would strike a responsive chord in the poet's audience.

6. Ongentheow was a Scyfling (Swedish) king, whose story is fully told below, sections XL and XLI. In fact Hygelac was not his slayer, but is called so because he led the attack on the Scyflings in which Ongentheow was killed.

Sea-Geats had been. "How did you fare on your journey, beloved Beowulf, when you suddenly resolved to seek distant combat over the salt water, battle in Heorot? Did you at all help the wide-known woes of Hrothgar, the famous prince? Because of you I burned with seething sorrows, care of heart—had no trust in the venture of my beloved man. I entreated you long that you should in no way approach the murderous spirit, should let the South-Danes themselves settle the war with Grendel. I say thanks to God that I may see you sound."

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "To many among men it is not hidden, lord Hygelac, the great encounter—what a fight we had, Grendel and I, in the place where he made many sorrows for the Victory-Scyldings, constant misery. All that I avenged, so that none of Grendel's kin over the earth need boast of that clash at night—whoever lives longest of the loathsome kind, wrapped in malice. There I went forth to the ring-hall to greet Hrothgar. At once the famous son of Healfdene, when he knew my purpose, gave me a seat with his own sons. The company was in joy: I have not seen in the time of my life under heaven's arch more mead-mirth of hall-sitters. At times the famous queen, peace-pledge of the people, went through all the hall, cheered the young men; often she would give a man a ring-band before she went to her seat. At times Hrothgar's daughter bore the ale-cup to the retainers, to the earls throughout the hall. I heard hall-sitters name her Freawaru when she offered the studded cup to warriors. Young and gold-adorned, she is promised to the fair son of Froda.<sup>7</sup> That has seemed good to the lord of the Scyldings, the guardian of the kingdom, and he believes of this plan that he may, with this woman, settle their portion of deadly feuds, of quarrels.<sup>8</sup> Yet most often after the fall of a prince in any nation the deadly spear rests but a little while, even though the bride is good.

"It may displease the lord of the Heatho-Bards and each thane of that people when he goes in the hall with the woman, [that while] the noble sons of the Danes, her retainers, [are] feasted,<sup>9</sup> the heirlooms of their ancestors will be shining on them<sup>1</sup>—the hard and wave-adorned treasure of the Heatho-Bards, [which was theirs] so long as they might wield those weapons, (XXIX.) until they led to the shield-play, to destruction, their dear companions and their own lives. Then at the beer he<sup>2</sup> who sees

7. I.e., Ingeld, who succeeded his father a king of the Heatho-Bards.

8. I.e., the feud between the Danes and Heatho-Bards.

9. The text is faulty here.

1. I.e., the weapons and armor which had once belonged to the Heatho-Bards

and were captured by the Danes will be worn by the Danish attendants of Hrothgar's daughter Freawaru when she goes to the Heatho-Bards to marry king Ingeld.

2. I.e., some old Heatho-Bard warrior.

the treasure, an old ash-warrior who remembers it all, the spear-death of warriors—grim is his heart—begins, sad of mind, to tempt a young fighter in the thoughts of his spirit, to awaken war-evil, and speaks this word:

“Can you, my friend, recognize that sword, the rare iron-blade, that your father, beloved man, bore to battle his last time in armor, where the Danes slew him, the fierce Scyldings, got possession of the battle-field, when Withergeld<sup>3</sup> lay dead, after the fall of warriors? Now here some son of his murderers walks in the hall, proud of the weapon, boasts of the murder, and wears the treasure that you should rightly possess.’ So he will provoke and remind at every chance with wounding words until that moment comes that the woman’s thane,<sup>4</sup> forfeiting life, shall lie dead, blood-smeared from the sword-bite, for his father’s deeds. The other escapes with his life, knows the land well. Then on both sides the oath of the earls will be broken; then deadly hate will well up in Ingeld, and his wife-love after the surging of sorrows will become cooler. Therefore I do not think the loyalty of the Heatho-Bards, their part in the alliance with the Danes, to be without deceit—do not think their friendship fast.

“I shall speak still more of Grendel, that you may readily know, giver of treasure, what the hand-fight of warriors came to in the end. After heaven’s jewel had glided over the earth, the angry spirit came, awful in the evening, to visit us where, unharmed, we watched over the hall. There the fight was fatal to Hondscioh, deadly to one who was doomed. He was dead first of all, armed warrior. Grendel came to devour him, good young retainer, swallowed all the body of the beloved men. Yet not for this would the bloody-toothed slayer, bent on destruction, go from the gold-hall empty-handed; but, strong of might, he made trial of me, grasped me with eager hand. His glove<sup>5</sup> hung huge and wonderful, made fast with cunning clasps: it had been made all with craft, with devil’s devices and dragon’s skins. The fell doer of evils would put me therein, guiltless, one of many. He might not do so after I had stood up in anger. It is too long to tell how I repaid the people’s foe his due for every crime. My prince, there with my deeds I did honor to your people. He slipped away, for a little while had use of life’s joy. Yet his right hand remained as his spoor in Heorot, and he went from there abject, mournful of heart sank to the mere’s bottom.

“The lord of the Scyldings repaid me for that bloody combat

3. Apparently a leader of the Heatho-Bards in their unsuccessful war with the Danes.

4. I.e., the Danish attendant of Fre-

awaru who is wearing the sword of his Heatho-Bard attacker’s father.

5. Apparently a large glove that could be used as a pouch.

with much plated gold, many treasures, after morning came and we sat down to the feast. There was song and mirth. The old Scylding, who has learned many things, spoke of times far-off. At times a brave one in battle touched the glad wood, the harp's joy; at times he told tales, true and sad; at times he related strange stories according to right custom; at times, again, the great-hearted king, bound with age, the old warrior, would begin to speak of his youth, his battle-strength. His heart welled within when, old and wise, he thought of his many winters. Thus we took pleasure there the livelong day until another night came to men.

"Then in her turn Grendel's mother swiftly made ready to take revenge for his injuries, made a sorrowful journey. Death had taken her son, war-hate of the Weather-Geats. The direful woman avenged her son, fiercely killed a warrior: there the life of Aeschere departed, a wise old counselor. And when morning came the folk of the Danes might not burn him, death-weary, in the fire, nor place him on the pyre, beloved man: she had borne his body away in fiend's embrace beneath the mountain stream. That was the bitterest of Hrothgar's sorrows, of those that had long come upon the people's prince. Then the king, sore-hearted, implored me by your life<sup>6</sup> that I should do a man's work in the tumult of the waters, venture my life, finish a glorious deed. He promised me reward. Then I found the guardian of the deep pool, the grim horror, as is now known wide. For a time there we were locked hand in hand. Then the flood boiled with blood, and in the war-hall I cut off the head of Grendel's mother with a mighty sword. Not without trouble I came from there with my life. I was not fated to die then, but the protector of earls again gave me many treasures, the son of Healfdene.

(XXXI.) "Thus the king of that people lived with good customs. I had lost none of the rewards, the meed of my might, but he gave me treasures, the son of Healfdene, at my own choice. I will bring these to you, great king, show my good will. On your kindnesses all still depends: I have few close kinsmen besides you, Hygelac."

Then he bade bring in the boar-banner—the head-sign—the helmet towering in battle, the gray battle-shirt, the splendid sword—afterwards spoke words: "Hrothgar, wise king, gave me this armor; in his words he bade that I should first tell you about his gift: he said that king Heorogar,<sup>7</sup> lord of the Scyldings, had had it for a long time; not for that would he give it, the breast-armor, to his son, bold Heorowearð, though he was loyal to him. Use it all well!"

6. I.e., "in your name."

7. Hrothgar's elder brother, whom Hrothgar succeeded as king.

I have heard that four horses, swift and alike, followed that treasure, fallow as apples. He gave him the gift of both horses and treasure. So ought kinsmen do, not weave malice-nets for each other with secret craft, prepare death for comrades. To Hygelac his nephew was most true in hard fights, and each one mindful of helping the other. I have heard that he gave Hygd the neck-ring, the wonderfully wrought treasure, that Wealhtheow had given him—gave to the king's daughter as well three horses, supple and saddle-bright. After the gift of the necklace, her breast was adorned with it.

Thus Beowulf showed himself brave, a man known in battles, of good deeds, bore himself according to discretion. Drunk, he slew no hearth-companions. His heart was not savage, but he held the great gift that God had given him, the most strength of all mankind, like one brave in battle. He had long been despised,<sup>8</sup> so that the sons of the Geats did not reckon him brave, nor would the lord of the Weather-Geats do him much gift-honor on the mead-bench. They strongly suspected that he was slack, a young man unbold. Change came to the famous man for each of his troubles.

Then the protector of earls bade fetch in the heirloom of Hrethel,<sup>9</sup> king famed in battle, adorned with gold. There was not then among the Geats a better treasure in sword's kind. He laid that in Beowulf's lap, and gave him seven thousand [hides of land], a hall and a throne. To both of them alike land had been left in the nation, home and native soil: to the other more especially wide was the realm, to him who was higher in rank.

[*Beowulf and the Dragon*]

Afterwards it happened, in later days, in the crashes of battle, when Hygelac lay dead and war-swords came to slay Heardred<sup>1</sup> behind the shield-cover, when the Battle-Scylfings, hard fighters, sought him among his victorious nation, attacked bitterly the nephew of Hereric—then the broad kingdom came into Beowulf's hand. He held it well fifty winters—he was a wise king, an old guardian of the land—until in the dark nights a certain one, a dragon, began to hold sway, which on the high heath kept watch over a hoard, a steep stone-barrow. Beneath lay a path unknown to men. By this there went inside a certain man [who made his way near to the heathen hoard; his hand took a cup, large, a shining treasure. The dragon did not afterwards conceal it though in his sleep he was tricked by the craft of the thief. That the

8. Beowulf's poor reputation as a young man is mentioned only here.

9. Hygelac's father.

1. Hygelac's son Heardred, who succeeded Hygelac as king, was killed by

the Swedes (Battle-Scylfings) in his own land, as is explained more fully below, section XXXIII. His uncle Hereric was perhaps Hygd's brother.



people discovered, the neighboring folk—that he was swollen with rage].<sup>2</sup>

(XXXII.) Not of his own accord did he who had sorely harmed him<sup>3</sup> break into the worm's hoard, not by his own desire, but for hard constraint; the slave of some son of men fled hostile blows, lacking a shelter, and came there, a man guilty of wrong-doing. As soon as he saw him,<sup>4</sup> great horror arose in the stranger; [yet the wretched fugitive escaped the terrible worm . . . When the sudden shock came upon him, he carried off a precious cup.]<sup>5</sup> There were many such ancient treasures in the earth-house, as in the old days some one of mankind had prudently hidden there the huge legacy of a noble race, rare treasures. Death had taken them all in earlier times, and the only one of the nation of people who still survived, who walked there longest, a guardian mourning his friends, supposed the same of himself as of them—that he might little while enjoy the long-got treasure. A barrow stood all ready on the shore near the sea-waves, newly placed on the headland, made fast by having its entrances skillfully hidden. The keeper of the rings carried in the part of his riches worthy of hoarding, plated gold; he spoke few words:

"Hold now, you earth, now that men may not, the possession of earls. What, from you good men got it first! War-death has taken each man of my people, evil dreadful and deadly, each of those who has given up this life, the hall-joys of men. I have none who wears sword or cleans the plated cup, rich drinking vessel. The company of retainers has gone elsewhere. The hard helmet must be stripped of its fair-wrought gold, of its plating. The polishers are asleep who should make the war-mask shine. And even so the coat of mail, which withstood the bite of swords after the crashing of the shields, decays like its warrior. Nor may the ring-mail travel wide on the war-chief beside his warriors. There is no harp-delight, no mirth of the singing wood, no good hawk flies through the hall, no swift horse stamps in the castle court. Baleful death has sent away many races of men."

So, sad of mind, he spoke his sorrow, alone of them all, moved joyless through day and night until death's flood reached his heart. The ancient night-ravager found the hoard-joy standing open, he who burning seeks barrows, the smooth hateful dragon who flies at night wrapped in flame. Earth-dwellers much dread him. He it is who must seek a hoard in the earth where he will guard heathen gold, wise for his winters: he is none the better for it.

2. This part of the manuscript is badly damaged, and the text within brackets is highly conjectural.

3. The dragon.

4. The dragon.

5. Several lines of the text have been lost.

So for three hundred winters the harmer of folk held in the earth one of its treasure-houses, huge and mighty, until one man angered his heart. He bore to his master a plated cup, asked his lord for a compact of peace: thus was the hoard searched, the store of treasures diminished. His requests were granted the wretched man: the lord for the first time looked on the ancient work of men. Then the worm woke; cause of strife was renewed: for then he moved over the stones, hard-hearted beheld his foe's footprints—with secret stealth he had stepped forth too near the dragon's head. (So may an undoomed man who holds favor from the Ruler easily come through his woes and misery.) The hoard-guard sought him eagerly over the ground, would find the man who had done him injury while he slept. Hot and fierce-hearted, often he moved all about the outside of the barrow. No man at all was in the emptiness. Yet he took joy in the thought of war, in the work of fighting. At times he turned back into the barrow, sought his rich cup. Straightway he found that some man had tampered with his gold, his splendid treasure. The hoard-guard waited restless until evening came; then the barrow-keeper was in rage: he would requite that precious drinking cup with vengeful fire. Then the day was gone—to the joy of the worm. He would not wait long on the sea-wall, but set out with fire, ready with flame. The beginning was terrible to the folk on the land, as the ending was soon to be sore to their giver of treasure.

(XXXIII.) Then the evil spirit began to vomit flames, burn bright dwellings; blaze of fire rose, to the horror of men; there the deadly flying thing would leave nothing alive. The worm's warfare was wide-seen, his cruel malice, near and far—how the destroyer hated and hurt the people of the Geats. He winged back to the hoard, his hidden hall, before the time of day. He had circled the land-dwellers with flame, with fire and burning. He had trust in his barrow, in his war and his wall: his expectation deceived him.

Then the terror was made known to Beowulf, quickly in its truth, that his own home, best of buildings, had melted in surging flames, the throne-seat of the Geats. That was anguish of spirit to the good man, the greatest of heart-sorrows. The wise one supposed that he had bitterly offended the Ruler, the Eternal Lord, against old law. His breast within boiled with dark thoughts—as was not for him customary. The fiery dragon with his flames had destroyed the people's stronghold, the land along the sea, the heart of the country. Because of that the war-king, the lord of the Weather-Geats, devised punishment for him. The protector of fighting men, lord of earls, commanded that a wonderful battle-shield be made all of iron. Well he knew that the wood of the forest might not help him—linden against flame. The prince good

from old times was to come to the end of the days that had been lent him, life in the world, and the worm with him, though he had long held the hoarded wealth. Then the ring-prince scorned to seek the far-flier with a troop, a large army. He had no fear for himself of the combat, nor did he think the worm's war-power anything great, his strength and his courage, because he himself had come through many battles before, dared perilous straits, clashes of war, after he had purged Hrothgar's hall, victorious warrior, and in combat crushed to death Grendel's kin, loathsome race.

Nor was that the least of his hand-combats where Hygelac was slain, when the king of the Geats, the noble lord of the people, the son of Hrethel, died of sword-strokes in the war-storm among the Frisians, laid low by the blade. From there Beowulf came away by means of his own strength, performed a feat of swimming; he had on his arm the armor of thirty earls when he turned back to the sea. There was no need for the Hetware<sup>6</sup> to exult in the foot-battle when they bore their shields against him: few came again from that warrior to seek their homes. Then the son of Ecgtheow swam over the water's expanse, forlorn and alone, back to his people. There Hygd offered him hoard and kingdom, rings and a prince's throne. She had no trust in her son, that he could hold his native throne against foreigners now that Hygelac was dead. By no means the sooner might the lordless ones get consent from the noble that he would become lord of Heardred or that he would accept royal power.<sup>7</sup> Yet he held him up among the people by friendly counsel, kindly with honor, until he became older,<sup>8</sup> ruled the Weather-Geats.

Outcasts from over the sea sought him, sons of Ohthere.<sup>9</sup> They had rebelled against the protector of the Scyflings, the best of the sea-kings of those who gave treasure in Sweden, a famous lord. For Heardred that became his life's limit: because of his hospitality there the son of Hygelac got his life's wound from the strokes of a sword. And the son of Ongentheow went back to seek his home after Heardred lay dead, let Beowulf hold the royal throne, rule the Geats: that was a good king.

(XXXIV.) In later days he was mindful of repaying the prince's fall, became the friend of the destitute Eadgils;<sup>1</sup> with folk he

6. I.e., a tribe, with whom the Frisians were allied.

7. I.e., Beowulf refused to take the throne from the rightful heir Heardred.

8. I.e., Beowulf supported the young Heardred.

9. Ohthere succeeded his father Ongentheow as king of the Scyflings (Swedes), but after his death his brother Onela seized the throne, driving out Ohthere's sons Eanmund and Eadgils. They were

given refuge at the Geatish court by Heardred, whom Onela attacked for this act of hospitality. In the fight Eanmund and Heardred were killed, and Onela left the kingdom in Beowulf's charge.

1. The surviving son of Ohthere was befriended by Beowulf, who supported him in his successful attempt to gain the Swedish throne and who killed the usurper Onela.

supported the son of Ohthere over the wide sea, with warriors and weapons. Afterwards he got vengeance by forays that brought with them cold care: he took the king's life.

Thus he had survived every combat, every dangerous battle, every deed of courage, the son of Ecgtheow, until that one day when he should fight with the worm. Then, one of twelve, the lord of the Geats, swollen with anger, went to look on the dragon. He had learned then from what the feud arose, the fierce malice to men: the glorious cup had come to his possession from the hand of the finder: he was the thirteenth of that company, the man who had brought on the beginning of the war, the sad-hearted slave—wretched, he must direct them to the place. Against his will he went to where he knew of an earth-hall, a barrow beneath the ground close to the sea-surge, to the struggling waves: within, it was full of ornaments and gold chains. The terrible guardian, ready for combat, held the gold treasure, old under the earth. It was no easy bargain for any man to obtain. Then the king, hardy in fight, sat down on the headland; there he saluted his hearth-companions, gold-friend of the Geats. His mind was mournful, restless and ripe for death: very close was the fate which should come to the old man, seek his soul's hoard, divide life from his body; not for long then was the life of the noble one wound in his flesh.

Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "In youth I lived through many battle-storms, times of war. I remember all that. I was seven winters old when the lord of treasure, the beloved king of the folk, received me from my father: King Hrethel had me and kept me, gave me treasure and feast, mindful of kinship. During his life I was no more hated by him as a man in his castle than any of his own sons, Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my own Hygelac. For the eldest a murder-bed was wrongfully spread through the deed of a kinsman, when Haethcyn struck him down with an arrow from his horned bow—his friend and his lord—missed the mark and shot his kinsman dead, one brother the other, with the bloody arrowhead. That was a fatal fight, without hope of recompense, a deed wrongly done, baffling to the heart; yet it had happened that a prince had to lose life unavenged.

"So it is sad for an old man to endure that his son should ride young on the gallows. Then he may speak a story, a sorrowful song, when his son hangs for the joy of the raven, and, old in years and knowing, he can find no help for him. Always with every morning he is reminded of his son's journey elsewhere. He cares not to wait for another heir in his hall, when the first through death's force has come to the end of his deeds. Sorrowful he

sees in his son's dwelling the empty wine-hall, the windy resting place without joy—the riders sleep, the warriors in the grave. There is no sound of the harp, no joy in the dwelling, as there was of old. (XXXV.) Then he goes to his couch, sings a song of sorrow, one alone for one gone. To him all too wide has seemed the land and the dwelling.

“So the protector of the Weather-Geats bore in his heart swelling sorrow for Herebeald. In no way could he settle his feud with the life-slayer; not the sooner could he wound the warrior with deeds of hatred, though he was not dear to him. Then for the sorrow that had too bitterly befallen him he gave up the joys of men, chose God's light. To his sons he left—as a happy man does—his land and his town when he went from life.

“Then there was battle and strife of Swedes and Geats, over the wide water a quarrel shared, hatred between hardy ones, after Hrethel died. And the sons of Ongentheow<sup>2</sup> were bold and active in war, wanted to have no peace over the seas, but about Hreosnabeorh often devised awful slaughter. That my friends and kinsmen avenged; both the feud and the crime, as is well-known, though one of them bought it with his life, a hard bargain: the war was mortal to Haethcyn, lord of the Geats.<sup>3</sup> Then in the morning, I have heard, one kinsman avenged the other on his slayer with the sword's edge, when Ongentheow attacked Eofor: the war-helm split, the old Scylfing fell mortally wounded: his hand remembered feuds enough, did not withstand the life-blow.

“I repaid in war the treasures that he<sup>4</sup> gave me—with my bright sword, as was granted me by fate: he had given me land, a pleasant dwelling. There was not any need for him, any reason, that he should have to seek among the Gifthas or the Spear-Danes or in Sweden in order to buy with treasure a worse warrior. I would always go before him in the troop, alone in the front. And so all my life I shall wage battle while this sword endures that has served me early and late ever since I became Daeghrefn's slayer in the press—the warrior of the Hugas.<sup>5</sup> He could not bring armor to the king of the Frisians, breast ornament, but fell in the fight, keeper of the standard, a noble man. Nor was my sword's edge his slayer, but my warlike grip broke open his heart-streams, his bone-house.<sup>x</sup> Now shall the sword's edge, the hand and hard blade, fight for the hoard.”

2. I.e., the Swedes Onela and Ohthere: the reference is, of course, to a time earlier than that referred to in section XXXIII, note 9.

3. Haethcyn had succeeded his father Hrethel as king of the Geats after his accidental killing of his brother Herebeald. When Haethcyn was killed while

attacking the Swedes, he was succeeded by Hygelac, who, as the next sentence relates, avenged Haethcyn's death on Ongentheow. The death of Ongentheow is described below, sections XL and XLI.

4. Hygelac.

5. I.e., the Franks.

\* bone-chamber

## [BEOWULF ATTACKS THE DRAGON]

Beowulf spoke, for the last time spoke words in boast: "In my youth I engaged in many wars. Old guardian of the people, I shall still seek battle, perform a deed of fame, if the evil-doer will come to me out of the earth-hall."

Then he saluted each of the warriors, the bold helmet-bearers, for the last time—his own dear companions. "I would not bear sword, weapon, to the worm, if I knew how else according to my boast I might grapple with the monster, as I did of old with Grendel. But I expect here hot battle-fire, steam and poison. Therefore I have on me shield and mail-shirt. I will not flee a foot-step from the barrow-ward, but it shall be with us at the wall as fate allots, the ruler of every man. I am confident in heart, so I forgo help against the war-flier. Wait on the barrow, safe in your mail-shirts, men in armor—which of us two may better bear wounds after our bloody meeting. This is not your venture, nor is it right for any man except me alone that he should spend his strength against the monster, do this man's deed. By my courage I shall get gold, or war will take your king, dire life-evil."

Then the brave warrior arose by his shield; hardy under helmet he went in his mail-shirt beneath the stone-cliffs, had trust in his strength—that of one man: such is not the way of the cowardly. Then he saw by the wall—he who had come through many wars, good in his great-heartedness, many clashes in battle when troops meet together—a stone arch standing, through it a stream bursting out of the barrow: there was welling of a current hot with killing fires, and he might not endure any while unburnt by the dragon's flame the hollow near the hoard. Then the man of the Weather-Geats, enraged as he was, let a word break from his breast. Stout-hearted he shouted; his voice went roaring, clear in battle, in under the gray stone. Hate was stirred up, the hoard's guard knew the voice of a man. No more time was there to ask for peace. First the monster's breath came out of the stone, the hot war-steam. The earth resounded. The man below the barrow, the lord of the Geats, swung his shield against the dreadful visitor. Then the heart of the coiled thing was aroused to seek combat. The good war-king had drawn his sword, the old heirloom, not blunt of edge. To each of them as they threatened destruction there was terror of the other. Firm-hearted he stood with his shield high, the lord of friends, while quickly the worm coiled itself; he waited in his armor. Then, coiling in flames, he came gliding on, hastening to his fate. The good shield protected the life and body of the famous prince, but for a shorter

while than his wish was. There for the first time, the first day in his life, he might not prevail, since fate did not assign him such glory in battle. The lord of the Geats raised his hand, struck the shining horror so with his forged blade that the edge failed, bright on the bone, bit less surely than its folk-king had need, hard-pressed in perils. Then because of the battle-stroke the barrow-ward's heart was savage, he exhaled death-fire—the war-flames sprang wide. The gold-friend of the Geats boasted of no great victories: the war blade had failed, naked at need, as it ought not to have done, iron good from old times. That was no pleasant journey, not one on which the famous son of Ecgtheow would wish to leave his land; against his will he must take up a dwelling-place elsewhere—as every man must give up the days that are lent him.

It was not long until they came together again, dreadful foes. The hoard-guard took heart, once more his breast swelled with his breathing. Encircled with flames, he who before had ruled a folk felt harsh pain. Nor did his companions, sons of nobles, take up their stand in a troop about him with the courage of fighting men, but they crept to the wood, protected their lives. In only one of them the heart surged with sorrows: nothing can ever set aside kinship in him who means well.

(XXXVI.) He was called Wiglaf, son of Weohstan, a rare shield-warrior, a man of the Scyflings,<sup>6</sup> kinsman of Aelfhere. He saw his liege lord under his war-mask suffer the heat. Then he was mindful of the honors he had given him before, the rich dwelling-place of the Waegmundings, every folk-right such as his father possessed. He might not then hold back, his hand seized his shield, the yellow linden-wood; he drew his ancient sword. Among men it was the heirloom of Eanmund, the son of Ohthere: <sup>7</sup> Weohstan had become his slayer in battle with sword's edge—an exile without friends; and he bore off to his kin the bright-shining helmet, the ringed mail-armor, the old sword made by giants that Onela had given him,<sup>8</sup> his kinsman's war-armor, ready battle-gear: he did not speak of the feud, though he had

6. Though in the next sentence Wiglaf is said to belong to the family of the Waegmundings, the Geatish family to which Beowulf belonged, he is here called a Scyfling (Swede), and immediately below his father Weohstan is represented as having fought for the Swede Onela in his attack on the Geats. But for a man to change his nation was not unusual, and Weohstan, who may have had both Swedish and Geatish blood, had evidently become a Geat long enough before to have brought up

his son Wiglaf as one. The identity of Aelfhere is not known.

7. See above, section XXXIII, note 9. Not only did Weohstan support Onela's attack on the Geat king Heardred, but actually killed Eanmund whom Heardred was supporting, and it is Eanmund's sword that Wiglaf is now wielding.

8. The spoils of war belonged to the victorious king, who apportioned them among his fighters: thus Onela gave Weohstan the armor of Eanmund, whom Weohstan had killed.

killed his brother's son.<sup>9</sup> He<sup>1</sup> held the armor many half-years, the blade and the battle-dress, until his son might do manly deeds like his old father. Then he gave him among the Geats war-armor of every kind, numberless, when, old, he went forth on the way from life. For the young warrior this was the first time that he should enter the war-storm with his dear lord. His heart's courage did not slacken, nor did the heirloom of his kinsman fail in the battle. That the worm found when they had come together.

Wiglaf spoke, said many fit words to his companions—his mind was mournful: "I remember that time we drank mead, when we promised our lord in the beer-hall—him who gave us these rings—that we would repay him for the war-arms if a need like this befell him—the helmets and the hard swords. Of his own will he chose us among the host for this venture, thought us worthy of fame—and gave me these treasures—because he counted us good war-makers, brave helm-bearers, though our lord intended to do this work of courage alone, as keeper of the folk, because among men he had performed the greatest deeds of glory, daring actions. Now the day has come that our liege lord has need of the strength of good fighters. Let us go to him, help our war-chief while the grim terrible fire persists. God knows of me that I should rather that the flame enfold my body with my gold-giver. It does not seem right to me for us to bear our shields home again unless we can first fell the foe, defend the life of the prince of the Weather-Geats. I know well that it would be no recompense for past deeds that he alone of the company of the Geats should suffer pain, fall in the fight. For us both shall there be a part in the work of sword and helmet, of battle-shirt and war-clothing."

Then he waded through the deadly smoke, bore his war-helmet to the aid of his king, spoke in few words: "Beloved Beowulf, do all well, for, long since in your youth, you said that you would not let your glory fail while you lived. Now, great-spirited noble, brave of deeds, you must protect your life with all your might. I shall help you."

After these words, the worm came on, angry, the terrible malice-filled foe, shining with surging flames, to seek for the second time his enemies, hated men. Fire advanced in waves; shield burned to the boss; mail-shirt might give no help to the young spear-warrior; but the young man went quickly under his kinsman's shield when

9. This ironic remark points out that Onela did not claim *wergild* or seek vengeance from Weohstan, as in other circumstances he ought to have done inasmuch as Weohstan had killed

Onela's close kinsman, his nephew Eanmund: but Onela was himself trying to kill Eanmund.

1. Weohstan.



his own was consumed with flames. Then the war-king was again mindful of fame, struck with his war-sword with great strength so that it stuck in the head-bone, driven with force: Naegling broke, the sword of Beowulf failed in the fight, old and steel-gray. It was not ordained for him that iron edges might help in the combat. Too strong was the hand that I have heard strained every sword with its stroke, when he bore wound-hardened weapon to battle: he was none the better for it.

Then for the third time the folk-harmer, the fearful fire-dragon, was mindful of feuds, set upon the brave one when the chance came, hot and battle-grim seized all his neck with his sharp fangs: he was smeared with life-blood, gore welled out in waves.

(XXXVII.) Then, I have heard, at the need of the folk-king the earl at his side made his courage known, his might and his keenness—as was natural to him. He took no heed for that head,<sup>2</sup> but the hand of the brave man was burned as he helped his kinsman, as the man in armor struck the hateful foe a little lower down, so that the sword sank in, shining and engraved; and then the fire began to subside. The king himself then still controlled his senses, drew the battle-knife, biting and war-sharp, that he wore on his mail-shirt: the protector of the Weather-Geats cut the worm through the middle. They felled the foe, courage drove his life out, and they had destroyed him together, the two noble kinsmen. So ought a man be, a thane at need. To the prince that was the last moment of victory for his own deeds, of work in the world.

Then the wound that the earth-dragon had caused began to burn and to swell; at once he felt dire evil boil in his breast, poison within him. Then the prince, wise of thought, went to where he might sit on a seat near the wall. He looked on the work of giants, how the timeless earth-hall held within it stone-arches fast on pillars. Then with his hands the thane, good without limit, washed him with water, blood-besmeared, the famous prince, his beloved lord, sated with battle; and he unfastened his helmet.

Beowulf spoke—despite his wounds spoke, his mortal hurts. He knew well he had lived out his days' time, joy on earth; all passed was the number of his days, death very near. "Now I would wish to give my son my war-clothing, if any heir after me, part of my flesh, were granted. I held this people fifty winters. There was no folk-king of those dwelling about who dared approach me with swords, threaten me with fears. In my

2. I.e., the dragon's flame-breathing head.

land I awaited what fate brought me, held my own well, sought no treacherous quarrels, nor did I swear many oaths unrightfully. Sick with life-wounds, I may have joy of all this, for the Ruler of Men need not blame me for the slaughter of kinsmen when life goes from my body. Now quickly go to look at the hoard under the gray stone, beloved Wiglaf, now that the worm lies sleeping from sore wounds, bereft of his treasure. Be quick now, so that I may see the ancient wealth, the golden things, may clearly look on the bright curious gems, so that for that, because of the treasure's richness, I may the more easily leave life and nation I have long held."

(XXXVIII.) Then I have heard that the son of Weohstan straightway obeyed his lord, sick with battle-wounds, according to the words he had spoken, went wearing his ring-armor, woven battle-shirt, under the barrow's roof. Then he saw, as he went by the seat, the brave young retainer, triumphant in heart, many precious jewels, glittering gold lying on the ground, wonders on the wall, and the worm's lair, the old night-flier's—cups standing there, vessels of men of old, with none to polish them, stripped of their ornaments. There was many a helmet old and rusty, many an arm-ring skillfully twisted. (Easily may treasure, gold in the ground, betray each one of the race of men, hide it who will.) Also he saw a standard all gold hang high over the hoard, the greatest of hand-wonders, linked with fingers' skill. From it came a light so that he might see the ground, look on the works of craft. There was no trace of the worm, for the blade had taken him. Then I have heard that one man in the mound pillaged the hoard, the old work of giants, loaded in his bosom cups and plates at his own desire. He took also the standard, brightest of banners. The sword of the old lord—its edge was iron—had already wounded the one who for a long time had been guardian of the treasure, waged his fire-terror, hot for the hoard, rising up fiercely at midnight, till he died in the slaughter.

The messenger was in haste, eager to return, urged on by the treasures. Curiosity tormented him, whether eagerly seeking he should find the lord of the Weather-Geats, strength gone, alive in the place where he had left him before. Then with the treasures he found the great prince, his lord, bleeding, at the end of his life. Again he began to sprinkle him with water until this word's point broke through his breast-hoard—he spoke, the king, old man in sorrow, looked on the gold: "I speak with my words thanks to the Lord of All for these treasures, to the King of Glory, Eternal Prince, for what I gaze on here, that I might get such

for my people before my death-day. Now that I have bought the hoard of treasures with my old life, you attend to the people's needs hereafter: I can be here no longer. Bid the battle-renowned make a mound, bright after the funeral fire, on the sea's cape. It shall stand high on Hronesness as a reminder to my people, so that sea-travelers later will call it Beowulf's barrow, when they drive their ships far over the darkness of the seas."

He took off his neck the golden necklace, bold-hearted prince, gave it to the thane, to the young spear-warrior—gold-gleaming helmet, ring, and mail-shirt, bade him use them well. "You are the last left of our race, of the Waegmundings. Fate has swept away all my kinsmen, earls in their strength, to destined death. I have to go after." That was the last word of the old man, of the thoughts of his heart, before he should taste the funeral pyre, hot hostile flames. The soul went from his breast to seek the doom of those fast in truth.

[*Beowulf's Funeral*]

(XXXIX.) Then sorrow came to the young man that he saw him whom he most loved on the earth, at the end of his life, suffering piteously. His slayer likewise lay dead, the awful earth-dragon bereft of life, overtaken by evil. No longer should the coiled worm rule the ring-hoard, for iron edges had taken him, hard and battle-sharp work of the hammers, so that the wide-flier, stilled by wounds, had fallen on the earth near the treasure-house. He did not go flying through the air at midnight, proud of his property, showing his aspect, but he fell to earth through the work of the chief's hands. Yet I have heard of no man of might on land, though he was bold of every deed, whom it should prosper to rush against the breath of the venomous foe or disturb with hands the ring-hall, if he found the guard awake who lived in the barrow. The share of the rich treasures became Beowulf's, paid for by death: each of the two had journeyed to the end of life's loan.

Then it was not long before the battle-slack ones left the woods, ten weak troth-breakers together, who had not dared fight with their spears in their liege lord's great need. But they bore their shields, ashamed, their war-clothes, to where the old man lay, looked on Wiglaf. He sat wearied, the foot-soldier near the shoulders of his lord, would waken him with water: it gained him nothing. He might not, though he much wished it, hold life in his chieftain on earth nor change anything of the Ruler's: the judgment of God would control the deeds of every man, just as it still does now. Then it was easy to get from the young man a

grim answer to him who before had lost courage. Wiglaf spoke, the son of Weohstān, a man sad at heart, looked on the unloved ones:

“Yes, he who will speak truth may say that the liege lord who gave you treasure, the war-gear that you stand in there, when he used often to hand out to hall-sitters on the ale-benches, a prince to his thanes, helmets and war-shirts such as he could find mightiest anywhere, both far and near—that he quite threw away the war-gear, to his distress when war came upon him. The folk-king had no need to boast of his war-comrades. Yet God, Ruler of Victories, granted him that he might avenge himself, alone with his sword, when there was need for his courage. I was able to give him little life-protection in the fight, and yet beyond my power I did begin to help my kinsman. The deadly foe was ever the weaker after I struck him with my sword, fire poured less strongly from his head. Too few defenders thronged about the prince when the hard time came upon him. Now there shall cease for your race the receiving of treasure and the giving of swords, all enjoyment of pleasant homes, comfort. Each man of your kindred must go deprived of his land-right when nobles from afar learn of your flight, your inglorious deed. Death is better for any earl than a life of blame.”

(XL.) Then he bade that the battle-deed be announced in the city, up over the cliff-edge, where the band of warriors sat the whole morning of the day, sad-hearted, shield-bearers in doubt whether it was the beloved man's last day or whether he would come again. Little did he fail to speak of new tidings, he who rode up the hill, but spoke to them all truthfully: “Now the joy-giver of the people of the Weathers, the lord of the Geats, is fast on his death-bed, lies on his slaughter-couch through deeds of the worm. Beside him lies his life-enemy, struck down with dagger-wounds—with his sword he might not work wounds of any kind on the monster. Wiglaf son of Weohstan sits over Beowulf, one earl by the lifeless other, in weariness of heart holds death-watch over the loved and the hated.

“Now may the people expect a time of war, when the king's fall becomes wide-known to the Franks and the Frisians. A harsh quarrel was begun with the Hugas when Hygelac came traveling with his sea-army to the land of the Frisians, where the Hetware assailed him in battle, quickly, with stronger forces, made the mailed warrior bow; he fell in the ranks: that chief gave no treasure to his retainers. Ever since then the good will of the Merewioing king has been denied us.

“Nor do I expect any peace or trust from the Swedish people, for it is wide-known that Ongentheow took the life of Haethcyn,

Hrethel's son, near Ravenswood when in their over-pride the people of the Geats first went against the War-Scylfings. Straightway the wary father of Ohthere,<sup>3</sup> old and terrible, gave a blow in return, cut down the sea-king,<sup>4</sup> rescued his wife, old woman of times past, bereft of her gold, mother of Onela and Ohthere, and then he followed his life-foes until they escaped, lordless, painfully, to Ravenswood. Then with a great army he besieged those whom the sword had left, weary with wounds, often vowed woes to the wretched band the livelong night, said that in the morning he would cut them apart with sword-blades, [hang] some on gallows-trees as sport for birds. Relief came in turn to the sorry-hearted together with dawn when they heard Hygelac's horn and trumpet, his sound as the good man came on their track with a body of retainers. (XLI.) Wide-seen was the bloody track of Swedes and Geats, the slaughter-strife of men, how the peoples stirred up the feud between them. Then the good man went with his kinsmen, old and much-mourning, to seek his stronghold: the earl Ongentheow moved further away. He had heard of the warring of Hygelac, of the war-power of the proud one. He did not trust in resistance, that he might fight off the sea-men, defend his hoard against the war-sailors, his children and wife. Instead he drew back, the old man behind his earth-wall.

"Then pursuit was offered to the people of the Swedes, the standards of Hygelac overran the stronghold as Hrethel's people pressed forward to the citadel. There Ongentheow the gray-haired was brought to bay by sword-blades, and the people's king had to submit to the judgment of Eofor alone. Wulf<sup>5</sup> son of Wonred had struck him angrily with his weapon so that for the blow the blood sprang forth in streams beneath his hair. Yet not for that was he afraid, the old Scylfing, but he quickly repaid the assault with worse exchange, the folk-king, when he turned toward him. The strong son of Wonred could not give the old man a return blow, for Ongentheow had first cut through the helmet of his head so that he had to sink down, smeared with blood—fell on the earth: he was not yet doomed, for he recovered, though the wound hurt him. The hardythane of Hygelac,<sup>6</sup> when his brother lay low, let his broad sword, old blade made by giants, break the great helmet across the shield-wall; then the king bowed, the keeper of the folk was hit to the quick.

3. I.e., Ongentheow.

4. I.e., Haethcyn, king of the Geats. Haethcyn's brother Hygelac, who succeeded him, was not present at this battle, but arrived after the death of Haethcyn with reinforcements to relieve the survivors and to pursue Ongentheow

in his retreat to his city.

5. The two sons of Wonred, Wulf and Eofor, attacked Ongentheow in turn. Wulf was struck down but not killed by the old Swedish king, who was then slain by Eofor.

6. I.e., Eofor.

“Then there were many who bound up the brother, quickly raised him up after it was granted them to control the battle-field. Then one warrior stripped the other, took from Ongentheow his iron-mail, hard-hilted sword, and his helmet, too; he bore the arms of the hoary one to Hygelac. He accepted that treasure and fairly promised him rewards among the people, and he stood by it thus: the lord of the Geats, the son of Hrethel, when he came home, repaid Wulf and Eofor for their battle-assault with much treasure, gave each of them a hundred thousand [units] of land and linked rings: there was no need for any man on middle-earth to blame him for the rewards, since they had performed great deeds. And then he gave Eofor his only daughter as a pledge of friendship—a fair thing for his home.

“That is the feud and the enmity, the death-hatred of men, for which I expect that the people of the Swedes, bold shield-warriors after the fall of princes, will set upon us after they learn that our prince has gone from life, he who before held hoard and kingdom against our enemies, did good to the people, and further still, did what a man should. Now haste is best, that we look on the people’s king there and bring him who gave us rings on his way to the funeral pyre. Nor shall only a small share melt with the great-hearted one, but there is a hoard of treasure, gold uncounted, grimly purchased, and rings bought at the last now with his own life. These shall the fire devour, flames enfold—no earl to wear ornament in remembrance, nor any bright maiden add to her beauty with neck-ring; but mournful-hearted, stripped of gold, they shall walk, often, not once, in strange countries—now that the army-leader has laid aside laughter, his game and his mirth. Therefore many a spear, cold in the morning, shall be grasped with fingers, raised by hands; no sound of harp shall waken the warriors, but the dark raven, low over the doomed, shall tell many tales, say to the eagle how he fared at the feast when with the wolf he spoiled the slain bodies.”

Thus the bold man was a speaker of hateful news, nor did he much lie in his words or his prophecies. The company all arose. Without joy they went below Eamanness<sup>7</sup> to look on the wonder with welling tears. Then they found on the sand, soulless, keeping his bed of rest, him who in former times had given them rings. Then the last day of the good man had come, when the war-king, prince of the Weather-Geats, died a wonderful death. First they saw the stranger creature, the worm lying loathsome, opposite him in the place. The fire-dragon was grimly terrible with his many colors, burned by the flames; he was fifty feet

7. The headland near where Beowulf had fought the dragon.

long in the place where he lay. Once he had joy of the air at night, came back down to seek his den. Then he was made fast by death, had made use of the last of his earth-caves. Beside him stood cups and pitchers, plates and rich swords lay eaten through by rust, just as they had been there in the bosom of the earth for a thousand winters. Then that huge heritage, gold of men of old, was wound in a spell, so that no one of men must touch the ring-hall unless God himself, the True King of Victories—He is men's protection—should grant to whom He wished to open the hoard—whatever man seemed fit to Him.

(XLII.) Then it was seen that the act did not profit him who wrongly kept hidden the handiworks under the wall. The keeper had first slain a man like few others, then the feud had been fiercely avenged. It is a wonder where an earl famed for courage may reach the end of his allotted life—then may dwell no longer in the mead-hall, man with his kin. So it was with Beowulf when he sought quarrels, the barrow's ward: he himself did not then know in what way his parting with the world should come. The great princes who had put it<sup>8</sup> there had laid on it so deep a curse until doomsday that the man who should plunder the place should be guilty of sins, imprisoned in idol-shrines, fixed with hell-bonds, punished with evils—unless the Possessor's favor were first shown the more clearly to him who desired the gold.

Wiglaf spoke, the son of Weohstan: "Often many a man must suffer distress for the will of one man, as has happened to us. We might by no counsel persuade our dear prince, keeper of the kingdom, not to approach the gold-guardian, let him lie where he long was, live in his dwelling to the world's end. He held to his high destiny. The hoard has been made visible, grimly got. What drove the folk-king thither was too powerfully fated. I have been therein and looked at it all, the rare things of the chamber, when it was granted me—not at all friendly was the journey that I was permitted beneath the earth-wall. In haste I seized with my hands a huge burden of hoard-treasures, of great size, bore it out here to my king. He was then still alive, sound-minded and aware. He spoke many things, old man in sorrow, and bade greet you, commanded that for your lord's deeds you make a high barrow in the place of his pyre, large and conspicuous, since he was of men the worthiest warrior through the wide earth, while he might enjoy wealth in his castle.

"Let us now hasten to see and visit for the second time the heap of precious jewels, the wonder under the walls. I shall direct you so that you may look on enough of them from near

8. The treasure.

at hand—rings and broad gold. Let the bier be made ready, speedily prepared, when we come out, and then let us carry our prince, beloved man, where he shall long dwell in the Ruler's protection."

Then the son of Weohstan, man brave in battle, bade command many warriors, men who owned houses, leaders of the people, that they carry wood from afar for the pyre for the good man. "Now shall flame eat the chief of warriors—the fire shall grow dark—who often survived the iron-shower when the storm of arrows driven from bow-strings passed over the shield-wall—the shaft did its task, made eager by feather-gear served the arrowhead."

And then the wise son of Weohstan summoned from the host thanes of the king, seven together, the best; one of eight warriors, he went beneath the evil roof. One who walked before bore a torch in his hands. Then there was no lot to decide who should plunder that hoard, since the men could see that every part of it rested in the hall without guardian, lay wasting. Little did any man mourn that hastily they should bear out the rare treasure. Also they pushed the dragon, the worm, over the cliff-wall, let the wave take him, the flood enfold the keeper of the treasure. Then twisted gold was loaded on a wagon, an uncounted number of things, and the prince, hoary warrior, borne to Hronesness.

(XLIII.) Then the people of the Geats made ready for him a funeral pyre on the earth, no small one, hung with helmets, battle-shields, bright mail-shirts, just as he had asked. Then in the midst they laid the great prince, lamenting their hero, their beloved lord. Then warriors began to awaken on the barrow the greatest of funeral-fires; the wood-smoke climbed, black over the fire; the roaring flame mixed with weeping—the wind-surge died down—until it had broken the bone-house, hot at its heart. Sad in spirit they lamented their heart-care, the death of their liege lord. [And the Geatish woman, wavy-haired, sang a sorrowful song about Beowulf, said]<sup>9</sup> again and again that she sorely feared for herself invasions of armies, many slaughters, terror of troops, humiliation, and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Then the people of the Weather-Geats built a mound on the promontory, one that was high and broad, wide-seen by seafarers, and in ten days completed a monument for the bold in battle, surrounded the remains of the fire with a wall, the most splendid that men most skilled might devise. In the barrow they placed rings and jewels, all such ornaments as troubled men had earlier taken from the hoard. They let the earth hold the wealth of

9. The manuscript is badly damaged and the interpretation conjectural.



earls, gold in the ground, where now it still dwells, as useless to men as it was before. Then the brave in battle rode round the mound, children of nobles, twelve in all, would bewail their sorrow and mourn their king, recite dirges and speak of the man. They praised his great deeds and his acts of courage, judged well of his prowess. So it is fitting that man honor his liege lord with words, love him in heart when he must be led forth from the body. Thus the people of the Geats, his hearth-companions, lamented the death of their lord. They said that he was of world-kings the mildest of men and the gentlest, kindest to his people, and most eager for fame.

## THE WANDERER

The lament of *The Wanderer* is an excellent example of the elegiac mood so common in Old English poetry. The loss of a lord, of companions in arms, of a mead-hall (in which Anglo-Saxon life realized itself to the full) are themes that enhance the melancholy tone of *Beowulf* as they are the emotional basis for such a poem as the present one. But nowhere more poignantly expressed than in *The Wanderer* is the loneliness of the exile in search of a new lord and hall: this is what Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, would have suffered, had it not been for Hrothgar's hospitality. To the wretched seeker all weather is wintry, for nature seems to conspire to match a man's mood as he moves over the water from one land to another, yearning for a home and kin to replace those vanished ones that still fill his thoughts.

As is true of most Old English elegiac laments, both the language and the structure of *The Wanderer* are difficult. At the beginning the speaker (whom the poet identifies as an "earth-walker") voices hope of finding comfort after his many tribulations. After the poet's interruption, the wanderer continues to speak—to himself—of his long search for a new home, describing how he must keep his thoughts locked within him while he makes his search. But these thoughts form the most vivid and moving part of his soliloquy—how, floating upon the sea, dazed with sorrow and fatigue, he imagines that he sees his old companions, and how, as he awakens to reality, they vanish over the water like sea-birds. The second part of the poem, beginning with the seventh paragraph ("Therefore I cannot think why \* \* \*"), expands the theme from one man to all men in a world wasted by war and time, and the speaker draws philosophical implications from his harsh experiences (presumably now in the past). He derives such cold comfort as he can from asking the old question, *Ubi sunt?*—where are they who were once so glad to be alive? And he concludes with the thought that "all this earthly habitation shall be emptied" of mankind. The narrator, "wise in heart," sits apart at the council, apparently as an indication of his detachment from life. The poem concludes with a characteristic Old English injunction to practice restraint on earth, place hope only in heaven.

*The Wanderer* is preserved only in the Exeter Book, a manuscript copied about 975, which contains the largest surviving collection of Old English poetry.

## The Wanderer<sup>1</sup>

“He who is alone often lives to find favor, mildness of the Lord, even though he has long had to stir with his arms the frost-cold sea, troubled in heart over the water-way had to tread the tracks of exile. Fully-fixed is his fate.”

So spoke the earth-walker, remembering hardships, fierce war-slaughters—the fall of dear kinsmen.

“Often before the day dawned I have had to speak of my cares, alone: there is now none among the living to whom I dare clearly express the thought of my heart. I know indeed that it is a fine custom for a man to lock tight his heart’s coffer, keep closed the hoard-case of his mind, whatever his thoughts may be. Words of a weary heart may not withstand fate, nor those of an angry spirit bring help. Therefore men eager for fame shut sorrowful thought up fast in their breast’s coffer.

“Thus I, wretched with care, removed from my homeland, far from dear kinsmen, have had to fasten with fetters the thoughts of my heart—ever since the time, many years ago, that I covered my gold-friend in the darkness of the earth; and from there I crossed the woven waves, winter-sad, downcast for want of a hall, sought a giver of treasure—a place, far or near, where I might find one in a mead-hall who should know of my people, or would comfort me friendless, receive me with gladness. He who has experienced it knows how cruel a companion sorrow is to the man who has no beloved protectors. Exile’s path awaits him, not twisted gold—frozen thoughts in his heart-case, no joy of earth. He recalls the hall-warriors and the taking of treasure, how in youth his gold-friend made him accustomed to feasting. All delight has gone.

“He who has had long to forgo the counsel of a beloved lord knows indeed how, when sorrow and sleep together bind the poor dweller-alone, it will seem to him in his mind that he is embracing and kissing his liege lord and laying his hands and his head on his knee, as it some times was in the old days when he took part in the gift-giving. Then he wakens again, the man with no lord, sees the yellow waves before him, the sea-birds bathe, spread their feathers, frost and snow fall, mingled with hail.

“Then the wounds are deeper in his heart, sore for want of his dear one. His sorrow renews as the memory of his kinsmen moves

1. This new translation by the editor is based on the text as edited by John C. Pope in *Seven Old English Poems* (1966).

through his mind: he greets them with glad words, eagerly looks at them, a company of warriors. Again they fade, moving off over the water; the spirit of these fleeting ones brings to him no familiar voices. Care renews in him who must again and again send his weary heart out over the woven waves.

“Therefore I cannot think why the thoughts of my heart should not grow dark when I consider all the life of men through this world—with what terrible swiftness they forgo the hall-floor, bold young retainers. So this middle-earth each day fails and falls. No man may indeed become wise before he has had his share of winters in this world’s kingdom. The wise man must be patient, must never be too hot-hearted, nor too hasty of speech, nor too fearful, nor too glad, nor too greedy for wealth, nor ever too eager to boast before he has thought clearly. A man must wait, when he speaks in boast, until he knows clearly, sure-minded, where the thoughts of his heart may turn.

“The wise warrior must consider how ghostly it will be when all the wealth of world stands waste, just as now here and there through this middle-earth wind-blown walls stand covered with frost-fall, storm-beaten dwellings. Wine-halls totter, the lord lies bereft of joy, all the company has fallen, bold men beside the wall. War took away some, bore them forth on their way; a bird carried one away over the deep sea; a wolf shared one with Death; another a man sad of face hid in an earth-pit.

“So the Maker of mankind laid waste this dwelling-place until the old works of giants stood idle, devoid of the noise of the stronghold’s keepers. Therefore the man wise in his heart considers carefully this wall-place and this dark life, remembers the multitude of deadly combats long ago, and speaks these words: ‘Where has the horse gone? Where the young warrior? Where is the giver of treasure? What has become of the feasting seats? Where are the joys of the hall? Alas, the bright cup! Alas, the mailed warrior! Alas, the prince’s glory! How that time has gone, vanished beneath night’s cover, just as if it never had been! The wall, wondrous high, decorated with snake-likenesses, stands now over traces of the beloved company. The ash-spears’ might has borne the earls away—weapons greedy for slaughter, Fate the mighty; and storms beat on the stone walls, snow, the herald of winter, falling thick binds the earth when darkness comes and the night-shadow falls, sends harsh hailstones from the north in hatred of men. All earth’s kingdom is wretched, the world beneath the skies is changed by the work of the fates. Here wealth is fleeting, here friend is fleeting, here man is fleeting, here woman is fleeting—all this earthly habitation shall be emptied.’”

So spoke the man wise in heart, sat apart at the council. He is

good who keeps his word; a man must never utter too quickly his breast's passion, unless he knows first how to achieve remedy, as a leader with his courage. It will be well with him who seeks favor, comfort from the Father in heaven, where for us all stability resides.

## THE BATTLE OF MALDON

The *Battle of Maldon* celebrates an event of the year 991, when a large party of Scandinavian raiders met the English defense forces on the estuary of the Blackwater River (the Pant of the poem), near Maldon in Essex. The Vikings had made a number of successful raids on seaports in the vicinity, after which they had encamped on an island near the mouth of the river. The island, since it was accessible from the mainland by a causeway that might be used only at low tide, provided a natural base from which the Vikings could continue their hit-and-run depredations on the countryside. Birhtnoth, the Earl of Essex, who was leader of the English militia, took up his position at the end of the causeway and from there was able to prevent the enemy from crossing to the mainland. As the poem relates, however, in his "overconfidence" he allowed them free passage so that a battle might take place. As a result, he was himself killed, and many of the defenders took to their heels; but the earl's retinue—his close associates and retainers—continued to fight bravely until they were overwhelmed. In the incomplete form in which the poem has come down to us we do not hear of the ultimate defeat of the English, though the grim tone and in particular the famous speech of Birhtwold prepare us for the disaster.

The unknown poet of late Anglo-Saxon times was apparently well versed in heroic English poetry of the type of *Beowulf*, and he does a brilliant job of adapting traditional epic mannerisms to his description of a local battle of no particular historical importance, which involved people with whom he was acquainted. The defense forces were actually no more than a home guard: inexperienced farmers and laborers conscripted for the local defense, together with a small group of aristocrats who were acquainted with heroic martial tradition but had not before had the opportunity to behave heroically. Since the defeat of the Scandinavians at Brunanburg in 937, the kingdom had enjoyed a long, peaceful respite from attack; the present Viking raid was, indeed, the beginning of a new and bloody era during which the realm that Alfred had consolidated weakened badly under Ethelred "the Unready." Godric and his brothers, who, according to the poem, fled from the battle, are representative of those Englishmen who preferred to pay tribute rather than to fight. But Birhtnoth and his retinue are of the traditional tough fiber, and it is especially in their speeches and single combats that the poet uses the epic style, contenting himself elsewhere with a forceful but generally realistic narrative of what occurred. Birhtnoth's decision to let the Vikings cross the river is treated in the epic manner as an instance of heroic overconfidence, like *Beowulf's* refusal to use his sword against the unarmed Grendel

—but in this case it is a gesture that leads to tragic doom. Probably Birhtnoth had a practical motive for his rashness: if the Vikings were prevented from raiding here, they would simply sail along the coast to a less well-defended spot in order to continue their depredations. Only their destruction would insure general peace; but from the local point of view, Birhtnoth's permitting the enemy to come where he could fight with them might well appear as the rashly noble act of a traditional hero.

The poem was written down in a manuscript that was reduced to charred fragments in the same fire that damaged the *Beowulf* manuscript. Fortunately, a transcript had been made of it before the fire, and on this modern editions depend. Even before the manuscript was burned the poem must have lacked a number of lines at its beginning and end, though most scholars feel that nothing very substantial has been lost.

## The Battle of Maldon<sup>1</sup>

Then he<sup>2</sup> commanded each of his warriors to leave his horse, drive it far away, and walk forward, trusting in his hands and in his good courage. When Offa's kinsman<sup>3</sup> understood that the earl would not put up with cowardice, he let his beloved hawk fly from his hand toward the woods and advanced to the battle: by this men might know that the youth would not weaken in the fight once he had taken up his weapons. Eadric wished also to serve his lord the earl in the battle; he carried his spear forward to the conflict. He was of good heart as long as he might hold shield and broadsword in his hands; he carried out the vow that he had made, now that he was to fight before his lord.

Then Birhtnoth began to place his men at their stations; he rode about and advised them, taught the troops how they should stand and hold the place and bade them grasp their shields aright, firm in their hands, and have no fear. When he had arranged his folk properly, he alighted among them where it seemed best to him, where he knew his retainers to be most loyal.

Then the Vikings' herald stood on the river bank, cried out loudly, spoke words, boastfully proclaimed the seafarers' message to the earl where he stood on the shore: "Bold seamen have sent me to you, have commanded me to say to you that you must quickly send treasure in order to protect yourself; and it is better for you to buy off this spear-assault with tribute than to have us give you harsh war. There is no need for us to destroy one another, if you are rich

1. In this prose translation by the present editor, a few liberties have been taken with the text in order to make clear the references of some of the loosely used Old English terms for "warrior." The translation is in general based on the text in J. C. Pope's

*Seven Old English Poems* (1966).

2. Earl Birhtnoth, commander of the English defense forces.

3. Offa is mentioned later in the poem as one of Birhtnoth's principal retainers; his young kinsman is not otherwise identified.

enough to pay. With the gold we will confirm truce. If you that are highest here decide upon this, that you will ransom your people, and in return for peace give the seamen money in the amount they request, and receive peace from us, we will go to ship with the tribute, set sail on the sea, and keep peace with you."

Birhtnoth spoke, raised his shield, his slender ash-spear, uttered words, angry and resolute gave him answer: "Do you hear, sea-farer, what this folk says? They will give you spears for tribute, poisoned point and old sword, heriot<sup>4</sup> that avails you not in battle. Sea-wanderers' herald, take back our answer, speak to your people a message far more hateful, that here stands with his host an undisgraced earl who will defend this country, my lord Æthelred's<sup>5</sup> homeland, folk and land. Heathen shall fall in the battle. It seems to me too shameful that you should go unfought to ship with our tribute, now that you have come thus far into our land. Not so easily shall you get treasure: point and edge shall first reconcile us, grim battle-play, before we give tribute."

Then he ordered the men to bear their shields, go forward so that they all stood on the river bank. Because of the water neither band could come to the other: after the ebb, the floodtide came flowing in; currents met and crossed. It seemed to them too long a time before they might bear their spears together. On the river Pant they stood in proud array, the battle-line of the East Saxons and the men from the ash-ships. Nor might any of them injure another, unless one should receive death from the flight of an arrow.

The tide went out. The seamen stood ready, many Vikings eager for war. The earl, protector of men, bade a war-hard warrior—he was named Wulfstan, of bold lineage—to hold the bridge:<sup>6</sup> he was Ceola's son, who with his spear pierced the first man bold enough to step upon the bridge. There stood with Wulfstan fearless fighters, Ælfhere and Maccus, bold men both who would not take flight from the ford, but defended themselves stoutly against the enemy as long as they might wield weapons.

When the loathed strangers saw that, and understood clearly that they would face bitter bridge-defenders there, they began to prefer words to deeds,<sup>7</sup> prayed that they might have access to the bank, pass over the ford and lead their forces across. Then in his overconfidence the earl began to yield ground—too much ground—to the hateful people: Birhtelm's son began to call over the cold water while warriors listened: "Now the way is laid open for you.

4. The weapons a tenant received from his lord; they were returned to the lord upon the tenant's death.

5. King Ethelred "the Unready," who reigned from 978 to 1016.

6. Not a bridge in the modern sense, but probably a stone causeway, under

water even at low tide; immediately below, it is called a ford.

7. Literally, "to practice deception"—an overstatement due to the poet's scorn for fighters who refused to do things the hard heroic way.

Come straightway to us, as men to battle. God alone knows which of us may be master of the field."

The slaughter-wolves advanced, minded not the water, a host of Vikings westward over the Pant, over the bright water bore their shields: sailors to land brought shields of linden. Opposite stood Birhtnoth with his warriors, ready for the fierce invaders. He ordered his men to form a war-hedge<sup>8</sup> with their shields and to hold the formation fast against the enemy. Now was combat near, glory in battle. The time had come when doomed men should fall. Shouts were raised; ravens circled, the eagle eager for food. On earth there was uproar.

They let the file-hard spears fly from their hands, grim-ground javelins. Bows were busy, shield felt point. Bitter was the battle-rush. On either side warriors fell, young men lay dead. Wulfmær was wounded, chose the slaughter-bed: kinsman of Birhtnoth—his sister's son—he was cruelly hewn down with swords. Then requital was made to the Vikings: I have heard that Eadweard struck one fiercely with his sword, withheld not the stroke, so that the warrior fell doomed at his feet; for this his lord gave the chamberlain<sup>9</sup> thanks when he had opportunity. Thus men stood firm in the battle, stern of purpose. Eagerly all these armed fighters contended with one another to see who could be the first with his weapon's point to take life from doomed man. The slain fell, carrion, to the earth. The defenders stood fast; Birhtnoth urged them on, bade each man who would win glory from the Danes to give his whole heart to the battle.

A war-hard Viking advanced, raised up his weapon, his shield to defend himself, moved against Birhtnoth. As resolute as the churl,<sup>1</sup> the earl advanced toward him. Each of them meant harm to the other. Then the seaman threw his southern-made<sup>2</sup> spear so that the fighters' chief was wounded. But he thrust the spear with his shield so that the shaft split and the spearhead broke off and sprang away.<sup>3</sup> The war-chief was maddened; with his spear he stabbed the proud Viking that had given him the wound. Wise in war was the host's leader: he let his spear go through the man's neck, guided his hand so that he mortally wounded the raider. Then he quickly stabbed another, breaking through the mail-shirt: in the breast, quite through the corselet, was this one wounded; at his heart stood the poisoned point. The earl was the blither; the bold man laughed, gave thanks to God that the Lord had given him this day's work.

8. A wall of shields (a common defensive formation).

9. I.e., Eadweard.

1. Here "churl" means something like "villain."

2. Apparently the Vikings preferred

weapons made in England or France—the "south."

3. The maneuver described frees the spear from the wounded man's body and enables him to take retaliatory action.

One of the Vikings loosed a javelin from his hand, let it fly from his fist, and it sped its way through Æthelred's noble thane. By the earl's side stood a lad not yet grown, a boy in the battle, son of Wulfstan, Wulfmær the young, who plucked full boldly the bloody spear from the warrior. He sent the hard spear flying back again: its point went in, and on the earth lay the man who had sorely wounded his lord. Then an armed Viking stepped toward the earl. He wished to seize the earl's war-gear, make booty of rings and ornamented sword. Then Birhtnoth took his sword from its sheath, broad and bright-edged, and struck at his assailant's coat of mail. Too soon one of the seafarers hindered him, wounded the earl in his arm. Then the gold-hilted sword fell to the earth: he might not hold the hard blade, wield his weapon. Yet he spoke words, the hoar battle-leader, encouraged his men, bade them go forward stoutly together. He might no longer stand firm on his feet. He looked toward Heaven and spoke: "I thank thee, Ruler of Nations, for all the joys that I have had in the world. Now, gentle Lord, I have most need that thou grant my spirit grace, that my soul may travel to thee—under thy protection, Prince of Angels, depart in peace. I beseech thee that fiends of hell harm it not." Then the heathen warriors slew him and both the men who stood by him; Ælfnoth and Wulfmær both were laid low; close by their lord they gave up their lives.

Then there retired from the battle those who did not wish to be there. The son of Odda was the first to flee: Godric went from the fight and left the good man that had given him many a steed. He leaped upon the horse that his lord had owned, upon trappings that he had no right to, and both his brothers galloped with him, Godwine and Godwig cared not for battle, but went from the war and sought the wood, fled to its fastness and saved their lives—and more men than was in any way right, if they remembered all the favors he had done for their benefit. So Offa had said to him that day at the meeting he had held in the place, that many there spoke boldly who would not remain firm at need.

The folk's leader had fallen, Æthelred's earl: all his hearth-companions saw that their lord lay dead. Then the proud thanes advanced; men without fear pressed eagerly on. They all desired either of two things, to leave life or avenge the man they loved. Thus Ælfric's son urged them on; the warrior young of winters spoke words; Ælfwine it was who spoke, and spoke boldly: "Remember the speeches we have spoken so often over our mead,<sup>4</sup> when we raised boast on the bench, heroes in the hall, about hard fighting. Now may the man who is bold prove that he is. I will make my

4. Boasting of prowess while drinking is a common element in Old English poetry.



noble birth known to all, that I was of great kin in Mercia. My grandfather was named Ealhelm, a wise earl, worldly-prosperous. Thanes among that people shall not have reason to reproach me that I would go from this band of defenders, seek my home, now that my lord lies hewn down in battle. To me that is greatest of griefs: he was both my kinsman and my lord." Then he went forward, bent on revenge, and with the point of his spear pierced one of the pirate band, so that he lay on the earth, destroyed by the weapon. Then Ælfwine began to encourage his comrades, friends and companions, to go forward.

Offa spoke, shook his ash-spear: "Lo, you, Ælfwine, have encouraged us all, thanes in need. Now that our lord the earl lies on the earth, there is need for us all that each one of us encourage the other, warriors to battle, as long as he may have and hold weapon, hard sword, spear and good blade. The coward son of Odda, Godric, has betrayed us all; when he rode off on that horse, on that proud steed, many a man thought that he was our lord. Therefore here on the field folk were dispersed, the shield-wall broken. Curses on his action, by which he caused so many men here to flee."

Leofsunu spoke, raised the linden buckler, his shield to defend himself; he answered the warrior: "I promise that I will not flee a footstep hence, but I will go forward, avenge my dear lord in the fight. Steadfast warriors about Sturmer<sup>5</sup> need not reproach me with their words that now that my patron is dead I would go lordless home, abandon the battle. But weapon, point and iron, shall take me." Full wrathful he went forward, fought fiercely; flight he despised.

Then Dunnere spoke, shook his spear; humble churl,<sup>6</sup> he cried over all, bade each warrior avenge Birhtnoth: "He who intends to avenge his lord on the folk may not hesitate nor care for life." Then they advanced: they cared not for life. The retainers began to fight hardily, fierce spear-bearers, and prayed God that they might avenge their patron and bring destruction to their enemies.

The hostage<sup>7</sup> began to help them eagerly. He was of bold kin among the Northumbrians, the son of Ecglafr: his name was Æscferth. He did not flinch at the war-play, but threw spears without pause. Now he hit shield, now he pierced man: each moment he caused some wound, as long as he might wield weapons.

Eadweard the Long still stood in the line, ready and eager, spoke boasting words, how he would not flee a footstep nor turn back, now that his chief lay dead. He broke the shield-wall and fought against

5. The Essex village where the speaker lived.

6. I.e., freeman of the lowest rank.

7. Among Germanic peoples, hostages

of high rank generally fought on the side of the warriors who held them in hostage.

the foe until he had worthily avenged his treasure-giver on the seamen—before he himself lay on the slaughter-bed.

So also did Æthelric, noble companion, eager and impetuous; he fought most resolutely, this brother of Sibirht, as did many another: they split the hollow shield and defended themselves boldly<sup>8</sup>. . . The shield's rim broke and the mail-shirt sang one of horror's songs. Then in the battle Offa struck the seafarer so that he fell on the earth, and there Gadd's kinsman himself sought the ground: Offa was quickly hewn down in the fight. He had, however, performed what he had promised his lord, what he had vowed before to his ring-giver, that they should either both ride to the town, hale to their home, or fall among the host, die of wounds in the slaughter-place. He lay as a thane should, near his lord.

Then there was a crash of shields. The seamen advanced, enraged by the fight. Spear oft pierced life-house of doomed man. Then Wistan advanced: Thurstan's son fought against the men. He was the slayer of three of them in the throng before the son of Wigelm<sup>9</sup> lay dead in the carnage. There was stubborn conflict. Warriors stood fast in the fight. Fighting men fell, worn out with wounds: slain fell among slain.

All the while Oswald and Eadwold, brothers both, encouraged the men, with their words bade their dear kinsmen that they should stand firm at need, wield their weapons without weakness.

Birhtwold spoke, raised his shield—he was an old retainer—shook his ash-spear; full boldly he exhorted the men: "Purpose shall be the firmer, heart the keener, courage shall be the more, as our night lessens.<sup>1</sup> Here lies our lord all hewn down, good man on ground. Ever may he lament who now thinks to turn from war-play. I am old of life; from here I will not turn, but by my lord's side, by the man I loved, I intend to lie."

So also the son of Æthelgar encouraged them all to the battle: this Godric oft let spear go, slaughter-shaft fly on the Vikings; thus he advanced foremost among the folk, hewed and laid low until he died in the fighting: he was not that Godric who fled the battle.

8. Apparently a description of a Viking's attack on Offa has been lost.

9. Identification uncertain: perhaps Offa was the son of Wigelm.

1. These famous lines appear thus in the original: "Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlaþ."

## GEOFFREY CHAUCER

(ca. 1343-1400)

- 1370: *The Book of the Duchess* (first important extant poem).  
 1372: First Italian journey: contact with Italian literature.  
 1385: *Troilus and Criseide*.  
 1386: *Canterbury Tales* begun.

Social thought in the Middle Ages lagged far behind social realities. Medieval England did not recognize the existence of any class between the aristocracy, a relatively small group that attained its position by birth alone, and the commons, which included everyone not of high birth. There was, theoretically, no way by which one might advance from the commons to the aristocracy. But in actual fact there existed a large and increasingly important middle class that was constantly infiltrating the aristocracy, and it was into this middle class that Chaucer was born. He was the son of a well-to-do wine merchant, and probably spent his boyhood in the down-to-earth atmosphere of London's Vintry, the wine-merchandising area; here, despite the privileges, especially in the way of education, that his father's wealth secured for him, he must have mixed daily with other commoners of all sorts. He might well have passed his whole life there, counting casks and money; but in his early teens he was sent to serve as a page in one of the great aristocratic households of England, that of Lionel of Antwerp, a son of the reigning monarch, Edward III. The rest of his life Chaucer spent in close association with the ruling nobility of the kingdom, not only with Lionel, but with his more powerful brother John of Gaunt; with their father King Edward; with their nephew Richard II, who succeeded to the throne in 1377; and finally with John's son Henry IV, who desposed his cousin and became king in 1399. Chaucer's wife Philippa was a member of the households of Edward's queen and of John of Gaunt's second wife, Constance of Castile, and she was doubtless of higher birth than the poet. A Thomas Chaucer, who was probably their son, was an eminent man in the next generation, and an Alice Chaucer, quite possibly Chaucer's granddaughter, was sufficiently important in her day to have been married successively to the Earl of Salisbury and the Duke of Norfolk. The theoretically unbridgeable gap between the commons and the aristocracy was thus ably bridged by the poet.

In order to accomplish this, Chaucer must have been able in other ways than as a poet, though doubtless his extraordinary poetic ability was of great service to his advancement. Yet if one were to rely merely on the preserved historical records, one would have little reason to suspect that the Geoffrey Chaucer they keep mentioning ever wrote a line of verse. We catch glimpses of him serving as a page in Lionel's household (1357); as a soldier getting himself captured by the French in one of Edward III's many sallies to the continent (1359); of his being the well-

beloved *vallactus* of Edward III (1367)—despite the term, which means “valet.” Chaucer’s duties were hardly menial—and the well-beloved servant of John of Gaunt (1374), and of receiving substantial rewards for his services; of his being sent to Italy to assist in arranging a trade agreement with the Genoese (1372), and to France, perhaps to assist in getting a royal bride for young Prince Richard (1377); of his receiving a rent-free house on the city wall of London (1374); of his keeping, “in his own hand,” the accounts for which he was responsible as Controller of the Customs and Subsidies on Wool for the port of London (1374–86)—and the wool trade was England’s largest trade; of other trips abroad on official business; of his becoming Justice of the Peace and Knight of the Shire (Member of Parliament) for the county of Kent (1385–86); of his erecting grandstands, inventorying pots and pans, and getting himself robbed as Clerk of the King’s Works (1389–91); of his being appointed deputy forester of one of the royal preserves in Somerset (1391); and—throughout his life—of his receiving grants and annuities, or having them confirmed by royal act when a new king took the throne, or asking that butts of wine given him by the crown be transformed into cash, or merely asking for money or more money. We last glimpse him, in the final months of his life, renting a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey, within a stone’s throw of Westminster Hall, the ancient seat of English government.

#### CHAUCER’S LITERARY CAREER

It might seem that a man so busy would have had little time to write poetry, but Chaucer seems to have been an assiduous versifier all his adult life. Unfortunately, few of his poems can be precisely dated, and some have not been preserved. Probably among his earliest works was a translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, a 13th-century French poem that exercised a profound influence on Chaucer’s work. The first part of the *Roman* is an allegory, written by Guillaume de Lorris, which tells, in the form of a dream, the progress of a youthful love affair. Guillaume left the poem unfinished, but an enormous sequel was added to it after Guillaume’s death by Jean de Meun: in this sequel the young courtier finally wins his lady (the rose), but not until Jean has discussed at great length many of the issues considered important by medieval intellectuals. The poem is a mixture of highly diverse elements, and it is characteristic of Chaucer’s love of variety that he was able to assimilate into his own work both the courtly emotionalism of Guillaume and the philosophical, often satiric, detachment of Jean. Of a 14th-century English translation of the French poem only a fragment has come down to us, and that without any mention of the translator’s name; scholars are generally agreed that the first 1700 lines of this fragment are Chaucer’s.

Chaucer’s work on the *Roman* is thought to have been done during the 60’s. During this decade he probably made other translations from the French, and kept on sharpening his rhetorical tools. At the end of the decade he produced his first major work (and the only one of his poems that can be accurately dated): the *Book of the Duchess*, probably completed in early 1369, an elegy for John of Gaunt’s first wife, the lovely Blanche of Lancaster, who died in 1368. This is at once one of Chaucer’s most derivative and most original poems: many of its octosyllabic lines

are translated directly from various works by Jean Froissart, a French poet contemporary with Chaucer, and from his countryman Guillaume de Machaut as well as from other Frenchmen; yet the plan of the work is imaginative and daring, and as a whole the elegy is on a level of excellence never attained by the poets from whom Chaucer is borrowing. It is also interesting to observe how that tact which was later to earn Chaucer his status as a minor diplomat controls the direction of the poem and gives it artistic form.

In the first period of his literary activity Chaucer's specific poetic models were French, but a knowledge of writings in Latin lies behind virtually everything he wrote—although the Latin writers Chaucer read were not the same as those which we should study today. He probably had a more than adequate knowledge of the *Aeneid* and of Ovid in the original, but it is likely that he knew the other classical authors mostly through French translations and paraphrases. He was directly familiar with a number of (to us) cumbersome medieval Latin poems. Certainly his favorite Latin writer was Boethius, the 6th-century Roman whose *Consolation of Philosophy*, written while its author was in prison awaiting his execution, became one of the most valued of books for the whole Middle Ages, which never failed to find inspiration and comfort in its nobly stoic doctrine. Chaucer's own philosophical attitude, that of living wholeheartedly in the world while remaining spiritually detached from it, is at least partially a legacy from Boethius. His wooden but painstaking prose translation of the *Consolation*, probably made during the 70's, is only one of innumerable indications of Chaucer's reverence for the Roman writer.

The journey that Chaucer made to Italy in 1372 was in all likelihood a milestone in his literary development. Hitherto the influences upon him had been largely French and Latin, and while he may have read Italian before, it is likely that it was his Italian journey that immersed him in the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—the last two still alive at the time of Chaucer's visit, though he probably did not meet them. Between Chaucer and the greatest of the Italian writers, Dante, there was a large dissimilarity of temperament; yet if Chaucer could not assimilate *The Divine Comedy*, he nevertheless appreciated its austere moral grandeur, and his work shows its influences in subtle, oblique ways. Moreover, one of his funniest poems, the *House of Fame*, written sometime while he was in the customs (1374–86), may be read as a light-hearted imitation of the *Comedy*, though not a wholly successful one. From the works of Petrarch, also a writer of alien temperament, Chaucer obtained less, though he accords him respect on the several occasions when he mentions him. It was Boccaccio, whose cast of mind was far more congenial to Chaucer than the more sober Dante and Petrarch, who was to provide the source for some of Chaucer's finest poems—though his name is never mentioned in Chaucer's works. Many of the *Canterbury Tales* are indebted to one or another of Boccaccio's works, as is his lovely, cryptic love vision, the *Parliament of Fowls* (between 1375 and 1385). And his longest poem, *Troilus and Criseide*, probably completed about 1385, is an adaptation of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* ("The

Love-Stricken"). The Italian work is one of considerable stature, which Chaucer reworked into one of the greatest love poems in any language. Even if he had never written the *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus* would have secured Chaucer a place among the great English poets.

Chaucer probably began work on the *Canterbury Tales* in 1386, and this was his chief literary interest until his death. The old tripartite division of Chaucer's literary career which assigns him a French period (to 1372), and an Italian period (1372-85), calls this last period of his life "English." But it was not English in the same sense as the earlier periods were French and Italian (i.e., dominated by French and Italian models), for the fact is that Chaucer from the beginning to the end stands apart from the mainstream of English literature. In the Rhyme of Sir Thopas, which he assigns himself in the *Canterbury Tales*, the wonderful fun he makes of popular Middle English romances shows his intimate knowledge of them; and undoubtedly he had read much English writing of all kinds. Yet his notion of literary art seems to have excluded many of the common characteristics—and the characteristic vices—of what had been and was being written in English, so that it is difficult to relate his work to that of his fellow English writers. His friend John Gower is a case in point: like Chaucer, he wrote a collection of English narrative poems in his *Confessio Amantis* ("The Lover's Confession"), and Chaucer tells some of the same stories in the *Canterbury Tales* and in the *Legend of Good Women*. The last, which may have interrupted Chaucer's work on the *Canterbury Tales* in the late 80's, was apparently assigned him by some eminent person; in order to make amends for his portrait of the unfaithful Criseide, he had to write a series of short poems celebrating famous faithful women. To make each story prove exactly the same point and nothing more is something that the conventional Gower had no trouble in doing. Yet Chaucer was able to complete the tales of only nine solemnly steadfast ladies before giving up in something like despair, and the most amusing thing about his narratives is his evident exasperation with having to make everything accord to a single formula. He could not bring himself to use the simple moralistic technique of conventional English poetry, and what Gower treats seriously appears in Chaucer often to be bordering on burlesque. Every comparison between Chaucer and run-of-the-mill English poetry either so exalts him as to make the act of comparison ludicrous or else, when Chaucer is trying to behave conventionally, shows him writing with his left hand. Chaucer had no really "English" period; English poetry had little to teach the first great English poet.

#### CHAUCER'S ART

The extraordinary variety of the *Canterbury Tales* as well as their number might well have demanded their author's full energy and attention during the last fourteen years of his life, but while he was at work on them he continued, almost to the end, to perform what seem to have been full-time jobs having nothing to do with literature. Doubtless this practical business prevented him from achieving more than the 22 tales he finished; and it probably made him search his old papers for tales that he could work in without substantial revision. Yet if it reduced his liter-

ary output—which, even so, is enormous—this lifelong involvement with the practical is one of the chief reasons for his greatness as a poet. From his birth to his death he dealt continually with all sorts of people, the highest and the lowest, and his wonderfully observant mind made the most of this ever-present opportunity. His wide reading gave him plots and ideas, but his experience gave him people. As a commoner himself he had a sympathy with and understanding of the lower classes that few men who attained his ultimate station might boast of—and the lower classes must have accepted him. Similarly, he seems to have won full acceptance from the proud and important personages with whom he associated at court, and this he could not have won if he had not understood them perfectly. He understands both the high and the low, but he remains curiously detached from both, and it is detachment, perfectly balanced in his poetry by sympathy, which distinguishes Chaucer's art. Although he was born a commoner, he did not live as a commoner; and although he was accepted by the aristocracy, he must always have been conscious of the fact that he did not really belong to that society of which birth alone could make one a true member. Medieval aristocratic society arrogated to itself all idealism, and Chaucer characteristically regards life in terms of aristocratic ideals; but he never lost the ability, which for the poorer class was also a positive necessity, of regarding life as a purely practical matter. The art of being at once involved in and detached from a given situation is peculiarly Chaucer's.

In the physical realm, double vision results in a blurred image, but not so in Chaucer's poetic world, where images have often an extraordinary clarity, as if reality itself were made more real. His Prioress in the *Canterbury Tales* is an example of the basic human paradox which places what people are in opposition to what they think they are or pretend to be: Chaucer shows us clearly her inability to be what she professes to be, a nun; shows also the inadequacy of what she thinks a nun ought to be, a lady; and shows the great human charm of what she is, a woman. The elements of the portrait are divided between the critical and the admiring: a heavily satiric poet might well enhance the critical comment, so that our ultimate impression would be of the Prioress' weakness, while a sentimental one might enhance her amiable side so as to make that the aspect which we should remember. But in Chaucer's handling the reality comprehends both sides of the Prioress, expresses the paradox without attempting to resolve it. He appears to have been a man who had no illusions about the world or its inhabitants, but was nevertheless deeply fond of them both, and thought it worth while to keep the world spinning as well as possible, either by telling stories of high artistic truth or by counting pots and pans.

The text given here is from the present editor's *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (1958, 1975). For the *Canterbury Tales* the Hengwrt Manuscript has provided the textual basis. The spelling has been altered to improve consistency, and has been modernized in so far as is possible without distorting the phonological values of the Middle English. Discussions of Middle English pronunciation, grammar, and prosody will be found in the introduction to the period.

**The Canterbury Tales** Chaucer's original plan for the *Canterbury Tales* projected about 120 stories, two for each pilgrim to tell on the way to Canterbury and two more on the way back. Chaucer actually completed only 22, though two more exist in fragments; a modification of the original plan is seen in the assignment of one of the completed tales to a pilgrim who was not a member of the group that assembled at Southwark. The work was probably first conceived in 1386, when Chaucer was living in Greenwich, some miles east of London. From his house he might have been able to see the pilgrim road that led toward the shrine of the famous English saint, Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury who was murdered in his cathedral in 1170. Medieval pilgrims were notorious tale-tellers (liars, according to the austere Langland), and the sight and sound of the bands riding toward Canterbury may well have suggested to Chaucer the idea of using a fictitious pilgrimage as a "framing" device for a number of stories. Collections of stories linked by such a device were common in the later Middle Ages. Chaucer's contemporary John Gower had used one in his *Confessio Amantis*; earlier in the century Boccaccio had placed the hundred tales of his *Decameron* in the mouths of ten characters, each of whom told a tale a day for ten days; and another Italian, Giovanni Sercambi, had placed a series of stories in the mouth of the leader of a group of persons journeying on horseback. Even if, as seems likely, Chaucer was unaware of the Italian precedents, the device of the framing fiction was in the air.

Chaucer's artistic exploitation of the device is, however, altogether his own. In Gower and Sercambi, one speaker relates all the stories; and in Boccaccio, the relationship between any one of the ten speakers and the story he tells is haphazard, so that reassignment of all the stories to different speakers would not materially change the effect. But in the best of the *Canterbury Tales* there is a fascinating accord between the narrator and his story, so that the story takes on rich overtones from what we have learned of its teller in the General Prologue and elsewhere, and the character himself grows and is revealed by his story. Chaucer conducts two fictions simultaneously—that of the individual tale and that of the pilgrim to whom he has assigned it. He develops the second fiction not only through the General Prologue but also through the "links," the interchanges among the pilgrims between stories. These interchanges sometimes lead to animosities. Thus the Miller's Tale offends the Reeve, who, formerly a carpenter, sees himself slandered in the figure of the Miller's silly, cuckolded carpenter; and the Reeve replies with a story that scores a miller who seems very like the pilgrim Miller. Similarly the Friar and the Summoner quarrel at the end of the Wife of Bath's Prologue, so that when the Friar is called upon he tells a tale most offensive to the Summoner, who in turn retaliates with an even more offensive story about a friar. The effect of each of these tales is enhanced by the animus of its teller, while the description of the animus in the links is exciting in itself: we are given at once a story and a drama. Furthermore, the Wife of Bath's monstrous feminism sets up resonances that are felt through all



the succeeding tales. Indeed, so powerful are these resonances that some see in them a thematic unifying device: the question of marriage that the Wife introduces is further treated from two opposing points of view by the Clerk and the Merchant, and is finally settled by the common sense of the Franklin. In addition to such artistic stratagems as these, the personality and mind of the reporter—a half-burlesque version of Chaucer himself—permeate the poem and enrich its meaning.

The composition of none of the tales can be accurately dated; most of them were written during the last fourteen years of Chaucer's life, though some which fail to fit their tellers may be much earlier. The popularity of the poem in late mediæval England is attested by the number of surviving manuscripts: more than 80, mostly from the 15th century. It was also twice printed by Caxton, and often reprinted by Caxton's early successors. The manuscripts reflect the unfinished state of the poem—the fact that when he died Chaucer had not made up his mind about a number of details, and hence left many inconsistencies. The poem appears in the manuscripts as nine or ten "fragments" or blocks of tales; the order of the poems within each fragment is generally the same, but the order of the fragments themselves varies widely. The fragment containing the General Prologue, the Knight's, Miller's and Reeve's Tales, and the Cook's unfinished tale, always comes first, and the fragment consisting of the Parson's Tale and the Retraction always comes last; but the others, such as that containing the Wife of Bath, the Friar, and the Summoner, or that consisting of the Physician and Pardoner, or the longest fragment consisting of six tales concluding with the Nun's Priest's, are by no means stable in relation to one another. The order followed here is one of the two that seems most nearly satisfactory.

#### THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

Chaucer did not need to make a pilgrimage himself in order to meet the types of people that his fictitious pilgrimage includes, for most of them had long inhabited literature as well as life: the ideal Knight, who had fought against the pagans in all the great battles of the last half-century; his son the Squire, a lover out of any love poem; the Prioress without a vocation but with the dogs and jewelry that satirical literature was always condemning nuns for; the hunting Monk and flattering Friar, chief butts of mediæval satirists; the too-busy and too-rich lawyer; the prosperous Franklin; the fraudulent Doctor; the Wife—or Archwife—of Bath; the austere Parson; and so on down through the lower orders to that flamboyant hypocrite, the Pardoner, a living vice. One meets all these types in mediæval literature, and, since literature imitates life, one might have met them also in mediæval society, as Chaucer, with his wide experience, undoubtedly did. Indeed, it has been argued that in some of his portraits he is drawing real people; but the appearance of doing so is actually a function of his art, which is able to endow types with a reality we generally associate only with people we know. Chaucer achieves this effect largely by persuading us that his own interest lies only in the visible, in what actually met his eye on the pilgrimage. He pretends to let the salient features of each pilgrim leap out directly at the reader, and does not seem

to mind if some of his descriptions are from top to toe, others all toe and no top. This imitation of the way our minds actually perceive reality may make us fail to notice the care with which Chaucer has selected his details in order to give an integrated sketch of the person being described. While they are generally not full-blown literary symbols, most of these details give something more than mere verisimilitude to the description; actually, they mediate between the world of types and the world of real people. Independent bourgeois women of the time were often makers of cloth, so that the Wife of Bath's proficiency at the trade is, in one way, merely part of her historical reality; yet the first weaver of cloth was the unparadised Eve, and her descendant is an unregenerate member of the distaff side. The Franklin's red face and white beard are in the same way merely individualizing factors in the portrait; yet the red face and white beard seem always to associate themselves with a man of good will who likes good living, and since Chaucer's time they have become the distinguishing marks of a kind of mythic Franklin, Santa Claus.

The rich suggestiveness of the details is what makes the portraits worth reading again and again. One may begin by enjoying the bright if flat photographic image of reality that the reporter creates, but one will find that the initial appearance of flatness is deceptive, and that the more one rereads the more complex and significant the portraits become. Here, as elsewhere in his work, Chaucer shows himself to be a rival to Shakespeare in the art of providing entertainment on the most primitive level, and at the same time, of significantly increasing the reader's ability to comprehend reality.

## From THE CANTERBURY TALES

### The General Prologue 1387?

	Whan that April with his <sup>o</sup> showres soote <sup>o</sup>	<i>its / sweet</i>
	The droughte of March hath perced to the roote,	
	And bathed every veine <sup>1</sup> in swich <sup>o</sup> licour <sup>o</sup> ,	<i>such / liquid</i>
	Of which vertu <sup>2</sup> engendred is the flour;	
5	Whan Zephyrus <sup>3</sup> eck <sup>o</sup> with his sweete breeth	<i>also</i>
	Inspired hath in every holt <sup>o</sup> and heeth <sup>o</sup>	<i>grove / field</i>
	The tendre croppes <sup>o</sup> , and the yonge sonne <sup>4</sup>	<i>shoots</i>
	Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,	
	And smale fowles maken melodye	
10	That sleepen al the night with open yē <sup>o</sup> —	<i>eye</i>
	So priketh hem <sup>o</sup> Nature in hir corages <sup>5</sup> —	<i>them</i>
	Thanne longen folk to goon <sup>o</sup> on pilgrimages,	<i>go</i>
	And palmeres <sup>6</sup> for to seeken straunge strondes	

1. I.e., in plants.

2. By the power of which.

3. The west wind.

4. The sun is young because it has run only halfway through its course in Aries, the Ram—the first sign of the zodiac in the solar year.

5. Their hearts.

6. Palmers, wide-ranging pilgrims—especially those who sought out the "straunge strondes" (foreign shores) of the Holy Land. "Ferne halwes": far-off shrines.

Spring

To ferne halwes, couthe° in sondry londes; known  
 15 And specially from every shires ende  
 Of Engelond to Canterbury they wende,  
 The holy blisful martyr<sup>7</sup> for to seeke  
 That hem hath holpen° whan that they were seke.° *helped / sick*  
 Bifel that in that seson on a day,  
 20 In Southwerk<sup>8</sup> at the Tabard as I lay,  
 Redy to wenden on my pilgimage  
 To Canterbury with ful° devout corage, very  
 At night was come into that hostelrye  
 Wel ninc and twenty in a compaignye  
 25 Of sondry folk, by aventure° yfalle chance  
 In felawshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle  
 That toward Canterbury wolden° ride. would  
 The chambres and the stables weren wide,  
 And wel we weren esed° at the beste.<sup>9</sup> accommodated  
 30 And shortly, whan the sonne was to reste,<sup>1</sup>  
 So hadde I spoken with hem everichoon° every one  
 That I was of hir felawshipe anon°, at once  
 And made forward<sup>2</sup> erly for to rise,  
 To take oure way ther as<sup>3</sup> I you devise.° describe  
 35 But nathelees°, whil I have time and space,<sup>4</sup> nevertheless  
 Er° that I ferther in this tale pace°, before / pass  
 Me thinketh it accordant to resoun<sup>5</sup>  
 To telle you al the condicioun  
 Of eech of hem, so as it seemed me,  
 40 And whiche they were, and of what degree,  
 And eek in what array that they were inne:  
 And at a knight thanne° wol I first biginne. then  
 A Knight ther was, and that a worthy man,  
 That fro the time that he first bigan  
 45 To riden out, he loved chivalrye,  
 Trouthe<sup>6</sup> and honour, freedom and curteisye.  
 Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre°, war  
 And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre°, further  
 As wel in Cristendom as hethenesse°, heathen lands  
 50 And<sup>7</sup> evere honoured for his worthinesse.  
 At Alisandre<sup>8</sup> he was whan it was wonne;  
 Ful ofte time he hadde the boord bigonne<sup>9</sup>

7. St. Thomas à Becket, murdered in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.

8. Southwark, site of the Tabard Inn, was then a suburb of London, south of the Thames River.

9. In the best possible way.

1. Had set.

2. I.e., (we) made an agreement.

3. "Ther as": where.

4. I.e., opportunity.

5. It seems to me according to reason.

6. Integrity. "Freedom" is here generosity of spirit, while "curteisye" is courtesy.

7. I.e., and he was.

8. The Knight has taken part in campaigns fought against all three groups of pagans who threatened Europe during the 14th century: the Moslems in the Near East, from whom Alexandria was seized after a famous siege; the northern barbarians in Prussia, Lithuania, and Russia; and the Moors in North Africa. The place names in the following lines refer to battlegrounds in these continuing wars.

9. Sat in the seat of honor at military feasts.

- Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;  
 In Lettoun had he reised,<sup>o</sup> and in Ruce, *campaigned*  
 55 No Cristen man so ofte of his degree;  
 In Gernade at the sege eek hadde he be  
 Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye;  
 At Lyeis was he, and at Satalye,  
 Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See<sup>1</sup>  
 60 At many a noble arivee<sup>o</sup> hadde he be. *military landing*  
 At mortal batailes<sup>2</sup> hadde he been fiteene,  
 And foughten for oure faith at Tramissene  
 In listes<sup>3</sup> thries,<sup>o</sup> and ay<sup>o</sup> slain his fo. *thrice / always*  
 This ilke<sup>o</sup> worthy Knight hadde been also *same*  
 65 Somtime with the lord of Palatyce<sup>4</sup>  
 Again<sup>o</sup> another hethen in Turkye; *against*  
 And everemore he hadde a sovereign pris.<sup>o</sup> *reputation*  
 And though that he were worthy,<sup>5</sup> he was wis,  
 And of his port<sup>o</sup> as meeke as is a maide. *demeanor*  
 70 He nevere yit no vilainye<sup>o</sup> ne saide *rudeness*  
 In al his lif unto no manere wight:<sup>6</sup>  
 He was a verray,<sup>o</sup> parfit,<sup>o</sup> gentil knight.<sup>7</sup> *highborn true / perfect*  
 But for to tellen you of his array;  
 His hors<sup>o</sup> were goode, but he was nat gay. *horses*  
 75 Of fustian<sup>o</sup> he wered<sup>o</sup> a gipoun<sup>7</sup> *thick cloth / wore*  
 Al bismotered with his haubergeoun,<sup>8</sup>  
 For he was late come from his viage,<sup>o</sup> *expedition*  
 And wente for to doon his pilgrymage.  
 With him ther was his sone, a yong Squier,<sup>9</sup>  
 80 A lovee and a lusty bacheler,  
 With lokkes crulle<sup>o</sup> as they were laid in presse. *curly*  
 Of twenty yeer of age he was, I gcsse.  
 Of his stature he was of evene<sup>o</sup> lengthe, *moderate*  
 And wonderly delivere,<sup>o</sup> and of greet<sup>o</sup> strengthe. *agile / great*  
 85 And he hadde been som time in chivachye<sup>1</sup>  
 In Flandres, in Artois, and Picardye,  
 And born him wel as of so litel space,<sup>2</sup>  
 In hope to stonden in his lady<sup>o</sup> grace. *lady's*  
 Embrouded<sup>o</sup> was he as it were a mede,<sup>3</sup> *embroidered*  
 90 Al ful of fresshe flowres, white and rede;<sup>o</sup> *red*  
 Singing he was, or floiting,<sup>o</sup> al the day: *whistling*

1. The Mediterranean.

2. Tournaments fought to the death.

3. Lists, tournament grounds.

4. "The lord of Palatyce" was a pagan: alliances of convenience were often made during the Crusades between Christians and pagans.

5. I.e., a valiant knight.

6. "No manere wight": any sort of person. In Middle English, negatives are multiplied for emphasis, as in these two lines: "nevere," "no," "ne," "no."

7. Tunic worn underneath the coat of mail.

8. All rust-stained from his hauberk (coat of mail).

9. The vague term "Squier" (Squire) here seems to be the equivalent of "bacheler," a young knight still in the service of an older one.

1. On cavalry expeditions. The places in the next line are sites of skirmishes in the constant warfare between the English and the French.

2. I.e., considering the little time he had been in service.

3. Mead, meadow.

He was as fressh as is the month of May.  
 Short was his gowne, with sleeves longe and wide.  
 Wel coude he sitte on hors, and faire ride;  
 95 He coude songes make, and wel endite,<sup>o</sup> *compose verse*  
 Juste<sup>4</sup> and eek daunce, and wel portraye<sup>o</sup> and write. *sketch*  
 So hote<sup>o</sup> he loved that by nightertale<sup>5</sup> *hotly*  
 He slepte namore than dooth a nightingale.  
 Curteis he was, lowely,<sup>o</sup> and servisable, *humble*  
 100 And carf biforn his fader at the table.<sup>6</sup>  
 A Yeman<sup>7</sup> hadde he and servants namo<sup>o</sup> *no more*  
 At that time, for him liste<sup>8</sup> ride so;  
 And he<sup>9</sup> was clad in cote and hood of greene.  
 A sheef of pecok arwes,<sup>o</sup> bright and keene, *arrows*  
 105 Under his belt he bar<sup>o</sup> ful thriftily,<sup>o</sup> *borne / properly*  
 Wel coude he dresse<sup>o</sup> his takel<sup>o</sup> yemanly:<sup>1</sup> *tend to / gear*  
 His arwes drouped nought with fetheres lowe.  
 And in his hand he bar a mighty bowe.  
 A not-heed<sup>o</sup> hadde he with a brown visage. *close-cut head*  
 110 Of wodecraft wel coude<sup>o</sup> he al the usage. *knew*  
 Upon his arm he bar a gay bracer,<sup>2</sup>  
 And by his side a swerd<sup>o</sup> and a bokeler,<sup>3</sup> *sword*  
 And on that other side a gay daggere,  
 Harneised<sup>o</sup> wel and sharp as point of spere; *mounted*  
 115 A Cristophre<sup>4</sup> on his brest of silver sheene;<sup>o</sup> *bright*  
 An horn he bar, the baudrik<sup>5</sup> was of greene.  
 A forster<sup>o</sup> was he soothly,<sup>o</sup> as I gesse. *forester / truly*  
 Ther was also a Nonne, a Prioresse,<sup>6</sup>  
 That of hir smiling was ful simple and coy.  
 120 Hir gretteste ooth was but by sainte Loy!<sup>o</sup> *Eloi*  
 And she was cleped<sup>o</sup> Madame Eglantine. *named*  
 Ful wel she soong<sup>o</sup> the service divine, *sang*  
 Entuned<sup>o</sup> in hir nose ful semely;<sup>7</sup> *chanted*  
 And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,<sup>o</sup> *elegantly*  
 125 After the scole<sup>o</sup> of Stratford at the Bowe<sup>8</sup>— *school*  
 For Frenssh of Paris was to hire unknowe.  
 At mete<sup>o</sup> wel ytaught was she withalle:<sup>o</sup> *meals / besides*  
 She leet<sup>o</sup> no morsel from hir lippes falle, *let*  
 Ne wette hir fingres in hir sauce deepe;  
 130 Wel coude she carve a morsel, and wel keepe<sup>o</sup> *take care*  
 That no drope ne fille<sup>o</sup> upon hir brest. *should fall*

4. Joust, fight in a tournament.

5. At night.

6. It was a squire's duty to carve his lord's meat.

7. The "Yeman" (Yeoman) is an independent commoner who acts as the Knight's military servant; "he" is the Knight.

8. "Him liste": it pleased him to.

9. I.e., the Yeoman.

1. In a workmanlike way.

2. Wristguard for archers.

3. Buckler (a small shield).

4. St. Christopher medal.

5. Baldric (a supporting strap).

6. The Prioress is the mother superior of her nunnery. "Simple and coy": sincere and mild.

7. In a seemly manner.

8. The French learned in a convent school in Stratford-at-the-Bow, a suburb of London, was evidently not up to the Parisian standard.

- In curteisye was set ful muchel hir lest.<sup>9</sup>  
 Hir over-lippe wiped she so clene  
 That in hir coppe<sup>o</sup> ther was no ferthing<sup>o</sup> scene      *cup / bit*  
 135 Of grece,<sup>o</sup> whan she dronken hadde hir draughte;      *grease*  
 Ful semely after hir mete she raughte.<sup>o</sup>      *reached*  
 And sikerly<sup>o</sup> she was of gret disport,<sup>1</sup>      *certainly*  
 And ful plesant, and amiable of port,<sup>o</sup>      *mien*  
 And pained hire to countrefete cheere<sup>2</sup>  
 140 Of court, and to been statlich<sup>o</sup> of manere,      *dignified*  
 And to been holden digne<sup>3</sup> of reverence.  
 But, for to speken of hir conscience,  
 She was so charitable and so pitous<sup>o</sup>      *merciful*  
 She wolde weepe if that she saw a mous  
 145 Caught in a trappe, if it were deed<sup>o</sup> or bledde.      *dead*  
 Of<sup>4</sup> smal houndes hadde she that she fedde  
 With rosted flessch, or milk and wastelbreed;<sup>o</sup>      *fine white bread*  
 But sore wepte she if oon of hem were deed,  
 Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte;<sup>5</sup>  
 150 And al was conscience and tendre herte.  
 Ful semely hir wimpel<sup>o</sup> pinched<sup>o</sup> was,      *headdress / pleated*  
 Hir nose tretis,<sup>o</sup> hir yēn<sup>o</sup> greye as glas,      *well-formed / eyes*  
 Hir mouth ful smal, and therto<sup>o</sup> softe and reed,<sup>o</sup>      *moreover / red*  
 But sikerly<sup>o</sup> she hadde a fair forheed:      *certainly*  
 155 It was almost a spanne brood,<sup>6</sup> I trowe,<sup>o</sup>      *believe*  
 For hardily,<sup>o</sup> she was nat undergrowe.      *assuredly*  
 Ful fetis<sup>o</sup> was hir cloke, as I was war;<sup>o</sup>      *becoming / aware*  
 Of smal<sup>o</sup> coral aboute hir arm she bar      *dainty*  
 A paire<sup>7</sup> of bedes, gauded al with greene,  
 160 And theron heeng<sup>o</sup> a brooch of gold ful sheenc,<sup>o</sup>      *hung / bright*  
 On which ther was first writen a crowned A,<sup>8</sup>  
 And after, *Amor vincit omnia*.<sup>9</sup>  
 Another Nonne with hire hadde she  
 That was hir chapelaine,<sup>o</sup> and preestes three.<sup>1</sup>      *secretary*  
 165 A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrye,<sup>2</sup>  
 An outridcre<sup>3</sup> that loved venerye,<sup>o</sup>      *hunting*  
 A manly man, to been an abbot able.<sup>o</sup>      *sub junctive*      *worthy*  
 Ful many a daintee<sup>o</sup> hors hadde he in stable,      *fine*  
 And whan he rood,<sup>o</sup> men mighte his bridel heere      *rode*  
 170 Ginglen<sup>o</sup> in a whistling wind as clere      *jingle*  
 And eek as loude as dooth the chapel belle

9. I.e., her chief delight lay in good manners.

1. Of great good cheer.

2. And took pains to imitate the behavior.

3. And to be considered worthy.

4. I.e., some.

5. If someone struck it with a rod sharply.

6. A handsbreadth wide.

7. String (i.e., a rosary); "gauded al with greene": provided with green

beads to mark certain prayers.

8. An A with an ornamental crown on it.

9. A Latin motto meaning "Love conquers all."

1. Although he here awards this charming lady three priests, Chaucer later reduces the number to one.

2. I.e., a superlatively fine one.

3. A monk charged with supervising property distant from the monastery.

	Ther as this lord was kepere of the celle. <sup>4</sup>	
	The rule of Saint Maure or of Saint Benoit, <sup>5</sup>	
	By cause that it was old and somdeel strait—	
175	This ilke Monk leet olde thinges pace, <sup>6</sup>	<i>pass away</i>
	And heeld <sup>o</sup> after the newe world the space. <sup>6</sup>	<i>held</i>
	He yaf nought of that text a pulled hen <sup>7</sup>	
	That saith that hunteres been <sup>o</sup> nought holy men,	<i>are</i>
	Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees, <sup>8</sup>	
180	Is likned til <sup>o</sup> a fissh that is waterlecs—	<i>to</i>
	This is to sayn, a monk out of his cloistrc;	
	But thilke <sup>o</sup> text heeld he nat worth an oystre.	<i>that same</i>
	And I saide his opinion was good:	
	What <sup>o</sup> sholde he studye and make hisselven wood <sup>o</sup>	<i>why / crazy</i>
185	Upon a book in cloistre alway to poure,	
	Or swinke <sup>o</sup> with his handes and labourc,	<i>work</i>
	As Austin bit? <sup>9</sup> How shal the world be served?	
	Lat Austin have his swink to him reserved!	
	Therefore he was a prikasour <sup>o</sup> aright.	<i>hard rider</i>
190	Grehoundes he hadde as swift as fowl in flight.	
	Of priking <sup>o</sup> and of hunting for the hare :	<i>riding</i>
	Was al his lust, <sup>o</sup> for no cost wolde he spare.	<i>pleasure</i>
	I sawgh his sleeves purfild <sup>o</sup> at the hand	<i>fur-lined</i>
	With gris, <sup>o</sup> and that the fineste of a land;	<i>gray fur</i>
195	And for to festne his hood under his chin	
	He hadde of gold wrought a ful curious <sup>1</sup> pin:	
	A love-knotte in the grettere <sup>o</sup> ende ther was.	<i>greater</i>
	His heed was balled, <sup>o</sup> that shoon as any glas,	<i>bald</i>
	And eck his face, as he hadde been anoint:	
200	He was a lord ful fat and in good point; <sup>2</sup>	
	His yën steepe, <sup>o</sup> and rolling in his heed,	<i>protruding</i>
	That stemed as a furnais of a leed, <sup>3</sup>	
	His bootes souple, <sup>o</sup> his hors in greet estat <sup>o</sup> —	<i>supple / condition</i>
	Now certainly he was a fair prelat. <sup>4</sup>	
205	He was nat pale as a forpined <sup>o</sup> gost:	<i>wasted away</i>
	A fat swan loved he best of any rost.	
	His palfrey <sup>o</sup> was as brown as is a berye.	<i>saddle horse</i>
	A Frere <sup>5</sup> ther was, a wantoune and a merye;	
	A limitour, a ful solempne <sup>o</sup> man.	<i>pompous</i>
210	In alle the ordres foure is noon that can <sup>o</sup>	<i>knows</i>
	So muche of daliaunce <sup>o</sup> and fair langage:	<i>flirtation</i>

4. Keeper of an outlying cell (branch) of the monastery.

5. St. Maurus and St. Benedict, authors of monastic rules. "Somdeel strait": somewhat strict.

6. I.e., in his own lifetime (?).

7. He didn't give a plucked hen for that text.

8. Reckless, careless of rule.

9. I.e., as St. Augustine bids. St. Augustine had written that monks should perform manual labor.

1. Of careful workmanship.

2. In good shape, plump.

3. That glowed like a furnace with a pot in it.

4. Prelate (an important churchman).

5. The "Frere" (Friar) is a member of one of the four religious orders whose members live by begging; as a "limitour" (line 209) he has been granted by his order exclusive begging rights within a certain limited area.

- He hadde maad ful many a mariage  
 Of yonge wommen at his owene cost;  
 Unto his ordre he was a noble post.<sup>6</sup>  
 215 Ful wel biloved and familier was he  
 With frankelains over al<sup>7</sup> in his contree,  
 And with worthy wommen of the town—  
 For he hadde power of confessioun,  
 As saide himself, more than a curat,<sup>8</sup> *parish priest*  
 220 For of<sup>9</sup> his ordre he was licenciat.<sup>8</sup> *by*  
 Ful swetely herde he confessioun,  
 And plesant was his absolucioun.  
 He was an esy man to yive penaunce  
 Ther as he wiste to have<sup>9</sup> a good pitaunce;<sup>9</sup> *donation*  
 225 For unto a poore ordre for to yive  
 Is signe that a man is wel yshrive;<sup>1</sup>  
 For if he yaf, he dorste make avaunt<sup>9</sup> *boast*  
 He wiste that a man was repentaunt;  
 For many a man so hard is of his herte  
 230 He may nat weepe though him sore smerte:<sup>2</sup>  
 Therfore, in stede of weeping and prayeres,  
 Men mote<sup>9</sup> yive silver to the poore freres.<sup>3</sup> *may*  
 His tipet<sup>9</sup> was ay farsed<sup>9</sup> ful of knives *scarf / packed*  
 And pinnes, for to yiven faire wives;  
 235 And certainly he hadde a merye note;  
 Wel coude he singe and playen on a rote;<sup>9</sup> *fiddle*  
 Of yeddinges he bar outrely the pris.<sup>4</sup>  
 His nekke whit was as the flowr-de-lis;<sup>9</sup> *lily*  
 Therto he strong was as a champioun.  
 240 He knew the tavernes wel in every town,  
 And every hostiler<sup>9</sup> and tappestere,<sup>9</sup> *innkeeper / barmaid*  
 Bet<sup>9</sup> than a lazar<sup>5</sup> or a beggestere. *better*  
 For unto swich a worthy man as he  
 Accorded nat, as by his facultee,<sup>6</sup>  
 245 To have with sike<sup>9</sup> lazars aquaintaunce: *sick*  
 It is nat honeste,<sup>9</sup> it may nought avaunce,<sup>9</sup> *dignified / profit*  
 For to delen with no swich poraile,<sup>7</sup>  
 But al with riche, and selleres of vitaille;<sup>9</sup> *foodstuffs*  
 And over al ther as profit sholde arise,  
 250 Curteis he was, and lowely of servise.  
 Ther was no man nowher so vertuous:<sup>9</sup> *efficient*  
 He was the beste beggere in his hous.<sup>9</sup> *friary*

6. I.e., pillar.

7. I.e., with franklins everywhere. Franklins were well-to-do country men.

8. I.e., licensed to hear confessions.

9. Where he knew he would have.

1. Shriven, absolved.

2. Though he is sorely grieved.

3. Before granting absolution, the confessor must be sure the sinner is contrite; moreover, the absolution is contingent upon the sinner's performance of an act of satisfaction. In the case of

Chaucer's Friar, a liberal contribution served both as proof of contrition and as satisfaction.

4. He absolutely took the prize for ballads.

5. Leper; "beggestere": female beggar.

6. It was not suitable because of his position.

7. I.e., poor people. The oldest order of friars had been founded by St. Francis to administer to the spiritual needs of precisely those classes the Friar avoids.



And yaf a certain ferme for the graunt:<sup>8</sup>  
 Noon of his bretheren cam ther in his haunt.<sup>9</sup>  
 255 For though a widwe<sup>o</sup> hadde nought a sho,<sup>o</sup> widow / shoe  
 So plesant was his *In principio*<sup>1</sup>  
 Yit wolde he have a ferthing<sup>o</sup> er he wente;  
 His purchas was wel bettre than his rente.<sup>2</sup> small coin  
 And rage he coude as it were right a whelpe;<sup>3</sup>  
 260 In love-dayes<sup>4</sup> ther coude he muchel<sup>o</sup> helpe, much  
 For ther he was nat lik a cloisterer,  
 With a thredbare cope, as is a poore scoler,  
 But he was lik a maister<sup>5</sup> or a pope.  
 Of double worstede was his semicope,<sup>o</sup> short robe  
 265 And rounded as a belle out of the presse.<sup>o</sup> bell-mold  
 Somwhat he lipped<sup>o</sup> for his wantounesse<sup>o</sup> lisped / affectation  
 To make his Englissh sweete upon his tonge;  
 And in his harping, whan he hadde songe,<sup>o</sup> sung  
 His yën twinkled in his heed aright  
 270 As doon the sterres<sup>o</sup> in the frosty night. stars  
 This worthy limitour was cleped Huberd. named

A Marchant was ther with a forked beard,  
 In motelee,<sup>6</sup> and hve on hors he sat,  
 Upon his heed a Flandrissh<sup>o</sup> bevere hat, Flemish  
 275 His bootes clasped faire and fetisly.<sup>o</sup> elegantly  
 His resons<sup>o</sup> he spak ful solempnely, opinions  
 Souning<sup>o</sup> alway th'encrees of his winning. sounding  
 He wolde the see were kept for any thing<sup>7</sup>  
 Bitwixen Middelburgh and Orewelle.  
 280 Wel coude he in eschaunge sheeldes<sup>8</sup> selle. employed  
 This worthy man ful wel his wit bisette:<sup>o</sup> knew  
 Ther wiste<sup>o</sup> no wight that he was in dette, dignified  
 So statly<sup>o</sup> was he of his governaunce,<sup>9</sup>  
 With his bargaines,<sup>1</sup> and with his chevissaunce.  
 285 Forsoothe he was a worthy man withalle; don't know  
 But, sooth to sayn, I noot<sup>o</sup> how men him calle.  
 A Clerk<sup>2</sup> ther was of Oxenforde also  
 That unto logik hadde longe ygo.<sup>3</sup>  
 As lene was his hors as is a rake,

8. And he paid a certain rent for the privilege of begging.

9. Assigned territory.

1. A friar's usual salutation (John i.1): "In the beginning (was the Word)."

2. I.e., the money he got through such activity was more than his regular income.

3. And he could flirt wantonly, as if he were a puppy.

4. Days appointed for the settlement of lawsuits out of court.

5. A man of recognized learning.

6. Motley, a cloth of mixed color.

7. I.e., he wished the sea to be guarded at all costs. The sea route between Middelburgh (in the Netherlands) and

Orwell (in Suffolk) was vital to the Merchant's export and import of wool—the basis of England's chief trade at the time.

8. Shields, *écus* (French coins): he could speculate profitably (if illegally) in foreign exchange.

9. The management of his affairs.

1. Bargainings; "chevissaunce": borrowing.

2. The Clerk is a student at Oxford; in order to become a student, he would have had to signify his intention of becoming a cleric, but he was not bound to proceed to a position of responsibility in the church.

3. Who had long since matriculated in philosophy.

- 290 And he was nought right fat, I undertake,  
But looked holwe,<sup>o</sup> and therto sobrelly. *hollow*  
Ful thredbare was his overeste courtpey,<sup>4</sup>  
For he hadde geten him yit no benefice,  
Ne was so worldly for to have office.<sup>o</sup> *secular employment*
- 295 For him was levere<sup>5</sup> have at his beddes heed  
Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed,  
Of Aristotle and his philosophye,  
Than robes riche, or fithelē,<sup>o</sup> or gay sautrye.<sup>6</sup> *fiddle*  
But al be that he was a philosophre<sup>7</sup>
- 300 Yit hadde he but litel gold in cofre;<sup>o</sup> *coffer*  
But al that he mighte of his freendes hente,<sup>o</sup> *take*  
On bookes and on lerning he it spente,  
And bisily gan for the soules praye  
Of hem that yaf him wherwith to scoleye.<sup>o</sup> *study*
- 305 Of studye took he most cure<sup>o</sup> and most hecde. *care*  
Nought oo<sup>o</sup> word spak he more than was neede, *one*  
And that was said in forme<sup>8</sup> and reverence,  
And short and quik,<sup>o</sup> and ful of heigh sentence:<sup>9</sup> *lively*  
Souning<sup>o</sup> in moral vertu was his speeche, *resounding*
- 310 And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.  
A Sergeant of the Lawe,<sup>1</sup> war and wis,  
That often hadde been at the Parvis<sup>2</sup>  
Ther was also, ful riche of excellence.  
Discreet he was, and of greet reverence—
- 315 He seemed swich, his wordes weren so wise.  
Justice he was ful often in assise<sup>o</sup> *circuit courts*  
By patente<sup>3</sup> and by plein<sup>o</sup> commissioun. *full*  
For his science<sup>o</sup> and for his heigh renown *knowledge*  
Of fees and robes hadde he many oon.
- 320 So greet a purchasour<sup>o</sup> was nowher noon; *speculator in land*  
Al was fee simple<sup>4</sup> to him in effect—  
His purchasing mighte nat been infect.<sup>5</sup>  
Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas;<sup>o</sup> *was not*  
And yit he seemed bisier than he was.
- 325 In termes<sup>6</sup> hadde he caas and doomes alle  
That from the time of King William<sup>7</sup> were falle.  
Therto he coude endite and make a thing,<sup>8</sup>  
Ther coude no wight pinchen<sup>o</sup> at his writing; *cavil*  
And every statut coude<sup>o</sup> he plein<sup>o</sup> by rote.<sup>9</sup> *knew / entire*
- 330 He rood but hoornly<sup>o</sup> in a medlee cote,<sup>1</sup> *unpretentiously*

4. Outer cloak. "Benefice": ecclesiastical living.

5. He would rather.

6. Psaltery (a kind of harp).

7. The word may also mean "alchemist."

8. With decorum.

9. Elevated thought.

1. The Sergeant is not only a practicing lawyer, but one of the high justices of the nation. "War and wis": wary and wise.

2. The "Paradise," a meeting place for

lawyers and their clients.

3. Royal warrant.

4. "Fee simple": owned outright without legal impediments.

5. Invalidated on a legal technicality.

6. I.e., by heart. "Caas and doomes": lawcases and decisions.

7. I.e., the Conqueror (reigned 1066–87).

8. Compose and draw up a deed.

9. By heart.

1. A coat of mixed color. "Ceint": belt; "barres": transverse stripes.

Girt with a ceint of silk, with barres smale.  
Of his array telle I no lenger tale.

A Frankelain<sup>2</sup> was in his compaignye:  
Whit was his beard as is the dayesye,<sup>o</sup> daisy  
335 Of his complexion he was sanguin.<sup>3</sup>  
Wel loved he by the morwe a sop in win.<sup>4</sup>  
To liven in delit<sup>o</sup> was evere his wone,<sup>o</sup> sensual delight / wont  
For he was Epicurus<sup>5</sup> owene sone,  
That heeld opinion that plein<sup>o</sup> delit full  
340 Was verray felicitee parfit.  
An housholdere and that a greet was he:  
Saint Julian<sup>6</sup> he was in his contree.  
His breed, his ale, was always after oon;<sup>7</sup>  
A bettre envined<sup>o</sup> man was nevere noon. wine-stocked  
345 Withouten bake mete was nevere his hous,  
Of fishh and flessch, and that so plentevous<sup>o</sup> plenteous  
It snewed<sup>o</sup> in his hous of mete and drinke, snowed  
Of alle daintees that men coude thinke.  
After<sup>o</sup> the sondry sesons of the yeer according to  
350 So chaunged he his mete<sup>8</sup> and his soper.  
Ful many a fat partrich hadde he in mewe,<sup>o</sup> cage  
And many a breem,<sup>o</sup> and many a luce<sup>o</sup> in stewe.<sup>9</sup> carp / pike  
Wo was his cook but if his sauce were  
Poinant<sup>o</sup> and sharp; and redy all his gere. pungent  
355 His table dormant in his halle alway  
Stood redy covered all the longe day.<sup>1</sup>  
At sessions<sup>2</sup> ther was he lord and sire.  
Ful ofte time he was Knight of the Shire.  
An anlaas<sup>o</sup> and a gipser<sup>o</sup> al of silk dagger / purse  
360 Heeng at his girdel,<sup>3</sup> whit as morne<sup>o</sup> milk. morning  
A shirreve<sup>o</sup> hadde he been, and countour.<sup>4</sup> sheriff  
Was nowher swich a worthy vavasour.<sup>5</sup>  
An Haberdasshere and a Carpenter,  
A Webbe,<sup>o</sup> a Dyere, and a Tapicer<sup>o</sup> — weaver / tapestry-maker  
365 And they were clothed alle in oo liverce<sup>6</sup>  
Of a solempne and gret fraternitee.  
Ful fresshe and newe hir gere apiked<sup>o</sup> was; polished  
Hir knives were chaped<sup>o</sup> nought with bras, mounted

2. The "Frankelain" (Franklin) is a prosperous country man, whose lower-class ancestry is no impediment to the importance he has attained in his county.

3. A reference to the fact that the Franklin's temperament is dominated by blood as well as to his red face.

4. I.e., in the morning he was very fond of a piece of bread soaked in wine.

5. The Greek philosopher whose teaching is popularly believed to make pleasure the chief goal of life.

6. The patron saint of hospitality.

7. Always of the same high quality.

8. Dinner; "soper": supper.

9. Fishpond.

1. Tables were usually dismounted when not in use, but the Franklin kept his mounted and set ("covered"), hence "dormant."

2. I.e., sessions of the justices of the peace. "Knight of the Shire": county representative in Parliament.

3. Hung at his belt.

4. Auditor of county finances.

5. Member of an upper, but not an aristocratic, feudal class.

6. In one livery, i.e., the uniform of their "fraternitee" or guild, a partly religious, partly social organization.

	But al with silver; wrought ful clene and weel	
370	Hir girdles and hir pouches everydeel. <sup>o</sup>	<i>altogether</i>
	Wel seemed eech of hem a fair burgeis <sup>o</sup>	<i>burgher</i>
	To sitten in a yeldehalle <sup>o</sup> on a dais.	<i>guildhall</i>
	Everich, for the wisdom that he can, <sup>7</sup>	
	Was shaply <sup>o</sup> for to been an alderman.	<i>suitable</i>
375	For catel <sup>o</sup> hadde they ynough and rente, <sup>o</sup>	<i>property / income</i>
	And eek hir wives wolde it wel assente—	
	And elles certain were they to blame:	
	It is ful fair to been ycleped "Madame,"	
	And goon to vigilies <sup>8</sup> all bifore,	
380	And have a mantel royalliche ybore. <sup>9</sup>	
	A Cook they hadde with hem for the nones, <sup>1</sup>	
	To boile the chiknes with the marybones, <sup>o</sup>	<i>marrowbones</i>
	And powdre-marchant tart and galingale. <sup>2</sup>	
	Wel coude he knowe <sup>o</sup> a draughte of London ale.	<i>recognize</i>
385	He coude roste, and sethe, <sup>o</sup> and broile, and frye,	<i>boil</i>
	Maken mortreux, <sup>o</sup> and wel bake a pie.	<i>stews</i>
	But greet harm was it, as it thoughte <sup>o</sup> me,	<i>seemed to</i>
	That on his shing <sup>o</sup> a mormal <sup>o</sup> hadde he.	<i>ulcer</i>
	For blankmanger, <sup>3</sup> that made he with the beste.	
390	A Shipman was ther, woning <sup>o</sup> fer by weste—	<i>dwelling</i>
	For ought I woot, <sup>o</sup> he was of Dertemouthe. <sup>4</sup>	<i>know</i>
	He rood upon a rouncey <sup>o</sup> as he couthe, <sup>5</sup>	<i>large nag</i>
	In a gowne of falding <sup>o</sup> to the knee.	<i>heavy wool</i>
	A daggere hanging on a laas <sup>o</sup> hadde he	<i>strap</i>
395	Aboute his nekke, under his arm adown.	
	The hote somer hadde maad his hewe <sup>o</sup> al brown;	<i>color</i>
	And certainly he was a good felawe.	
	Ful many a draughte of win hadde he drawe <sup>6</sup>	
	Fro Burdeuxward, <sup>7</sup> whil that the chapman sleep:	
400	Of nice <sup>o</sup> conscience took he no keep, <sup>o</sup>	<i>fastidious / heed</i>
	If that he faught and hadde the hyer hand,	
	By water he sente hem hoom to every land.	
	But of his craft, to rekene wel his tides,	
	His stremes <sup>o</sup> and his daungers <sup>o</sup> him bisides, <sup>8</sup>	<i>currents / hazards</i>
405	His herberwe <sup>o</sup> and his moonc, his lodcmenage, <sup>9</sup>	<i>anchorage</i>
	There was noon swich from Hulle to Cartage. <sup>1</sup>	
	Hardy he was and wis to undertake;	
	With many a tempest hadde his beard been shake;	
	He knew alle the havnes <sup>o</sup> as they were	<i>harbors</i>

7. Was capable of.

8. Feasts held on the eve of saints' days. "Al bifore": i.e., at the head of the procession.

9. Royally carried.

1. For the occasion.

2. "Powdre-marchant" and "galingale" are flavoring materials.

3. An elaborate stew.

4. Dartmouth, a port in the southwest of England.

5. As best he could.

6. Drawn, i.e., stolen.

7. From Bordeaux; i.e., while carrying wine from Bordeaux (the wine center of France). "Chapman sleep": merchant slept.

8. Around him.

9. Pilotage.

1. From Hull (in northern England) to Cartagena (in Spain).

- 410 Fro Gotlond to the Cape of Finistere,<sup>2</sup>  
 And every crike° in Britaine° and in Spaine. *inlet / Brittany*  
 His barge ycleped was the Maudelaine.° *Magdalene*  
 With us ther was a Doctour of Physik:° *medicine*  
 In al this world ne was ther noon him lik  
 415 To speken of physik and of surgerye.  
 For° he was grounded in astronomye,° *because / astrology*  
 He kepte° his pacient a ful gret deel<sup>3</sup> *tended to*  
 In houres<sup>4</sup> by his magik naturel.  
 Wel coude he fortunen the ascendent  
 420 Of his images<sup>5</sup> for his pacient.  
 He knew the cause of every maladyc,  
 Were it of hoot or cold or moiste or drye,  
 And where engendred and of what humour:°<sup>6</sup>  
 He was a verray parfit praktisour.<sup>7</sup>  
 425 The cause yknowe,° and of his harm the roote, *known*  
 Anoon he yaf the sike man his boote.° *remedy*  
 Ful redy hadde he his apothecaries  
 To senden him drogges° and his letuaries,° *drugs / medicines*  
 For eech of hem made other for to winne:  
 Hir frendshipe was nought newe to biginne.  
 430 Wel knew he the olde Esculapius,<sup>8</sup>  
 And Deiscorides and eek Rufus,  
 Olde Ipocras, Hali, and Galien,  
 Serapion, Razis, and Avicen,  
 435 Averrois, Damascien, and Constantin,  
 Bernard, and Gatesden, and Gilbertin.  
 Of his diete mesurable° was he, *moderate*  
 For it was of no superfluitec,  
 But of gret norissing° and digestible. *nourishment*  
 440 His studye was but litel on the Bible.  
 In sanguin° and in pers° he clad was al, *blood-red / blue*  
 Lined with taffata and with sendal;° *silk*

2. From Gotland (an island in the Baltic) to Finisterre (the westernmost point in Spain).

3. Closely.

4. I.e., the astrologically important hours (when conjunctions of the planets might help his recovery). "Magik naturel": natural—as opposed to black—magic.

5. Assign the propitious time, according to the position of stars, for using talismanic images. Such images, representing either the patient himself or points in the zodiac, were thought to be influential on the course of the disease.

6. Diseases were thought to be caused by a disturbance of one or another of the four bodily "humors," each of which, like the four elements, was a compound of two of the elementary qualities mentioned in line 422: the melancholy humor, seated in the black

bile was cold and dry (like earth); the sanguine, seated in the blood, hot and moist (like air); the choleric, seated in the yellow bile, hot and dry (like fire); the phlegmatic, seated in the phlegm, cold and moist (like water).

7. True perfect practitioner.

8. The Doctor is familiar with the treatises that the Middle Ages attributed to the "great names" of medical history, whom Chaucer names in lines 431-36: the purely legendary Greek demigod Aesculapius; the Greeks Dioscorides, Rufus, Hippocrates, Galen, and Serapion; the Persians Hali and Rhazes; the Arabians Avicenna and Averroës; the early Christians John (?) of Damascus and Constantine Afer; the Scotsman Bernard Gordon; the Englishmen John of Gatesden and Gilbert, the former an early contemporary of Chaucer.

	And yit he was but esy of dispence;°	<i>expenditure</i>
	He keppe that he wan in pestilence. <sup>9</sup>	
445	For° gold in physik is a cordial, <sup>1</sup>	<i>because</i>
	Therefore he loved gold in special.	
	A good Wif was ther of biside Bathe,	
	But she was somdcel deef, and that was scathe.°	<i>a pity</i>
	Of cloth-making she hadde swich an haunt,°	<i>practice</i>
450	She passed° hem of Ypres and of Gaunt. <sup>2</sup>	<i>surpassed</i>
	In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon	
	That to the offering <sup>3</sup> bifore hire sholde goon,	
	And if ther dide, certain so wroth° was she	<i>angry</i>
	That she was out of alle charitec.	
455	Hir coverchiefs ful fine were of ground°—	<i>texture</i>
	I dorste° swere they weyeden° ten pound	<i>dare / weighed</i>
	That on a Sunday weren° upon hir heed.	<i>were</i>
	Hir hosen weren of fin scarlet reed,°	<i>red</i>
	Ful straite yteyd, <sup>4</sup> and shoes ful moiste° and newe.	<i>unworn</i>
460	Bold was hir face and fair and reed of hewe.	
	She was a worthy womman al hir live:	
	Housbondes at chirche dorc <sup>5</sup> she hadde five,	
	Withouten other compaignye in youthe—	
	But therof needeth nought to speke as nouthe.°	<i>now</i>
465	And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;	
	She hadde passed many a straunge° streem;	<i>foreign</i>
	At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,	
	In Galice at Saint Jame, and at Coloigne: <sup>6</sup>	
	She coude° muchel of wandring by the waye.	<i>knew</i>
470	Gat-toothed° was she, soothly for to save.	<i>gap-toothed</i>
	Upon an amblere <sup>7</sup> esily she sat,	
	Ywimpled° wel, and on hir heed an hat	<i>veiled</i>
	As brood as is a bokeler or a targe, <sup>8</sup>	
	A foot-mantel° aboute hir hipis large,	<i>riding skirt</i>
475	And on hir feet a paire of spores° sharpe.	<i>spurs</i>
	In felawshipe wel coude she laughe and carpe:°	<i>talk</i>
	Of remedies of love she knew parchaunce,°	<i>as it happened</i>
	For she coude of that art the olde daunce. <sup>9</sup>	
	A good man was ther of religioun,	
480	And was a poore Person° of a town,	<i>parson</i>
	But riche he was of holy thought and werk.	
	He was also a lerned man, a clerk,	
	That Cristes gospel trewely° wolde preche;	<i>faithfully</i>

9. He saved the money he made during the plague time.

1. A stimulant. Gold was thought to have some medicinal properties.

2. Ypres and Ghent ("Gaunt") were Flemish cloth-making centers.

3. The offering in church, when the congregation brought its gifts forward.

4. Tightly laced.

5. In medieval times, weddings were

performed at the church door.

6. Rome; Boulogne (in France); St. James (of Compostella) in Galicia (Spain); Cologne (in Germany): all sites of shrines much visited by pilgrims.

7. Horse with an easy gait.

8. "Bokeler" and "targe": small shields.

9. I.e., she knew all the tricks of that trade.

His parisshe<sup>o</sup> devoutly wolde he teche. *parishioners*  
 485 Benigne he was, and wonder<sup>o</sup> diligent, *wonderfully*  
 And in adversitee ful pacient,  
 And swich he was preved<sup>o</sup> ofte sithes.<sup>o</sup> *proved / times*  
 Ful loth were him to cursen for his tithes,<sup>1</sup>  
 But rather wolde he yiven, out of doute,<sup>2</sup>  
 490 Unto his poore parisshe<sup>o</sup> aboute  
 Of his offering<sup>3</sup> and eek of his substaunce:<sup>o</sup> *property*  
 He coude in litel thing have suffisaunce.<sup>o</sup> *sufficiency*  
 Wid was his parisshe, and houses fer asonder,  
 But he ne lafte<sup>o</sup> nought for rain ne thonder, *neglected*  
 495 In siknesse nor in meschief,<sup>o</sup> to visite *misfortune*  
 The ferreste<sup>o</sup> in his parisshe, muche and lite,<sup>4</sup> *farthest*  
 Upon his feet, and in his hand a staf.  
 This noble ensample<sup>o</sup> to his sheep he yaf *example*  
 That first he wroughte,<sup>5</sup> and afterward he taughte.  
 500 Out of the Gospel he tho<sup>o</sup> wordes caughte,<sup>o</sup> *those / took*  
 And this figure he added eek therto:  
 That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?  
 For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste,  
 No wonder is a lewed<sup>o</sup> man to ruste. *uneducated*  
 505 And shame it is, if a preest take keep,<sup>o</sup> *heed*  
 A shiten<sup>o</sup> shepherde and a clene sheep. *befouled*  
 Wel oughte a preest ensample for to yive  
 By his clenness how that his sheep sholde live.  
 He sette nought his benefice<sup>6</sup> to hire  
 510 And leet his sheep encombred in the mire  
 And ran to London, unto Sainte Poules,<sup>7</sup>  
 To seeken him a chaunterye<sup>8</sup> for soules,  
 Or with a bretherhede to been withholde,<sup>9</sup>  
 But dwelte at hoom and kepte wel his folde,  
 515 So that the wolf ne made it nought miscarye:  
 He was a shepherde and nought a mercenarye.  
 And though he holy were and vertuous,  
 He was to sinful men nought despitous,<sup>o</sup> *scornful*  
 Ne of his speche daungerous<sup>o</sup> ne digne,<sup>o</sup> *disdainful / haughty*  
 520 But in his teching discreet and benigne,  
 To drawn folk to hevене by fairnesse  
 By good ensample—this was his bisnesse.  
 But it<sup>o</sup> were any persone obstinat, *if there*  
 What so he were, of heigh or lowe estat,

1. He would be most reluctant to invoke excommunication in order to collect his tithes.

2. Without doubt.

3. The offering made by the congregation of his church was at the Parson's disposal.

4. Great and small.

5. I.e., he practiced what he preached.

6. I.e., his parish. A priest might rent his parish to another and take a more

profitable position. "Leet": i.e., he did not leave.

7. St. Paul's Cathedral.

8. Chantry, i.e., a foundation that employed priests for the sole duty of saying masses for the souls of certain persons. St. Paul's had many of them.

9. Or to be employed by a brotherhood; i.e., to take a lucrative and fairly easy position as chaplain with a parish guild.

525	Him wolde he snibben° sharply for the nones: <sup>1</sup>	<i>scold</i>
	A bettre preest I trowe° ther nowher noon is.	<i>believe</i>
	He waited after <sup>2</sup> no pompe and reverence, Ne maked him a spiced conscience. <sup>3</sup>	
	But Cristes lore° and his Apostles twelve	<i>teaching</i>
530	He taughte, but first he folwed it himselve.	
	With him ther was a Plowman, was his brother, That hadde ylad° of dong° ful many a fother. <sup>4</sup>	<i>carried / dung</i>
	A trewe swinkere° and a good was he, Living in pees° and parfit charitee.	<i>worker</i> <i>peace</i>
535	God loved he best with al his hoole° herte	<i>whole</i>
	At alle times, though him gamed or smerte, <sup>5</sup> And thanne his neighebor right as himselve. He wolde threshe, and therto dike° and delve,	<i>dig ditches</i>
	For Cristes sake, for every poore wight, 540 Withouten hire, if it laye in his might. His tithes payed he ful faire and wel, Bothe of his propre swink <sup>6</sup> and his catel.°	<i>property</i>
	In a tabard° he rood upon a mere.°	<i>short coat / mare</i>
	Ther was also a Reeve° and a Millere, 545 A Somnour, and a Pardoner <sup>7</sup> also,	<i>estate manager</i>
	A Manciple,° and myself—ther were namo.	<i>steward</i>
	The Millere was a stout carl° for the nones. Ful big he was of brawn° and eek of bones— That preved <sup>8</sup> wel, for overal ther he cam	<i>fellow</i> <i>muscle</i>
550	At wrastling he wolde have alway the ram. <sup>9</sup>	
	He was short-shuldred, brood,° a thikke knarre.°	<i>broad / bully</i>
	Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre, <sup>1</sup> Or breke it at a renning° with his heed.°	<i>running / head</i>
	His beard as any sowe or fox was reed,°	<i>red</i>
555	And therto brood, as though it were a spade; Upon the cop° right of his nose he hade A werte,° and theron stood a tuft of heres, Rcde as the bristles of a sowes ercs;	<i>ridge</i> <i>wart</i>
	His nosethirles° blake were and wide.	<i>nostrils</i>
560	A swerd and a bokeler° bar° he by his side.	<i>shield / bore</i>
	His mouth as greet was as a greet furnais.°	<i>furnace</i>
	He was a janglere° and a Goliardais, <sup>2</sup>	<i>chatterer</i>
	And that was most of sinne and harlotries.°	<i>obscenities</i>
	Wel coude he stelen corn and tollen thries <sup>3</sup> —	

1. On any occasion.

2. I.e., expected.

3. Nor did he assume an overfastidious conscience.

4. Load.

5. Whether he was pleased or grieved.

6. His own work.

7. "Somnour" (Summoner): server of summonses to the ecclesiastical court; Pardoner: dispenser of papal pardons.

See lines 625 and 671, and notes, below.

8. Proved, i.e., was evident.

9. A ram was frequently offered as the prize in wrestling.

1. He would not heave off (its) hinge.

2. Goliard, teller of ribald stories.

3. Take toll thrice—i.e., deduct from the grain far more than the lawful percentage.



565 And yit he hadde a thombe<sup>4</sup> of gold, pardee.<sup>o</sup> by heaven  
 A whit cote and a blew hood wered<sup>o</sup> he. wore  
 A baggepipe wel coude he blowe and sounce,<sup>o</sup> sound  
 And therwithal<sup>o</sup> he broughte us out of towne. therewith

A gentil Manciple<sup>5</sup> was ther of a temple,  
 570 Of which achatours<sup>o</sup> mighte take exemple buyers of food  
 For to been wise in bying of vitaile,<sup>o</sup> victuals  
 For wheither that he paide or took by taile,<sup>6</sup>  
 Algate he waited so in his achat<sup>7</sup>  
 That he was ay biforn<sup>8</sup> and in good stat.

575 Now is nat that of God a ful fair grace  
 That swich a lewed<sup>o</sup> mannes wit shal pace<sup>o</sup> ignorant / surpass  
 The wisdom of an heap of lerned men?  
 Of maistres<sup>o</sup> hadde he mo than thries ten masters  
 That weren of lawe expert and curious,<sup>o</sup> cunning  
 580 Of whiche ther were a dozeine in that hous  
 Worthy to been stiwardes of rente<sup>o</sup> and lond income  
 Of any lord that is in Engelond,  
 To make him live by his propre good<sup>9</sup>  
 In honour dettelees but if<sup>1</sup> he were wood,<sup>o</sup> insane  
 585 Or live as scarsly<sup>o</sup> as him list<sup>o</sup> desire, sparely / it pleases  
 And able for to helpen al a shire  
 In any caas<sup>o</sup> that mighte falle<sup>o</sup> or happe, event / befall  
 And yit this Manciple sette hir aller cappe!<sup>2</sup>

The Reeve<sup>3</sup> was a splendre<sup>o</sup> colerik man; slender  
 590 His beard was shave as neigh<sup>o</sup> as evere he can; close  
 His heer was by his eres ful round vshorn;  
 His top was dokked<sup>4</sup> lik a preest biforn;  
 Ful longe were his legges and ful lene,  
 Ylik a staf, ther was no calf yseene.<sup>o</sup> visible  
 595 Wel coude he keepe<sup>o</sup> a gerner<sup>o</sup> and a binne— guard / granary  
 Ther was noon auditour coude on him winne.<sup>5</sup>  
 Wel wiste<sup>o</sup> he by the droughte and by the rain knew  
 The yeelding of his seed and of his grain.  
 His lordes sheep, his neet,<sup>o</sup> his daycrve, cattle dairy  
 600 His swin, his hors, his stoor,<sup>o</sup> and his pultrye stock  
 Was hoolly<sup>o</sup> in this Reeves governinge, wholly  
 And by his covenant yaf<sup>6</sup> the rekeninge,  
 Sin<sup>o</sup> that his lord was twenty-yeer of age. since

4. Thumb. The narrator seems to be questioning the validity of the adage that (only) an honest miller has a golden thumb.

5. The Manciple is the steward of a community of lawyers in London (a "temple").

6. By talley, i.e., on credit.

7. Always he was on the watch in his purchasing.

8. I.e., ahead of the game. "Stat": financial condition.

9. His own money.

1. Out of debt unless.

2. This Manciple made fools of them all.

3. The Reeve is the superintendent of a large farming estate; "colerik" (choleric) describes a man whose dominant humor is yellow bile (cholera)—i.e., a hot-tempered man.

4. Cut short: the clergy wore the head partially shaved.

5. I.e., find him in default.

6. And according to his contract he gave.

- There coude no man bringe him in arrerage.<sup>7</sup>  
 605 Ther nas baillif, hierde, nor other hinc,  
 That he ne knew his sleighte and his covine<sup>8</sup>—  
 They were adrad° of him as of the deeth.° *afraid / plague*  
 His woning° was ful faire upon an heeth;° *dwelling / meadow*  
 With grene trees shadwed was his place.  
 610 He coude better than his lord purchace.° *acquire goods*  
 Ful riche he was astored° prively.° *stocked / secretly*  
 His lord wel coude he plesen subtilly,  
 To yive and lene° him of his owene good,° *lend / property*  
 And have a thank, and yit a cote and hood.  
 615 In youthe he hadde lerned a good mister:° *occupation*  
 He was a wel good wrighte, a carpenter.  
 This Reeve sat upon a ful good stot° *stallion*  
 That was a pomely° grey and highte° Scot. *dapple / was named*  
 A long surcote° of pers° upon he hade,<sup>9</sup> *overcoat / blue*  
 620 And by his side he bar° a rusty blade. *bore*  
 Of Northfolk was this Reeve of which I telle,  
 Biside a town men clepen Baldeswelle.° *Bawdswell*  
 Tukked<sup>1</sup> he was as is a frere aboute,  
 And evcre he rood the hindreste of oure route.<sup>2</sup>  
 625 A Somnour<sup>3</sup> was ther with us in that place  
 That hadde a fir-reed° cherubinnes<sup>4</sup> face, *fire-red*  
 For saucefleem° he was, with yën narwe, *pimply*  
 And hoot° he was, and lecherous as a sparwe,° *hot / sparrow*  
 With scaled° browes blake and piled<sup>5</sup> beard: *scabby*  
 630 Of his visage children were aferd.° *afraid*  
 Ther nas quiksilver, litarge, ne brimstoon,  
 Boras, ceruce, ne oile of tartre noon,<sup>6</sup>  
 Ne oinment that wolde clense and bite,  
 That him mighte helpen of his whelkes° white, *blotches*  
 635 Nor of the knobbes° sitting on his cheekes. *lumps*  
 Wel loved he garlek, oinons, and eek leekes,  
 And for to drinke strong win reed as blood.  
 Thanne wolde he speke and crye as he were wood;° *mad*  
 And whan that he wel dronken hadde the win,  
 640 Thanne wolde he speke no word but Latin:  
 A fewe termes hadde he, two or threce,  
 That he hadde lerned out of som decree;  
 No wonder is—he herde it al the day,

7. Convict him of being in arrears financially.

8. There was no bailiff (i.e., foreman), shepherd, nor other farm laborer whose craftiness and plots he didn't know.

9. "Upon he hade": he had on.

1. With clothing tucked up.

2. Hindmost of our group.

3. The "Somnour" (Summoner) is an employee of the ecclesiastical court, whose defined duty is to bring to court persons whom the archdeacon—the jus-

tice of the court—suspects of offenses against canon law. By this time, however, summoners had generally transformed themselves into corrupt detectives who spied out offenders and blackmailed them by threats of summonses.

4. Cherub's, often depicted in art with a red face.

5. Uneven, partly hairless.

6. These are all ointments for diseases affecting the skin, probably diseases of venereal origin.

And eek ye knowe wel how that a jay<sup>o</sup> parrot  
 645 Can clepen "Watte"<sup>7</sup> as wel as can the Pope—  
 But whoso coude in other thing him grope,<sup>o</sup> examine  
 Thanne hadde he spent all his philosophye;<sup>8</sup>  
 Ay *Questio quid juris*<sup>9</sup> wolde he crye.  
 He was a gentil harlot<sup>o</sup> and a kinde; rascal  
 650 A bettre felawe sholde men nouht finde:  
 He wolde suffre,<sup>o</sup> for a quart of win, permit  
 A good felawe to have his concubin  
 A twelfmonth, and excusen him at the fulle;<sup>1</sup>  
 Ful prively a finch eek coude he pulle.<sup>2</sup>  
 655 And if he foond<sup>o</sup> owher<sup>o</sup> a good felawe found / anywhere  
 He wolde techen him to have noon awe  
 In swich caas of the Ercedekenes curs,<sup>3</sup>  
 But if<sup>4</sup> a mannes soule were in his purs,  
 For in his purs he sholde ypunished be.  
 660 "Purs is the Ercedekenes helle," saide he.  
 But wel I woot he lied right in deede:  
 Of cursing<sup>o</sup> oughte eech gilty man drede, excommunication  
 For curs wol slee<sup>o</sup> right as assoiling<sup>o</sup> savith— slay / absolution  
 And also war him of a *significavit*.<sup>5</sup>  
 665 In daunger<sup>6</sup> hadde he at his owene gise<sup>o</sup> disposal  
 The yonge girles of the diocese,  
 And knew hir conseil,<sup>o</sup> and was al hir reed.<sup>7</sup> secrets  
 A gerland hadde he set upon his heed  
 As greet as it were for an ale-stake;<sup>8</sup>  
 670 A bokeler hadde he maad him of a cake.  
 With him ther rood a gentil Pardoner<sup>9</sup>  
 Of Rouncival, his freend and his compeer,<sup>o</sup> comrade  
 That straight was comen fro the Court of Rome.  
 Ful loude he soong,<sup>o</sup> "Com hider, love, to me." sang  
 675 This Somnour bar to him a stif burdoun.<sup>1</sup>  
 Was nevere trompe<sup>o</sup> of half so greet a soun. trumpet  
 This Pardoner hadde heer as yelow as wax,  
 But smoothe it heeng<sup>o</sup> as dooth a strike<sup>o</sup> of hung / hank / flax  
 flex;<sup>o</sup>  
 By ounces<sup>2</sup> henge his lokkes that he hadde,

7. Call out: "Walter"—like modern parrots' "Polly."

8. I.e., learning.

9. "What point of law does this investigation involve?": a phrase frequently used in ecclesiastical courts.

1. "At the fulle": fully. Ecclesiastical courts had jurisdiction over many offenses which today would come under civil law, including sexual offenses.

2. "To pull a finch" is to have carnal dealings with a woman.

3. Archdeacon's sentence of excommunication.

4. "But if": unless.

5. And also one should be careful of a *significavit* (the writ which transferred the guilty offender from the ecclesiasti-

cal to the civil arm for punishment).

6. Under his domination.

7. Was their chief source of advice.

8. A tavern was signalized by a pole ("ale-stake"), rather like a modern flagpole, projecting from its front wall; on this hung a garland, or "bush."

9. A Pardoner dispensed papal pardon for sins to those who contributed to the charitable institution that he was licensed to represent; this Pardoner purported to be collecting for the hospital of Roncesvalles ("Rouncival") in Spain, which had a London branch.

1. I.e., provided him with a strong vocal accompaniment.

2. I.e., thin strands.

- 680 And therwith he his shuldres overspradde,<sup>o</sup> *overspread*  
 But thinne it lay, by colpons,<sup>o</sup> oon by oon; *strands*  
 But hood for jolitee<sup>o</sup> wered<sup>o</sup> he noon, *nonchalance / wore*  
 For it was trussed up in his walet:<sup>o</sup> *pack*  
 Him thoughte he rood al of the newe jet.<sup>o</sup> *fashion*
- 685 Dischevelee<sup>o</sup> save his cappe he rood al bare. *with hair down*  
 Swiche glaring yën hadde he as an hare.  
 A vernicle<sup>3</sup> hadde he sowed upon his cappe,  
 His walet biforn him in his lappe,  
 Bretful<sup>o</sup> of pardon, comen from Rome al hoot.<sup>o</sup> *brimful / hot*
- 690 A vois he hadde as smal<sup>o</sup> as hath a goot;<sup>o</sup> *fine / goat*  
 No beerd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;  
 As smoothe it was as it were late yshave:  
 I trowe<sup>o</sup> he were a gelding or a mare. *believe*  
 But of his craft, fro Berwik into Ware,<sup>4</sup>
- 695 Ne was ther swich another pardoner;  
 For in his male<sup>o</sup> he hadde a pilwe-beer<sup>o</sup> *bag / pillowcase*  
 Which that he saide was Oure Lady veil;  
 He saide he hadde a gobet<sup>o</sup> of the sail *piece*  
 That Sainte Peter hadde whan that he wente
- 700 Upon the see, til Jesu Crist him hente.<sup>o</sup> *seized*  
 He hadde a crois<sup>o</sup> of laton,<sup>o</sup> ful of stones, *cross / brassy metal*  
 And in a glas he hadde pigges bones,  
 But with thise relikes<sup>5</sup> whan that he foond<sup>o</sup> *found*  
 A poore person<sup>o</sup> dwelling upon lond,<sup>6</sup> *parson*
- 705 Upon<sup>o</sup> a day he gat<sup>o</sup> him more moneye *in / got*  
 Than that the person gat in monthes twaye;  
 And thus with feined<sup>o</sup> flaterye and japes<sup>o</sup> *false / tricks*  
 He made the person and the peple his apes.<sup>o</sup> *dupes*  
 But trewely to tellen at the laste,
- 710 He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste;  
 Wel coude he rede a lesson and a storye,<sup>o</sup> *liturgical narrative*  
 But alderbest<sup>o</sup> he soong an offertorye, *best of all*  
 For wel he wiste<sup>o</sup> whan that song was songe, *knew*  
 He moste<sup>o</sup> preche and wel affile<sup>o</sup> his tonge *must / sharpen*
- 715 To winne silver, as he ful wel coude—  
 Therefore he soong the mericrly<sup>o</sup> and loude. *more merrily*  
 Now have I told you soothly in a clause<sup>7</sup>  
 Th'estaat, th'array, the nombre, and eek the cause  
 Why that assembled was this compaignye
- 720 In Southwerk at this gentil hostelrye  
 That highte the Tabard, faste<sup>o</sup> by the Belle;<sup>8</sup> *close*  
 But now is time to you for to telle  
 How that we baren us<sup>9</sup> that ilke<sup>o</sup> night *same*

3. Portrait of Christ's face as it was said to have been impressed on St. Veronica's handkerchief.

4. Probably towns south and north of London.

5. Relics—i.e., the pigs' bones which

the Pardoner represented as saints' bones.

6. "Upon lond": upcountry.

7. I.e., in a short space.

8. Another tavern in Southwark.

9. Bore ourselves.

- Whan we were in that hostelrye alight;  
 725 And after wol I telle of oure viage,<sup>o</sup> trip  
 And al the remenant of oure pilgimage.  
 But first I praye you of youre curtcisy  
 That ye n'arette it nought my vilainye<sup>1</sup>  
 Though that I plainly speke in this matere  
 730 To telle you hir wordes and hir cheere,<sup>o</sup> behavior  
 Ne though I speke hir wordes proprely,<sup>o</sup> accurately  
 For this ye knowen also wel as I:  
 Who so shal telle a tale after a man  
 He moot<sup>o</sup> reherce,<sup>o</sup> as neigh as evere he can, must / repeat  
 735 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,<sup>o</sup> responsibility  
 Al speke he<sup>2</sup> nevere so rudeliche and large,<sup>o</sup> broadly  
 Or elles he moot telle his tale untrewe,  
 Or feine<sup>o</sup> thing, or finde<sup>o</sup> wordes newe; falsify / devise  
 He may nought spare<sup>3</sup> although he were his brother:  
 740 He moot as wel saye oo word as another.  
 Crist spak himself ful brode<sup>o</sup> in Holy Writ,  
 And wel ye woot no vilainye is it;  
 Eek Plato saith, who so can him rede,  
 The wordes mote be cosin to the deede.  
 745 Also I praye you to foryive it me  
 Al<sup>o</sup> have I nat set folk in hir degree although  
 Here in this tale as that they sholde stonde:  
 My wit is short, ye may wel understonde.  
 Greet cheere made oure Host<sup>4</sup> us everichoon,  
 750 And to the soper sette he us anon.<sup>o</sup> at once  
 He served us with vitaille<sup>o</sup> at the beste. food  
 Strong was the win, and wel to drinke us leste.<sup>o</sup> it pleased  
 A semely man oure Hoste was withalle  
 For to been a marchal<sup>5</sup> in an halle;  
 755 A large man he was, with yēn steepe,<sup>o</sup> prominent  
 A fairer burgeis<sup>o</sup> was ther noon in Chepe<sup>6</sup>— burgher  
 Bold of his speeche, and wis, and wel ytaught,  
 And of manhood him lakkede right naught.  
 Eek therto he was right a merye man,  
 760 And after soper playen he bigan,  
 And spak of mirthe amonges othere thinges—  
 Whan that we hadde maad oure rekeninges<sup>7</sup>—  
 And saide thus, “Now, lordinges, trewely,  
 Ye been to me right welcome, hertely.<sup>o</sup> heartily  
 765 For by my trouthe, if that I shal nat lie,  
 I sawgh nat this veer so merye a compaignye  
 At ones in this herberwe<sup>o</sup> as is now. inn

1. That you do not charge it to my lack of decorum.

2. Although he speak.

3. I.e., spare anyone.

4. The Host is the landlord of the Tabard Inn.

5. Marshal, one who was in charge of feasts.

6. Cheapside, bourgeois center of London.

7. Had paid our bills.

- Fain° wolde I doon you mirthe, wiste I<sup>8</sup> how. gladly  
 And of a mirthe I am right now bithought,  
 770 To doon you ese, and it shal coste nought.  
 “Ye goon to Canterbury—God you speede;  
 The blisful martyr quite you youre meede.<sup>9</sup>  
 And wel I woot as ye goon by the waye  
 Ye shapen you<sup>1</sup> to talen° and to playe, converse  
 775 For trewely, confort ne mirthe is noon  
 To ride by the waye domb as stoon;° stone  
 And therefore wol I maken you disport  
 As I saide erst,° and doon you som confort; before  
 And if you liketh alle, by oon assent,  
 780 For to stonden at<sup>2</sup> my juggement,  
 And for to werken as I shal you saye,  
 Tomorwe whan ye riden by the waye—  
 Now by my fader° soule that is deed, father's  
 But° ye be merye I wol yive you myn heed!<sup>0</sup> unless / head  
 785 Holde up youre handes withouten more speeche.”  
 Oure counseil was nat longe for to seeche;° seek  
 Us thoughte it was nat worth to make it wis,<sup>3</sup>  
 And graunted him withouten more avis,° deliberation  
 And bade him saye his voirdit° as him leste.<sup>4</sup> verdict  
 790 “Lordinges,” quod he, “now herkneth for the beste;  
 But taketh it nought, I praye you, in desdain.  
 This is the point, to speken short and plain,  
 That cech of you, to shorte with oure waye  
 In this viage, shal tellen tales twaye°— two  
 795 To Canterburyward, I mene it so,  
 And hoomward he shal tellen othere two,  
 Of aventures that whilom° have bifalle; once upon a time  
 And which of you that bereth him best of alle—  
 That is to sayn, that telleth in this cas  
 800 Tales of best sentence° and most solas°— purport / delight  
 Shal have a soper at oure aller cost,<sup>5</sup>  
 Here in this place, sitting by this post,  
 Whan that we come again fro Canterbury.  
 And for to make you the more mury° merry  
 805 I wol myself goodly° with you ride— kindly  
 Right at myn owene cost—and be youre gide.  
 And who so wol my juggement withsave° contradict  
 Shal paye al that we spende by the waye.  
 And if ye vouche sauf that it be so,  
 810 Telle me anoon, withouten wordes mo,° more  
 And I wol erly shape me<sup>6</sup> therfore.”  
 This thing was graunted and oure othes swore  
 With ful glad herte, and prayden<sup>7</sup> him also

8. If I knew.

9. Pay you your reward.

1. “Shapen you”: intend.

2. Abide by.

3. We didn't think it worthwhile to

make an issue of it.

4. It pleased.

5. At the cost of us all.

6. Prepare myself.

7. I.e., we prayed.

That he wolde vouche sauf for to do so,  
 815 And that he wolde been oure governour,  
 And of oure tales juge and reportour,<sup>o</sup> *accountant*  
 And sette a soper at a certain pris,<sup>o</sup> *price*  
 And we wol ruled been at his devis,<sup>o</sup> *disposal*  
 In heigh and lowe; and thus by oon assent  
 820 We been accorded to his juggedment.  
 And therupon the win was fet<sup>o</sup> anoon; *fetched*  
 We dronken and to reste wente eechoon  
 Withouten any lenger<sup>o</sup> tarynge. *longer*  
 Amorwe<sup>o</sup> whan that day bigan to springe *in the morning*  
 825 Up roos oure Host and was oure aller cok,<sup>8</sup>  
 And gadred us togidres in a flok,  
 And forth we riden, a litel more than pas,<sup>o</sup> *a step*  
 Unto the watering of Saint Thomas;<sup>9</sup>  
 And ther oure Host bigan his hors arreste,<sup>o</sup> *halt*  
 830 And saide, "Lordes, herkneth if you leste:<sup>o</sup> *it please*  
 Ye woot youre forward<sup>o</sup> and it you recorde:<sup>1</sup> *agreement*  
 If evensong and morwesong<sup>o</sup> accorde,<sup>o</sup> *morningsong / agree*  
 Lat see now who shal telle the firste tale.  
 As evere mote I drinken win or ale,  
 100 835 Who so be rebel to my juggedment  
 Shal paye for al that by the way is spent.  
 Now draweth cut<sup>2</sup> er that we ferrer twinne:  
 He which that hath the shorteste shal biginne.  
 "Sire Knight," quod he, "my maister and my lord,  
 840 Now draweth cut, for that is myn accord.<sup>o</sup> *will*  
 Cometh neer," quod he, "my lady Prioressse,  
 And ye, sire Clerk, lat be youre shamefastnesse<sup>o</sup>— *modesty*  
 Ne studieth nought. Lay hand to, every man!"  
 Anoon to drawen every wight bigan,  
 845 And shortly for to tellen as it was,  
 Were it by aventure, or sort, or cas,<sup>3</sup>  
 The soothe<sup>o</sup> is this, the cut fil<sup>o</sup> to the Knight; *truth / fell*  
 Of which ful blithe and glad was every wight,  
 And telle he moste<sup>o</sup> his tale, as was resoun, *must*  
 850 By forward and by composicioun,<sup>4</sup>  
 As ye han herd. What needeth wordes mo?  
 And whan this goode man sawgh that it was so,  
 As he that wis was and obedient  
 To keepe his forward by his free assent,  
 855 He saide, "Sin I shal biginne the game,  
 What, welcome be the cut, in Goddes name!  
 Now lat us ride, and herkneth what I saye."  
 And with that word we riden forth oure waye,  
 And he bigan with right a merye checre<sup>o</sup> *countenance*  
 860 His tale anoon, and saide as ye may hecre.

8. Was rooster for us all.

9. A watering place near Southwark.

1. You recall it.

2. I.e., draw lots; "ferrer twinne": go

farther.

3. Whether it was luck, fate, or chance.

4. By agreement and compact.

The Miller's Tale<sup>1</sup>*The Introduction*

- Whan that the Knight hadde thus his tale ytold,<sup>2</sup>  
 In al the route° nas ther yong ne old *group*  
 That he ne saide it was a noble storye,  
 And worthy for to drawn° to memorye, *recall*  
 5 And namely° the gentils everichoon. *especially*  
 Oure Hoste lough° and swoor, "So mote I goon,<sup>3</sup> *laughed*  
 This gooth aright: unboked is the male.° *pouch*  
 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,° *can*  
 Somwhat to quite° with the Knightes tale." *repay*  
 The Millere, that for dronken<sup>4</sup> was al pale,  
 So that unnethe° upon his hors he sat, *with difficulty*  
 He nolde avalen° neither hood ne hat, *doff*  
 15 Ne abiden no man for his curteisye,  
 But in Pilates vois<sup>5</sup> he gan to crye,  
 And swoor, "By armes<sup>6</sup> and by blood and bones,  
 I can° a noble tale for the nones, *know*  
 With which I wol now quite the Knightes tale."  
 20 Oure Hoste sawgh that he was dronke of ale,  
 And saide, "Abide, Robin, leve° brother, *dear*  
 Som bettre man shal telle us first another.  
 Abide, and lat us werken thriftily."° *with propriety*  
 "By Goddes soule," quod he, "that wol nat I,  
 25 For I wol speke or elles go my way."  
 Oure Host answerde, "Tel on, a devele way!<sup>7</sup>  
 Thou art a fool; thy wit is overcome."  
 "Now herkneth," quod the Millere, "alle and some."<sup>8</sup>

1. The Miller's Tale belongs to the literary genre known as the "fabliau," a short story in verse that generally involves bourgeois or lower-class characters in an outrageous, often obscene plot, which is, however, realistically handled by the narrator. The fabliau is peculiarly French, and aside from the three or four examples in Chaucer there are few representatives of it in English. Yet Chaucer was supreme in this kind of tale as in many others, and the Miller's Tale is generally considered the best-told fabliau in any language.

Two originally separate plots are the basis of the Miller's Tale, both of them probably already old in Chaucer's time. In the first, a student—students are often the heroes of fabliaux and were probably often their authors—creates an opportunity to sleep with a woman by persuading her husband that Noah's

flood is about to be repeated; and in the second, a lover who has been tricked into a humiliatingly misdirected kiss takes a dreadful vengeance on his tormentor. Whether or not Chaucer first united these traditional plots is not clear, but in any case their union, culminating in the scorched student's cry of "Water!" is a brilliant stroke, and brilliantly handled by Chaucer.

2. The Knight's Tale is actually the first one told on the Canterbury pilgrimage, immediately following the General Prologue.

3. So might I walk.

4. I.e., drunkenness.

5. The harsh voice usually associated with the character of Pontius Pilate in the mystery plays.

6. I.e., by God's arms.

7. I.e., in the devil's name.

8. Each and every one.



- But first I make a protestacioun° *public affirmation*  
 30 That I am dronke: I knowe it by my soun.° *tone of voice*  
 And therefore if that I mis° speke or saye, *amiss*  
 Wite it<sup>9</sup> the ale of Southwerk, I you praye;  
 For I wol telle a legende and a lif  
 Bothe of a carpenter and of his wif,  
 35 How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe."<sup>1</sup>  
 The Reeve answerde and saide, "Stint thy clappe!<sup>2</sup>  
 Lat be thy lewed° dronken harlotrye.° *ignorant / obscenity*  
 It is a sinne and eek° a greet folwe *also*  
 To apairen° any man or him defame, *injure*  
 40 And eek to bringen wives in swich fame.° *report*  
 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.° *dear*  
 45 But I saye nat therefore that thou art oon. *cuckold*  
 Ther ben ful goode wives many oon,° *a one*  
 And evere a thousand goode ayains oon badde.  
 That knowestou wel thyself but if thou madde.° *rave*  
 Why artou angry with my tale now?  
 50 I have a wif, pardee, as wel as thou,  
 Yit nolde° I, for the oxen in my plough, *would not*  
 Take upon me more than ynough  
 As decemen of myself that I were oon:  
 I wol bileve wel that I am noon.  
 55 An housbonde shal nought been inquisitif  
 Of Goddes privetee,° nor of his wif. *secrets*  
 So<sup>3</sup> he may finde Goddes foison° there, *plenty*  
 Of the remenant° needeth nought enquire."<sup>o</sup> *rest / inquire*  
 What sholde I more sayn but this Millere  
 60 He nolde his wordes for no man forbere,  
 But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.  
 M'athinketh° that I shal reherce° it here, *I regret / repeat*  
 And therefore every gentil wight I praye;  
 Deemeth nought, for Goddes love, that I saye  
 65 Of yvel entente, but for° I moot reherse *because*  
 Hir tales alle, be they bet° or werse, *better*  
 Or elles falsen° som of my matere. *falsify*  
 And therefore, whoso list it nought yheere  
 Turne over the leef, and chese° another tale, *choose*  
 70 For he shal finde ynowe,° grete and smale, *enough*  
 Of storial<sup>4</sup> thing that toucheth gentillesse,° *gentility*  
 And eek moralitee and holinesse:  
 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,

9. Blame it on.

1. I.e., how a clerk made a fool of a carpenter.

2. Stop your chatter.

3. Provided that.

4. Historical, i.e., true.

And harlotrye° they tolden bothe two. ribaldry  
 Aviseth you,<sup>5</sup> and putte me out of blame:  
 And eek men shal nought maken ernest of game.

*The Tale*

Whilom° ther was dwelling at Oxenforde once upon a time  
 80 A riche gnof° that gestes heeld to boorde,<sup>6</sup> boor  
 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° interest  
 Was turned for to lere° astrologye, learn  
 85 And coude a certain of conclusionys,  
 To deemen by interrogaciouns,<sup>8</sup>  
 If that men axed° him in certain houres asked  
 Whan that men sholde have drouhte or elcs showres,  
 Or if men axed him what shal bifalle  
 90 Of every thing—I may nat rekene hem alle.  
 This clerk was cleped° hende<sup>9</sup> Nicholas. called  
 Of derne love he coude, and of solas.<sup>1</sup>  
 100 And therto he was sly and ful privee,<sup>o</sup> secretive  
 And lik a maide meeke for to sec.  
 95 A chambre hadde he in that hostelrye  
Allone, withouten any compaignye,  
 107 Ful fetisly ydight<sup>2</sup> with herbes swoote,<sup>o</sup> sweet  
 And he himself as swete 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 his art,  
 His augrim stones,<sup>6</sup> laven faire apart  
 On shelves couchede° at his beddes heed; set  
 His presse° ycovered with a falding reed;<sup>7</sup> storage chest  
 105 And al above ther lay a gay sautrye,<sup>o</sup> psaltery  
 On which he made a nichtes melodye  
 So swetely that al the chambre roong,<sup>o</sup> 200 rang  
 And Angelus ad Virginem<sup>8</sup> he soong,  
 And after that he soong the Kinges Note:  
 110 Ful often blessed was his nierye throte.  
 And thus this swete clerk his time spente  
 After his freendes finding and his rente.<sup>9</sup>  
 This carpenter hadde wedded newe° a wif lately

5. Take heed.

6. I.e., took in boarders.

7. Who had completed the first stage of university education (the trivium).

8. I.e., and he knew a number of propositions on which to base astrological analyses (which would reveal the matters in ll. 87–90).

9. Handy, sly, attractive.

1. I.e., he knew about secret love and pleasurable practices.

2. Elegantly furnished.

3. Setwall, a spice.

4. 2nd-century treatise by Ptolemy, still the standard astronomy textbook.

5. Astrolabe, an astronomical instrument.

6. Counters used in arithmetic.

7. Red coarse wool.

8. "The Angel's Address to the Virgin," a hymn; "Kinges Note": probably a popular song of the time.

9. In accordance with his friends' provision and his own income.

Which that he loved more than his lif.  
 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 himself been lik a cokewold.<sup>1</sup>  
 He knew nat Caton,<sup>2</sup> for his wit was rude,  
 120 That bad men sholde wedde his similitude.<sup>3</sup>  
 Men sholde wedden after hir estat,<sup>4</sup>  
 For youthe and elde° is often at debat. *age*  
 But sith that he was fallen in the snare,  
 He moste endure, as other folk, his care.  
 125 Fair was this yonge wif, and therwithal  
 As any wesele° hir body gent and smal.<sup>5</sup> *weasel*  
 A ceint she wered, barred<sup>6</sup> al of silk;  
 A barmcloth° as whit as morne milk *apron*  
 Upon hir lendes,° ful of many a gore;° *loins / strip of cloth*  
 130 Whit was hir smok,° and broiden<sup>7</sup> al bifore *undergarment*  
 And eek bihinde, on hir coler° aboute, *collar*  
 Of° col-blak silk, withinne and eek withoute; *with*  
 The tapes° of hir white voluper° *ribbons / cap*  
 Were of the same suite of<sup>8</sup> hir coler;  
 135 Hir file° brood° of silk and set ful hye; *headband / broad*  
 And sikerly° she hadde a likerous° yē; *certainly / wanton*  
 Ful smale y pulled<sup>9</sup> were hir browes two,  
 And tho were bent,° and blake as any slo.° *arching / sloeberry*  
 She was ful more blisful on to see  
 140 Than is the newe perejonette° tree, *pear*  
 And softer than the wolle° is of a wether;° *wool / ram*  
 And by hir girdel° heeng° a purs of lether, *belt / hung*  
 Tasseled with silk and perled with latoun.<sup>1</sup>  
 In al this world, to seken up and down,  
 145 Ther nis no man so wis that coude thenche° *imagine*  
 So gay a popeiote° or swich° a wenche. *doll / such*  
 Ful brighter was the shining of hir hewe  
 Than in the Towr<sup>2</sup> the noble° y forged newe. *gold coin*  
 But of hir song, it was as loud and yerne° *lively*  
 150 As any swalwe sitting on a berne.° *barn*  
 Therto she coude skippe and make game<sup>3</sup>  
 As any kide or calf folwing his dame.° *mother*  
 Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth,<sup>4</sup>  
 Or hoord of apples laid in hay or heeth.° *heather*

1. I.e., suspected of himself that he was like a cuckold.

2. Dionysius Cato, the supposed author of a book of maxims used in elementary education.

3. Commanded that one should wed his equal.

4. Men should marry according to their condition.

5. Slender and delicate.

6. A belt she wore, with transverse stripes.

7. Embroidered.

8. I.e., the same pattern as.

9. Delicately plucked.

1. I.e., with brassy spangles on it.

2. The Tower of London.

3. Play.

4. "Bragot" and "meeth" are honey drinks.

- 155 Wising<sup>o</sup> she was as is a joly<sup>o</sup> colt, *skittish / high-spirited*  
 Long as a mast, and upright<sup>o</sup> as a bolt.<sup>o</sup> *straight / arrow*  
 A brooch she bar upon hir lowe coler  
 As brood as is the boos<sup>o</sup> of a bokeler;<sup>o</sup> *boss / shield*  
 Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye.
- 160 She was a primerole,<sup>o</sup> a piggesnye,<sup>o</sup> *cowslip / pig's eye*  
 For any lord to leggen<sup>o</sup> in his bedde, *lay*  
 Or yit for any good yeman to wedde.  
 Now sire, and eft<sup>o</sup> sire, so bifel the cas *again*  
 That on a day this hende Nicholas
- 165 Fil<sup>o</sup> with this yonge wif to rage<sup>o</sup> and playe, *happened / flirt*  
 Whil that hir housbonde was at Oseneye<sup>5</sup>  
 (As clerkes been ful subtil and ful quainte),<sup>o</sup> *clever*  
 And prively he caughte hire by the queinte,<sup>o</sup> *pudendum*  
 And saide, "Ywis, but if ich<sup>o</sup> have my wille, *I*  
 170. For derne<sup>o</sup> love of thee, lemman, I spille,"<sup>o</sup> *secret / die*  
 And heeld hire harde by the haunche-bones,  
 And saide, "Lemman,<sup>o</sup> love me al atones,<sup>6</sup> *mistress*  
 Or I wol dien, also<sup>o</sup> God me save."  
 And she sproong<sup>o</sup> as a colt dooth in a trave,<sup>7</sup> *so sprang*  
 175 And with hir heed she wried<sup>o</sup> faste away; *twisted*  
 She saide, "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fay.<sup>o</sup>  
 Why, lat be," quod she, "lat be, Nicholas!  
 Or I wol crye 'Out, harrow,<sup>o</sup> and allas!  
 Do way youre handes, for your curteisye!" *help*
- 180 This Nicholas gan mercy for to crye,  
 And spak so faire, and profred him so faste,<sup>8</sup>  
 That she hir love him graunted atte laste,  
 And swoor hir ooth by Saint Thomas of Kent<sup>9</sup>  
 That she wolde been at his comandement,  
 185 Whan that she may hir leiscr<sup>1</sup> wel espye.  
 "Myn housbonde is so ful of jalousye  
 That but ye waite<sup>o</sup> wel and been privee, *be on guard*  
 I woot right wel I nam but deed," quod she.  
 "Ye moste been ful derne<sup>o</sup> as in this cas." *secret*
- 190 "Nay, therof care thee nought," quod Nicholas.  
 "A clerk hadde litherly biset his while,<sup>2</sup>  
 But if he coude a carpenter bigile."  
 And thus they been accorded and ysworn  
 To waite<sup>o</sup> a time, as I have told biforn. *watch for*
- 195 Whan Nicholas hadde doon this everydeel,  
 And thakked<sup>o</sup> hire upon the lendes<sup>o</sup> weel, *patted / loins*  
 He kiste hire sweete, and taketh his sautrye,  
 And playeth faste, and maketh melodye.  
 Thanne fil<sup>o</sup> it thus, that to the parissch chirche, *befell*

5. A town near Oxford.

6. Right now.

7. Frame for a restive horse.

8. I.e., pushed himself so vigorously.

9. Thomas à Becket.

1. I.e., opportunity.

2. Poorly employed his time.

200	Cristes owene werkes for to wirche, <sup>o</sup>	<i>perform</i>
	This goode wif wente on an haliday: <sup>o</sup>	<i>holy day</i>
	Hir forheed shoon as bright as any day,	
	So was it wasshen when she leet <sup>o</sup> hir werk.	<i>left</i>
	Now was ther of that chirche a parissch clerk,	
205	The which that was ycleped <sup>o</sup> Absolon:	<i>called</i>
	Crul <sup>o</sup> was his heer, and as the gold it shoon,	<i>curly</i>
	And strouted <sup>o</sup> as a fanne <sup>3</sup> large and brode;	<i>spread out</i>
	Ful straight and evene lay his joly shode. <sup>4</sup>	
	His rode <sup>o</sup> was reed, his yën greye as goos. <sup>o</sup>	<i>complexion / goose</i>
210	With Poules window corven <sup>5</sup> on his shoos,	
	In hoses <sup>o</sup> rede he wente fetisly. <sup>o</sup>	<i>stockings / elegantly</i>
	Yclad he was ful smale <sup>o</sup> and proprely,	<i>finely</i>
	Al in a kirtel <sup>o</sup> of a light waget <sup>o</sup> —	<i>tunic / blue</i>
	Ful faire and thikke been the pointes <sup>6</sup> set—	
215	And therupon he hadde a gay surplis, <sup>o</sup>	<i>surplice</i>
	As whit as is the blosme upon the ris. <sup>o</sup>	<i>bough</i>
	A merye child <sup>o</sup> he was, so God me save.	<i>lad</i>
	Wel coude he laten <sup>o</sup> blood, and clippe, and shave,	<i>let</i>
	And maken a chartre of land, or acquitaunce; <sup>7</sup>	
220	In twenty manere <sup>o</sup> coude he trippe and daunce.	<i>ways</i>
	After the scole of Oxenforde tho,	
	And with his legges casten <sup>o</sup> to and fro,	<i>prance</i>
	And playen songes on a smal rubible; <sup>o</sup>	<i>fiddle</i>
	Therto he soong somtime a loud quinible, <sup>8</sup>	
225	And as wel coude he playe on a giterne: <sup>o</sup>	<i>guitar</i>
	In al the town nas brewhous ne taverne	
	That he ne visited with his solas, <sup>o</sup>	<i>entertainment</i>
	Ther any gailard tappestere <sup>9</sup> was.	
	But sooth to sayn, he was somdeel squaimous <sup>o</sup>	<i>squeamish</i>
230	Of farting, and of speeche daungerous, <sup>o</sup>	<i>fastidious</i>
	This Absolon, that joly <sup>o</sup> was and gay,	<i>pretty, amorous</i>
	Gooth with a cencer <sup>o</sup> on the haliday,	<i>incense-burner</i>
	Cencing the wives of the parissch faste,	
	And many a lovely look on hem he caste,	
235	And namely <sup>o</sup> on this carpenteres wif:	<i>especially</i>
	To looke on hire him thoughte a merye lif.	
	She was so propre <sup>o</sup> and sweete and likerous, <sup>1</sup>	<i>neat</i>
	I dar wel sayn, if she hadde been a mous,	
	And he a cat, he wolde hire hente <sup>o</sup> anoon.	<i>pounce on</i>
240	This parissch clerk, this joly Absolon,	
	Hath in his herte swich a love-longinge <sup>o</sup>	<i>lovesickness</i>
	That of no wif ne took he noon offringe—	
	For curteisye he saide he wolde noon.	

3. Wide-mouthed basket for separating grain from chaff.

4. Parting of the hair.

5. Carved with intricate designs, like the tracery in the windows of St. Paul's.

6. Laces for fastening the tunic and

holding up the hose.

7. Legal release.

8. Part requiring a very high voice.

9. Gay barmaid.

1. Wanton, appetizing.

- The moone, whan it was night, ful brighte shoon,<sup>o</sup> *shone*  
 245 And Absolon his giterne<sup>o</sup> hath ytake— *guitar*  
 For paramours<sup>o</sup> he thoughte for to wake— *love*  
 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 him up by a shot-windowe<sup>2</sup>  
 That was upon the carpenteres wal.  
 He singeth in his vois gentil and smal,<sup>o</sup> *dainty*  
 "Now dere lady, if thy wille be,  
 I praye you that ye wol rewe<sup>o</sup> on me," *have pity*  
 255 Ful wel accordant to his giterninge.<sup>3</sup>  
 This carpenter awook and herde him singe,  
 And spak unto his wif, and saide anon,  
 "What, Alison, heerestou nought Absolon  
 That chaunteth thus under oure bowrc<sup>o</sup> wal?" *bedroom's*  
 260 And she answerde hir housbonde therwithal,  
 "Yis, God woot, John, I heere it everydeel."  
 This passeth forth. What wol ye bet than weel?<sup>4</sup>  
 Fro day to day this joly Absolon  
 So woweth<sup>o</sup> hire that him is wo-bigoon: *woos*  
 265 He waketh<sup>o</sup> al the night and al the day; *stays awake*  
 He kembed<sup>o</sup> his lokkes brode<sup>5</sup> and made him gay; *combed*  
 He woweth hire by menes and brocage,<sup>6</sup>  
 And swoor he wolde been hir owene page;<sup>o</sup> *personal servant*  
 He singeth, brokking<sup>o</sup> as a nightingale; *trilling*  
 270 He sente hire piment,<sup>7</sup> meeth, and spiced ale,  
 And wafres<sup>o</sup> piping hoot out of the gleede;<sup>o</sup> *pastries / coals*  
 And for she was of towne,<sup>8</sup> he profred meede<sup>o</sup>— *bribe*  
 For som folk wol be wonnen for richesse,  
 And som for strokes,<sup>o</sup> and som for gentillesse. *blows*  
 275 Somtime to shewe his lightnesse and maistrye,<sup>9</sup>  
 He playeth Herodes<sup>1</sup> upon a scaffold<sup>o</sup> hye. *platform, stage*  
 But what availeth him as in this cas?  
 She loveth so this hend<sup>o</sup> Nicholas  
 That Absolon may blowe the bukkes horn;<sup>2</sup> *handy sly attractive*  
 280 He ne hadde for his labour but a scorn.  
 And thus she maketh Absolon hir ape,<sup>3</sup>  
 And al his earnest turneth til a jape.<sup>o</sup> *joke*  
 Ful sooth is this proverbe, it is no lie;  
 Men saith right thus: "Alway the nye slye  
 285 Maketh the ferre leve to be loth."<sup>4</sup>

2. Took his position by a hinged window.

3. In harmony with his guitar-playing.

4. Better than well.

5. I.e., wide-spreading.

6. By intermediaries and mediation.

7. Spiced wine; "meeth": mead.

8. Since she was a town woman.

9. Facility and virtuosity.

1. Herod, a role traditionally played as a bully in the mystery plays.

2. Blow the buck's horn, i.e., go without reward.

3. I.e., thus she makes a fool of Absolon.

4. Always the sly man at hand makes the distant dear one hated.

For though that Absolon be wood<sup>o</sup> or wroth, *furios*  
 By cause that he fer was from hir sighte,  
 This nye<sup>o</sup> Nicholas stood in his lighte. *nearby*  
 Now beer<sup>o</sup> thee wel, thou hende Nicholas, *bear*  
 290 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,  
 295 That Nicholas shal shapen<sup>o</sup> hem a wile<sup>o</sup> *arrange / trick*  
 This sely<sup>5</sup> jealous housbonde to bigile,  
 And if so be this game wente aright,  
 She sholden sleepen in his arm al night—  
 For this was his desir and hire<sup>o</sup> also. *hers*  
 300 And right anoon, withouten wordes mo,  
 This Nicholas no lenger wolde tarye,  
 But dooth ful softe unto his chambre carye  
 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— *didn't 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 answer for no thing that mighte falle.<sup>o</sup> *happen*  
 This passeth forth al thilke<sup>o</sup> Saterdag *this*  
 That Nicholas stille in his chambre lay,  
 And eet,<sup>o</sup> and sleep,<sup>o</sup> or dide what him leste,<sup>o</sup> *ate / slept*  
 Til Sondag that the sonne gooth to reste.  
 315 This sely carpenter hath greet mervaile  
 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:  
 I sawgh today a corps yborn to chirche  
 That now a<sup>o</sup> Monday last I sawgh him wirche.<sup>o</sup> *on / work*  
 Go up,” quod he unto his knave<sup>o</sup> anoon, *manservant*  
 “Clepe<sup>o</sup> at his dore or knobbe with a stoon.<sup>o</sup> *call / stone*  
 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,<sup>o</sup> *mad*  
 “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,

5. “Poor innocent.”

6. He wanted.

- And at that hole he looked in ful deepe,  
 335 And attc laste he hadde of him a sighte.  
 This Nicholas sat evere caping° uprighte *gaping*  
 As he hadde kiked° on the newe moone. *gazed*  
 Adown he gooth and toldc his maister soone  
 In what array° he saw this ilkc° man. *condition / same*
- 340 This carpenter to blessen him<sup>7</sup> bigan,  
 And saide, "Help us, Sainte Frideswide!  
 A man woot litel what him shal bitide.  
 This man is falle, with his astromye,<sup>8</sup>  
 In som woodnesse° or in som agonye. *madness*  
 345 I thoughte ay° wel how that it sholde be: *always*  
 Men sholde nought knowe of Goddes privetee.  
 Ye, blessed be alway a lewed° man *ignorant*  
 That nought but only his bileve° can.° *creed / knows*  
 So ferde° another clerk with astromye: *fares*
- 350 He walked in the feeldes for to pry  
 Upon the sterres,° what ther sholde bifalle, *stars*  
 Til he was in a marle-pit<sup>9</sup> yfalle—  
 He saw nat that. But yit, by Saint Thomas,  
 Me reweth sore<sup>1</sup> for hende Nicholas.
- 355 He shal be rated of<sup>2</sup> his studying,  
 If that I may, by Jesus, hevene king!  
 Get me a staf that I may underspore,° *pry up*  
 Whil that thou, Robin, hevest° up the dore. *heave*  
 He shal<sup>3</sup> out of his studying, as I gesse."
- 360 And to the chambre dore he gan him dresse.<sup>4</sup>  
 His knave was a strong carl° for the nones,° *fellow / purpose*  
 And by the haspe he haaf° it up atones: *heaved*  
 Into° the floor the dore fil° anoon. *on / fell*  
 This Nicholas sat ay as stille as stoon,  
 365 And evere caped up into the air.
- This carpenter wende° he were in despair, *thought*  
 And hente° him by the shuldres mightily, *seized*  
 And shook him harde, and cride spitously,° *roughly*  
 "What, Nicholay, what, how! What! Looke adown!
- 370 Awaak and thenk on Cristes passioun!<sup>5</sup>  
 I crouche<sup>6</sup> thee from elves and fro wightes."  
 Therwith the nightspel saide he anoonrightes<sup>7</sup>  
 On foure halves° of the hous aboute, *sides*  
 And on the thresshfold° on the dore withoute: *threshold*
- 375 "Jesu Crist and Sainte Benedight,° *Benedict*  
 Blesse this hous from every wiked wight!  
 For nightes nerye the White Pater Noster.<sup>8</sup>

7. Cross himself.

8. Illiterate form of "astronomye."

9. Pit from which a fertilizing clay is dug.

1. I sorely pity.

2. Scolded for.

3. I.e., shall come.

4. Took his stand.

5. I.e., the Crucifixion.

6. Make the sign of the cross on; "wightes": wicked creatures.

7. The night-charm he said right away.

8. I.e., the White-Lord's Prayer defend (us). This personification was considered a powerful beneficent spirit.



Where wentestou, thou Sainte Petres soster?"<sup>o</sup> sister  
 And at the laste this hende Nicholas  
 Gan for to sike<sup>o</sup> sore, and saide, "Allas, sigh  
 380 Shal al the world be lost eftsoones<sup>o</sup> now?" again  
 This carpenter answerde, "What saistou?  
 What, thenk on God as we doon, men that swinke."<sup>9</sup>  
 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 when 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> secret / disclose  
 For it is Cristes conseil that I saye,  
 And if thou telle it man,<sup>1</sup> thou art forlore,<sup>o</sup> lost  
 For this vengeance thou shalt have therefore,  
 That if thou wraye me, thou shalt be wood."<sup>2</sup>  
 400 "Nay, Crist forbede it, for his holy blood,"  
 Quod tho this sely<sup>o</sup> man. "I nam no labbe,<sup>3</sup> innocent  
 And though I saye, I nam nat lief to gabbe.<sup>4</sup>  
 Say what thou wilt, I shal it nevere telle  
 To child ne wif, by him that harwed helle."<sup>5</sup>  
 405 "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>6</sup>  
 Shal falle a rain, and that so wilde and wood,<sup>o</sup> furious  
 410 That half so greet was nevere Noees<sup>o</sup> flood. Noah's  
 This world," he saide, "in lasse<sup>o</sup> than an hour less  
 Shal al be dreint,<sup>o</sup> so hidous is the showr. drowned  
 Thus shal mankinde drenche<sup>o</sup> and lese<sup>o</sup> hir lif."<sup>7</sup> drown / lose  
 This carpenter answerde, "Allas, my wif!  
 415 And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!"  
 For sorve of this he fil almost<sup>7</sup> adown,  
 And saide, "Is there no remedye in this cas?"  
 "Why yis, for<sup>8</sup> Gode," quod hende Nicholas,  
 "If thou wolt werken after lore and reed<sup>9</sup>—  
 420 Thou maist nought werken after thyn owene hecd;<sup>o</sup> head  
 For thus saith Salomon that was ful trewe,  
 "Werk al by conseil and thou shalt nought reve."<sup>o</sup> be sorry

9. Work.

1. To anyone.
2. Go mad.
3. Blabbermouth.
4. And though I say it myself, I don't like to gossip.
5. By Him that despoiled hell—i.e.,

Christ.

6. I.e., shortly before dawn.
7. Almost fell.
8. I.e., by.
9. Act according to learning and advice.

And if thou werken wolt by good conseil, *conseil*  
 I undertake, withouten mast or sail,  
 425 Yit 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> *lost*  
 "Yis," quod this carpenter, "ful yore ago."  
 430 "Hastou nat herd," quod Nicholas, "also  
 The sorwe of Noee with his felaweshipe?  
 Er that he mighte gete his wif to shipe,  
 Him hadde levere,<sup>1</sup> I dar wel undertake,  
 At thilke time than alle his wetheres blake  
 435 That she hadde had a ship hirself allone.<sup>2</sup>  
 And therfore woostou<sup>o</sup> what is best to doone?  
 This axeth<sup>o</sup> haste, and of an hastif<sup>o</sup> thing *do you know*  
 Men may nought preche or maken taryng. *requires / urgent*  
 Anoon go gete us faste into this in<sup>o</sup> *lodging*  
 440 A kneeding trough or elles a kimelin<sup>o</sup> *brewing tub*  
 For eech of us, but looke that they be large,<sup>o</sup> *wide*  
 In whiche we mowen swimme as in a barge,<sup>3</sup>  
 And han therinne vitaille suffisaunt<sup>4</sup>  
 But for a day—fy<sup>o</sup> on the remenaunt! *fit*  
 445 The water shal aslake<sup>o</sup> and goon away *diminish*  
 Aboute prime<sup>5</sup> upon the nexte day.  
 But Robin may nat wite<sup>o</sup> of this, thy knave, *know*  
 Ne eek thy maide Gille I may nat save.  
 Axe nought why, for though thou axe me,  
 450 I wol nought tellen Goddes privetee.<sup>o</sup> *secrets*  
 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.  
 455 But whan thou hast for hire<sup>o</sup> and thee and me *her*  
 Ygeten us thise kneeding-tubbes thre,  
 Thannc shaltou hangen hem in the roof ful hyc,  
 That no man of oure purveyance<sup>o</sup> espye. *foresight*  
 And whan thou thus hast doon as I have said,  
 460 And hast oure vitaille faire in hem ylaid,  
 And cek an ax to smite the corde atwo,  
 Whan that the water comth that we may go,  
 And broke an hole an heigh<sup>6</sup> upon the gable  
 Unto the gardinward,<sup>7</sup> over the stable,  
 465 That we may freely passen forth oure way,  
 Whan that the grete showr is goon away,

1. He had rather. "Wetheres": rams. I.e., he'd have given all the rams he had.

2. The reluctance of Noah's wife to board the ark is a traditional comic theme in the mystery plays.

3. In which we can float as in a vessel.

4. Sufficient food.

5. 9 A.M.

6. On high.

7. Toward the garden.

Thanne shaltou swimme as merye, I undertake,  
 As dooth the white doke° after hir drake. duck  
 Thanne wol I clepe,° 'How, Alison? How, John?' call  
 470 Be merye, for the flood wol passe anon.  
 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, ne crye, but been in his prayere,  
 480 For it is Goddes owene hceste dcre.<sup>8</sup>  
 Thy wif and thou mote hange fer atwinne,<sup>9</sup>  
 For that bitwixe you shal be no sinne—  
 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° 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 carpenter gooth forth his way:  
 Ful ofte he saide alas and wailaway,  
 495 And to his wif he tolde his privetee,  
 And she was war,<sup>o</sup> and knew it bet° than he, aware / better  
 What al this quainte cast° was for to saye.<sup>o</sup> trick / mean  
 But nathelees she ferde° 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.  
 I am thy trewe verray wedded wif:  
 Go, dere spouse, and help to save oure lif."  
 Lo, which a greet thing is affecciou!<sup>o</sup> emotion  
 Men may dien of imaginacioun,  
 505 So deepe° may impression be take. deeply  
 This sely carpenter biginneth quake;  
 Him thinketh verrailiche° that he may see truly  
 Noees flood come walwing° as the see rolling  
 To drenchen° Alison, his hony dere. drown  
 510 He weepeth, waileth, maketh sory checre;  
 He siketh° 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 kimclin,  
 And prively he sente hem to his in,<sup>o</sup> dwelling

8. Precious commandment.

9. Far apart.

- 515 And heeng° hem in the roof in privetee; hung  
 His owene hand he made laddres three,  
 To climben by the ronges° and the stalkes° rungs / uprights  
 Unto the tubbes hanging in the balkes,° rafters  
 And hem vitailed,° bothe trough and tubbe, victualled  
 520 With brecd and cheese and good ale in a jubbe,° jug  
 Suffising right ynough as for a day.  
 But er that he hadde maad al this array,  
 He sente his knave, and eck his wenche also,  
 Upon his neede<sup>1</sup> to London for to go.  
 525 And on the Monday whan it drow to<sup>2</sup> nighte,  
 He shette° his dore withouten candel-lighte, shut  
 And dressed° alle thing as it sholde be, arranged  
 And shortly up they clomben° alle three. climbed  
 They seten° stille wcl, a furlong way.<sup>3</sup> sat  
 530 "Now, Pater Noster, clum,"<sup>4</sup> saide Nicholay, Our Father (?)  
 And "Clum" quod John, and "Clum" saide Alisoun.  
 This carpenter saide his devocioun,  
 And stille he sit° and biddeth his prayere, sits  
 Awaiting on the rain, if he it heere.° might hear  
 535 The dede sleep, for wery bisnesse,  
 Fil° on this carpenter right as I gesse fell  
 Aboute corfew time,<sup>5</sup> or litel more.  
 For travailing of his gost<sup>6</sup> he groneth sore,  
 And eft° he routeth,° for his heed mislay.<sup>7</sup> then / 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 lies  
 In bisnesse of mirthe and of solas,° pleasure  
 Til that the belle of Laudes<sup>8</sup> gan to ringe,  
 And freres in the chauncl° gonne singe. chancel  
 This pariss clerk, this amorous Absolon,  
 550 That is for love alway so wo-bigoon,  
 Upon the Monday was at Oseneye,  
 With compaignye him to disporte and playe,  
 And axed upon caas<sup>9</sup> a cloisterer  
 Ful prively after John the carpenter;  
 555 And he drow him apart out of the chirche,  
 And saide, "I noot:<sup>1</sup> I sawgh him here nought wirche  
 Sith Saterday. I trowe that he be went  
 For timber ther oure abbot hath him sent.

1. On an errand for him.

2. Drew toward.

3. The time it takes to go a furlong (i.e., a few minutes).

4. Hush (?).

5. Probably about 8 P.M.

6. Affliction of his spirit.

7. Lay in the wrong position.

8. The first church service of the day.

9. By chance; "cloisterer": here, a member of the religious order of Osney Abbey.

1. Don't know; "wirche": work.

For he is wont for timber for to go,  
 560 And dwellen atte grange<sup>2</sup> a day or two.  
 Or elles he is at his hous, certain.  
 Where that he be I can nought soothly sayn.”  
 This Absolon ful jolif was and light,<sup>3</sup>  
 And thoughte, “Now is time to wake al night,  
 565 For sikerly,<sup>o</sup> I sawgh him nought stiringe *certainly*  
 Aboute his dore sin day bigan to springe.  
 So mote<sup>o</sup> I thrive, I shal at cokkes crowe *may*  
 Ful prively knokken at his windowe  
 That stant<sup>o</sup> ful lowe upon his bowres<sup>4</sup> wal. *stands*  
 570 To Alison now wol I tellen al  
 My love-longing,<sup>o</sup> for yet I shal nat misse *lovesickness*  
 That at the leeste way<sup>5</sup> I shal hire kisse.  
 Som manere confort shal I have, parfay.<sup>o</sup> *in faith*  
 My mouth hath icched al this longe day:  
 575 That is a signe of kissing at the leeste.  
 Al night me mette<sup>6</sup> eck I was at a feeste.  
 Therfore 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<sup>o</sup> this joly lovere Absolon, *rises*  
 And him arrayeth gay at point devis.<sup>7</sup>  
 But first he cheweth grain<sup>8</sup> and licoris,  
 To smellen sweete, er he hadde kembd<sup>o</sup> his heer. *combed*  
 Under his tonge a trewe-love<sup>9</sup> he beer,<sup>o</sup> *bore*  
 585 For therby wende<sup>o</sup> he to be gracious.<sup>o</sup> *supposed / pleasing*  
 He rometh<sup>o</sup> to the carpenteres hous, *strolls*  
 And stille he stant<sup>o</sup> under the shot-windowe— *stands*  
 Unto his brest it raughte,<sup>o</sup> it was so lowe— *reached*  
 And ofte he cougheth with a semisoun.<sup>o</sup> *small sound*  
 590 “What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
 My faire brid,<sup>1</sup> my sweete cinamome?  
 Awaketh, lemman<sup>o</sup> myn, and speketh to me. *mistress*  
 Wel litel thinken ye upon my wo  
 That for your love I swete<sup>o</sup> ther I go. *sweat*  
 595 No wonder is though that I swelte<sup>o</sup> and swete: *melt*  
 I moorne as doth a lamb after the tete.<sup>o</sup> *tit*  
 Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longinge,  
 That lik a turtle<sup>o</sup> trewe is my moorninge: *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<sup>o</sup> than thee, by Jesu, Absolon. *better*

2. The outlying farm belonging to the abbey.

3. Was very amorous and gay.

4. Bower's, bedroom's.

5. I.e., at least.

6. I dreamed.

7. To perfection.

8. Grain of paradise (a spice).

9. Sprig of a clover-like plant.

1. Bird or bride.

- Go forth thy way or I wol caste a stoon,  
 605 And lat me sleepe, a twenty devele way."<sup>2</sup>  
 "Allas," quod Absolon, "and wailaway,  
 That trewe love was evere so yvele biset.<sup>3</sup>  
 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.  
 "Yc, certes, lemman," quod this Absolon.  
 "Thanne maak thee redy," quod she. "I come anoon."  
 And unto Nicholas she saide stille,<sup>o</sup> *quietly*  
 "Now hust,<sup>o</sup> and thou shalt laughen al thy fille." *hush*
- 615 This Absolon down sette him on his knees,  
 And said, "I am a lord at alle degrees,<sup>4</sup>  
 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, "come of and speed thee faste,  
 Lest thatoure neighebores thee espve."  
 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,<sup>5</sup>  
 But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers,  
 Ful savourly,<sup>o</sup> or he were war of this. *with relish*  
 Abak he sterte,<sup>o</sup> and thoughte it was amis, *started*  
 For wel he wiste a womman hath no beard.
- 630 He felte a thing al rough and longe yherd,<sup>o</sup> *haired*  
 And saide, "Fy, allas, what have I do?"  
 "Teehee," quod she, and clapte the windowe to.  
 And Absolon gooth forth a sory pas.<sup>6</sup>  
 "A beard, a beerd!" 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*
- Who rubbeth now, who froteth<sup>o</sup> now his lippes *wipes*  
 640 With dust, with sond,<sup>7</sup> with straw, with cloth, with chippes,  
 But Absolon, that saith ful ofte allas?  
 "My soule bitake<sup>o</sup> I unto Satanas,<sup>o</sup> *commit / Satan*  
 But me were leveres<sup>8</sup> than all this town," quod he,  
 "Of this despit<sup>o</sup> awroken<sup>o</sup> for to be. *insult / avenged*
- 645 Allas," quod he, "allas I ne hadde ybleint!"<sup>o</sup> *turned aside*  
 His hote love was cold and al yqueint,<sup>o</sup> *quenched*  
 For fro that time that he hadde kist hir ers  
 Of paramours he sette nought a kers,<sup>9</sup>

2. In the name of twenty devils.

3. Ill-used.

4. In every way.

5. It befell him neither better nor worse.

6. I.e., walking sadly.

7. Sand.

8. I had rather.

9. He didn't care a piece of cress for woman's love.

For he was heled<sup>o</sup> of his maladye. cured  
 650 Ful ofte paramours he gan defve,<sup>o</sup> renounce  
 And weep<sup>o</sup> as dooth a child that is ybete. wept  
 A softe paas<sup>1</sup> he wente over the streete  
 Until<sup>o</sup> a smith men clepen daun Gervais,<sup>2</sup> to  
 That in his forge smithed plough harneis:<sup>o</sup> equipment  
 655 He sharpeth shaar and cultour<sup>3</sup> bisily. quietly  
 This Absolon knokketh al esily,<sup>o</sup> at once  
 And saide, "Undo, Gervais, and that anon."<sup>o</sup>  
 "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> early / bless me  
 What aileth you? Som gay girl, God it woot,  
 Hath brought you thus upon the viritoot.<sup>4</sup>  
 By Sainte Note, ye woot wel what I mene."  
 This Absolon ne roughte nat a bene<sup>5</sup>  
 665 Of al his play. No word again he yaf:  
 He hadde more tow on his distaf<sup>6</sup>  
 Than Gervais knew, and saide, "Freend so dere,  
 This hote cultour in the chimenee<sup>o</sup> here, fireplace  
 As lene<sup>7</sup> it me: I have therwith to doone.  
 670 I wol bringe it thee again ful soone."  
 Gervais answerde, "Certes, werc it gold,  
 Or in a poke nobles alle untold,<sup>8</sup>  
 Thou sholdest have, as I am trewe smith.  
 Ey, Cristes fo,<sup>9</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> handle  
 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> before  
 This Alison answerde, "Who is ther  
 That knokketh so? I warante<sup>1</sup> it a thief."  
 "Why, nay," quod he, "God woot, my sweete lief,<sup>o</sup> dear  
 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> engraved  
 This wol I yiven thee if thou me kisse."  
 690 This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,  
 And thoughte he wolde amenden<sup>2</sup> al the jape:<sup>o</sup> joke  
 He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.

1. I.e., quiet walk.  
 2. Master Gervais.  
 3. He sharpens plowshare and coulter  
 (the turf-cutter on a plow).  
 4. I.e., on the prowl.  
 5. Didn't care a bean.

6. I.e., more on his mind.  
 7. I.e., please lend.  
 8. Or gold coins all uncounted in a bag.  
 9. Foe, i.e., Satan.  
 1. I.e., wager.  
 2. Improve on.

- And up the window dide he hastily,  
 And out his ers he putteth prively,  
 695 Over the buttoke to the haunche-boon.  
 And therwith spak this clerk, this Absolon,  
 "Speek, sweete brid, I noot nought wher thou art."  
 This Nicholas anoon leet flec<sup>3</sup> a fart  
 As greet as it hadde been a thonder-dent° *thunderbolt*  
 700 That with the strook he was almost yblent°, *blinded*  
 And he was redy with his iren hoot°, *hot*  
 And Nicholas amidde the ers he smoot°: *smote*  
 Of gooth the skin an hande-brede° aboute; *handbreadth*  
 The hote cultour brende so his toute° *buttocks*  
 705 That for the smert he wende for to<sup>4</sup> die;  
 As he were wood° for wo he gan to crye, *crazy*  
 "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 Nowcles<sup>5</sup> flood!"  
 He sette him up withoute wordes mo,  
 And with his ax he smoot the corde atwo,  
 And down gooth al: he foond neither to selle  
 Ne breed ne ale til he cam to the celle,<sup>6</sup>  
 715 Upon the floor, and ther aswoune° he lay. *in a faint*  
 Up sterte hire<sup>7</sup> Alison and Nicholay,  
 And criden "Out" and "Harrow" in the streete.  
 The neighebores, bothe smale and grete,  
 In ronnen for to gauren° on this man *gape*  
 720 That aswoune lay bothe pale and wan,  
 For with the fal he brosten° hadde his arm; *broken*  
 But stonde he moste° unto his owene harm, *must*  
 For whan he spak he was anoon bore down<sup>8</sup>  
 With° heide Nicholas and Alisoun: *by*  
 725 They tolden every man that he was wood—  
 He was agast so of Noweles flood,  
 Thurgh fantasye, that of his vanitee° *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>9</sup>  
 The folk gan laughen at his fantasye.  
 Into the roof they kiken° and they cape°, *peer / gape*  
 And turned al his harm unto a jape°, *joke*  
 735 For what so that this carpenter answerde,  
 It was for nought: no man his reson° herde; *argument*  
 With othes grete he was so sworn adown,  
 That he was holden° wood in al the town. *considered*

3. Let fly.

4. Thought he would.

5. The carpenter is confusing Noah and Noel (Christmas).

6. He found time to sell neither bread

nor ale until he arrived at the foundation.

7. Started;

8. Refuted.

9. For company's sake.



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

## The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

### The Prologue<sup>1</sup>

Experiencce, though noon auctoritee  
 Were in this world, is right ynough for me  
 To speke of wo that is in mariage:  
 For lordinges,<sup>o</sup> sith I twelf yeer was of age— gentlemen  
 5 Thanked be God that is eterne on live—  
 Housbondes at chirche dore<sup>2</sup> I have had five  
 (If I so ofte mighte han wedded be),  
 And alle were worthy men in hir degree.  
 But me was told, certain, nat longe agoon is,  
 10 That sith that Crist ne wente nevere but ones

1. The Wife of Bath is the remarkable culmination of many centuries of an antifeminism that was particularly nurtured by the medieval church. In their eagerness to exalt the spiritual ideal of chastity, certain theologians developed an idea of womankind that was nothing less than monstrous. According to these, insatiable lecherousness and indomitable shrewishness (plus a host of attendant vices) were characteristic of women. This notion was given most eloquent expression by St. Jerome in his attack (written about A.D. 400) on the monk Jovinian, who had uttered some good words for matrimony, and it is Jerome that the Wife of Bath comes forward not, curiously enough, to refute, but to confirm. The first part of her Prologue is a mass of quotations from that part of Jerome's tract where he is appealing to St. Paul's Epistle (I Corinthians vii) for antimatrimonial authority. On the narrow issue of her right to remarry, to be sure, the Wife finds fault—rather mildly—with Jerome, but on the more central issue of why she wishes to marry and remarry she expresses no disagreement with him. Yet in the failure to defend herself and refute the saint, she somehow manages to make the latter's point of view look a good deal sillier than she looks herself; and instead of embodying the satire on womanhood that one would ex-

pect because of her origins in antifeminist literature, she becomes instead a satirist of the grotesquely woman-hating men who had first defined her personality.

More important, because of the extraordinary vitality that Chaucer has imparted to her, the Wife of Bath by the end of her Prologue comes to bear a less significant relation to satire than she does to reality itself. Making the best of the world in which they have arbitrarily been placed is the occupation of both the Wife of Bath and the reader, and it is in doing this that the Wife ceases to be a monstrosity of fiction and becomes alive—wonderfully alive, both to the potentialities of which she and her world are capable and to the limitations that even in her world time and age place upon her. It is especially in the attitude with which she regards these limitations that her fiction becomes most true to life, since they are also the limitations imposed by the real world. Despite the loss of youth and beauty, her best weapons, she faces her future not only with a woman's ability to endure and enjoy what she cannot reshape, but also with a zest for life on its own terms that is almost more than human.

2. The actual wedding ceremony was celebrated at the church door, not in the chancel.

- To wedding in the Cane<sup>3</sup> of Galilee,  
 That by the same ensample<sup>o</sup> taughte he me *example*  
 That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.  
 Herke eek,<sup>o</sup> lo, which<sup>o</sup> a sharp word for the nones,<sup>4</sup> *also / what*
- 15 Beside a welle, Jesus, God and man,  
 Spak in repreve<sup>o</sup> of the Samaritan: *reproof*  
 "Thou hast yhad five housbondes," quod he,  
 "And that ilke<sup>o</sup> man that now hath thee *same*  
 Is nat thyn housbonde." Thus saide he certain.
- 20 What that he mente therby I can nat sayn,  
 But that I axe<sup>o</sup> why the fifthe man *ask*  
 Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan?<sup>5</sup>  
 How manye mighte she han in mariage?  
 Yit herde I nevere tellen in myn age
- 25 Upon this nombre diffinicioun.<sup>o</sup> *definition*  
 Men may divine<sup>o</sup> and glosen<sup>o</sup> up and down, *guess / interpret*  
 But wel I woot,<sup>o</sup> expres,<sup>o</sup> withouten lie, *know / expressly*  
 God bad us for to wexe<sup>6</sup> and multiplie:  
 That gentil text can I wel understonde.
- 30 Eek wel I woot<sup>o</sup> he saide that myn housbonde *know*  
 Sholde lete<sup>o</sup> fader and moder and take to me,<sup>7</sup> *leave*  
 But of no nombre mencion made he—  
 Of bigamy<sup>e</sup> or of octogamy<sup>e</sup>:<sup>8</sup>  
 Why sholde men thanne speke of it vilainye?
- 35 Lo, here the wise king daun<sup>o</sup> Salomon: *master*  
 I trowe<sup>o</sup> he hadde wives many oon,<sup>9</sup> *believe*  
 As wolde God it leveful<sup>o</sup> were to me *permissible*  
 To be refreshed half so ofte as he.  
 Which yifte<sup>1</sup> of God hadde he for alle his wives!
- 40 No man hath swich that in this world alive is.  
 God woot this noble king, as to my wit,<sup>o</sup> *knowledge*  
 The firste night hadde many a merye fit<sup>o</sup> *bout*  
 With eech of hem, so wel was him on live.<sup>2</sup>  
 Blessed be God that I have wedded five,
- 45 Of whiche I have piked out the beste,<sup>3</sup>  
 Bothe of hir nether<sup>o</sup> purs and of hir cheste.<sup>o</sup> *lower / moneybox*  
 Diverse scoles maken parfit<sup>o</sup> clerkes, *perfect*  
 And diverse practikes<sup>4</sup> in sondry werkes  
 Maken the werkman parfit sikerly:<sup>o</sup> *certainly*
- 50 Of five housbondes scoleyng<sup>o</sup> am I. *schooling*  
 Welcome the sixte whan that evere he shall!<sup>5</sup>

3. Cana (see John ii.1).

4. To the purpose.

5. Christ was actually referring to a sixth man who was not married to the Samaritan woman (cf. John iv.6 ff.).

6. I.e., increase. See Genesis i.28.

7. See Matthew xix.5.

8. I.e., of two or even eight marriages.

The Wife is referring to successive,

rather than simultaneous marriages.

9. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings xi.3).

1. What a gift.

2. I.e., so pleasant a life he had.

3. Whom I have cleaned out of everything worthwhile.

4. Practical experiences.

5. I.e., shall come along.

- For sith I wol nat kepe me chast in al,  
 Whan my housbonde is fro the world agoon,  
 Som Cristen man shal wedde me anon.<sup>o</sup> *right away*
- 55 For thanne th'Apostle<sup>6</sup> saith that I am free  
 To wedde, a Goddes half,<sup>7</sup> where it liketh me.  
 He said that to be wedded is no sinne:  
 Bet<sup>o</sup> is to be wedded than to brinne.<sup>o</sup> *better / burn*
- 60 What rekketh me<sup>8</sup> though folk saye vilainye  
 Of shrewed<sup>o</sup> Lamech<sup>9</sup> and his bigamye? *cursed*  
 I woot wel Abraham was an holy man,  
 And Jacob eek, as fer as evere I can,<sup>o</sup> *know*  
 And eech of hem hadde wives mo than two,  
 And many another holy man also.
- 65 Where can ye saye in any manere age  
 That hye God defended<sup>o</sup> mariage *prohibited*  
 By expres word? I praye you, telleth me.  
 Or where comanded he virginitee?  
 I woot as wel as ye, it is no drede,<sup>o</sup> *doubt*
- 70 Th'Apostle, whan he speketh of maidenhede,<sup>o</sup> *maidenhood*  
 He saide that precept therof hadde he noon:  
 Men may conseile a womman to be oon,<sup>o</sup> *single*  
 But conseiling nis no comandement.  
 He putte it in oure owene juggement.
- 75 For hadde God comanded maidenhede,  
 Thanne hadde he dampned<sup>o</sup> wedding with the *condemned*  
 deede;<sup>1</sup>  
 And certes, if there were no seed ysowe,  
 Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe?  
 Paul dorste nat comanden at the leeste
- 80 A thing of which his maister yaf<sup>o</sup> no heeste.<sup>o</sup> *gave / command*  
 The dart<sup>2</sup> is set up for virginitee:  
 Cacche whoso may, who renneth<sup>o</sup> best lat see. *runs*  
 But this word is nought take of<sup>3</sup> every wight,  
 But ther as<sup>4</sup> God list<sup>o</sup> yive it of his might. *it pleases*
- 85 I woot wel that th'Apostle was a maide,<sup>o</sup> *virgin*  
 But nathelees, though that he wroot and saide  
 He wolde that every wight were swich<sup>o</sup> as he, *such*  
 Al nis but conseil to virginitee;  
 And for to been a wif he yaf me leve
- 90 Of indulgence; so nis it no repreve<sup>o</sup> *disgrace*  
 To wedde me<sup>5</sup> if that my make<sup>o</sup> die, *mate*  
 Withouten excepcion of bigamy<sup>6</sup>—

6. St. Paul.

7. On God's behalf; "it liketh me": I please.

8. What do I care.

9. The first man whom the Bible mentions as having two wives (Genesis iv.19-24).

1. I.e., at the same time.

2. I.e., prize in a race.

3. Understood for, i.e., applicable to.

4. Where.

5. For me to marry.

6. I.e., without there being any legal objection on the score of remarriage.

- Al<sup>o</sup> were it good no womman for to touche  
 (He mente as in his bed or in his couche,  
 95 For peril is bothe fir<sup>o</sup> and tow<sup>o</sup> t'assemble—  
 Ye knowe what this ensample may resemble).<sup>7</sup> *True. The Greek is usually misinterpreted,*  
 This al and som,<sup>8</sup> he heeld virginitee  
 More parfit than wedding in freletee.<sup>o</sup> *frailty*  
 (Freletee clepe I but if<sup>9</sup> that he and she  
 100 Wolde leden al hir lif in chastitee.)  
 I graunte it wel, I have noon envye  
 Though maidenhede preferre<sup>o</sup> bigamy<sup>e</sup>:<sup>o</sup> *excel / remarriage*  
 It liketh hem to be clene in body and gost.<sup>o</sup> *spirit*  
 Of myn estaat ne wol I make no boost;  
 105 For wel ye knowe, a lord in his houshold  
 Ne hath nat every vessel al of gold:  
 Some been of tree,<sup>o</sup> and doon hir lord servise. *wood*  
 God clepeth folk to him in sondry wise,  
 And everich hath of God a propre<sup>1</sup> yifte,  
 110 Som this, som that, as him liketh shifte.<sup>o</sup> *ordain*  
 Virginitee is greet perfeccioun,  
 And continence eek with devocioun,  
 But Crist, that of perfeccion is welle,<sup>o</sup> *source*  
 Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle  
 115 Al that he hadde and yive it to the poore,  
 And in swich wise folwe him and his fore:<sup>2</sup>  
 He spak to hem that wolde live parfitly<sup>o</sup>— *perfectly*  
 And lordinges, by youre leve, that am nat I.  
 I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age  
 120 In th'actes and in fruit of mariage.  
 Telle me also, to what conclusioun<sup>o</sup> *end*  
 Were membres maad of generacioun  
 And of so parfit wis a wrighte ywrought?<sup>3</sup>  
 Trusteth right wel, they were nat maad for nought.  
 125 Glose<sup>o</sup> whoso wol, and saye bothe up and down *interpret*  
 That they were made for purgacioun  
 Of urine, and oure bothe thinges smale  
 Was eek to knowe a femele from a male,  
 And for noon other cause—saye ye no?  
 130 Th'experience woot it is nought so.  
 So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,  
 I saye this, that they been maad for bothe—  
 That is to sayn, for office<sup>o</sup> and for ese *excretion*  
 Of engendrure, ther we nat God displese.  
 135 Why sholde men elles in hir bookes sette  
 That man shal yeelde<sup>4</sup> to his wif hir dette?

7. I.e., what this metaphor may apply to.

8. This is all there is to it.

9. Frailty I call it unless.

1. I.e., his own.

2. Matthew xix.21: "Fore": footsteps.

3. And wrought by so perfectly wise a maker.

4. I.e., pay.

- Now wherwith sholde he make his payement  
 If he ne used his sely<sup>o</sup> instrument? *innocent*  
 Thanne were they maad upon a creature  
 To purge urine, and eek for engendrure.  
 140 But I saye nought that every wight is holdc,<sup>o</sup> *bound*  
 That hath swich harneis<sup>o</sup> as I to you tolde, *equipment*  
 To goon and usen hem in engendrure:  
 Thanne sholde men take of chastitee no cure.<sup>o</sup> *heed*  
 145 Crist was a maide<sup>o</sup> and shapen as a man, *virgin*  
 And many a saint sith that the world bigan,  
 Yit lived they evere in parfit chastitee.  
 I nil envye no virginittee:  
 Lat hem be breed<sup>o</sup> of pured<sup>o</sup> whete seed, *bread / refined*  
 150 And lat us wives hote<sup>o</sup> barly breed— *be called*  
 And yit with barly<sup>o</sup> breed, Mark telle can,  
 Oure Lord Jesu refreshed many a man.<sup>5</sup>  
 In swich estaat as God hath cleped us  
 I wol persevere: I nam nat precious.<sup>o</sup> *fastidious*  
 155 In wifhood wol I use myn instrument  
 As freely<sup>o</sup> as my Makere hath it sent. *generously*  
 If I be daungerous,<sup>o</sup> God yive me sorwe: *stand-offish*  
 160 Myn housbonde shal it han both eve and morwe,<sup>o</sup> *morning*  
 Whan that him list<sup>6</sup> come forth and paye his dette.  
 An housbonde wol I have, I wol nat lette,<sup>7</sup>  
 Which shal be bothe my dettour<sup>o</sup> and my thral,<sup>o</sup> *debtor / slave*  
 And have his tribulacion withal  
 Upon his flessh whil that I am his wif.  
 I have the power during al my lif  
 165 Upon his propre<sup>o</sup> body, and nat he: *own*  
 Right thus th'Apostle tolde it unto me,  
 And bad oure housbondes for to love us weel.  
 Al this sentence<sup>o</sup> me liketh everydeel.<sup>o</sup> *purport / entirely*

[AN INTERLUDE]

- Up sterte<sup>o</sup> the Pardoner and that anon: *started*  
 170 "Now dame," quod he, "by God and by Saint John,  
 Ye been a noble prechour in this cas.  
 I was aboute to wedde a wif: allas,  
 What<sup>o</sup> sholde I bye<sup>o</sup> it on my flessh so dere? *why / purchase*  
 Yit hadde I levere wedde no wif toyer."<sup>o</sup> *this year*  
 175 "Abid," quod she, "my tale is nat bigonne.  
 Nay, thou shalt drinken of another tonne,<sup>o</sup> *tun*  
 Er that I go, shal savoure wors than ale.  
 And whan that I have told thee forth my tale  
 Of tribulacion in mariage,  
 180 Of which I am expert in al myn age—

5. In the descriptions of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, it is actually John, not Mark, who mentions barley

bread (vi.9).

6. When he wishes to.

7. I will make no difficulty.

- This is to saye, myself hath been the whippe—  
 Thanne maistou chese° wheighter thou wolt sippe *choose*  
 Of thilke° tonne that I shal abroche:° *this same / broach*  
 Be war of it, er thou too neigh approche,  
 185 For I shal telle ensamples mo than ten.  
 ‘Whoso that nile° be war by othere men, *would not*  
 By him shal othere men corrected be.’  
 These same wordes writeth Ptolounee:  
 Rede in his *Almageste* and take it there.”<sup>8</sup>  
 190 “Dame, I wolde praye you if youre wil it were,”  
 Saide this Pardonere, “as ye bigan,  
 Telle forth youre tale; spareth for no man,  
 And teche us yonge men of youre practike.”<sup>9</sup> *mode of operation*  
 “Gladly,” quod she, “sith it may you like;° *please*  
 195 But that I praye to al this compaignye,  
 If that I speke after my fantasye,<sup>9</sup>  
 As taketh nat agrief° of that I saye, *amiss*  
 For myn entente nis but for to playe.”

## [THE WIFE CONTINUES]

- Now sire, thanne wol I telle you forth my tale.  
 200 As evere mote I drinke win or ale,  
 I shal saye sooth: tho° housbondes that I hadde, *those*  
 As three of hem were goode, and two were badde.  
 The three men were goode, and riche, and olde;  
 Unnethe° mighte they the statut holde *with difficulty*  
 205 In which they were bounden unto me—  
 Ye woot wel what I mene of this, pardee.  
 As help me God, I laughe whan I thinke  
 How pitously anight I made hem swinke;° *work*  
 And by my fay,° I tolde of it no stoor:<sup>1</sup> *faith*  
 210 They hadde me yiven hir land and hir tresor;  
 Me needed nat do lenger diligence  
 To winne hir love or doon hem reverence.  
 They loved me so wel, by God above,  
 That I ne tolde no daintee of<sup>2</sup> hir love.  
 215 A wis womman wol bisye hire evere in oon<sup>3</sup>  
 To gete hire love, ye, ther as she hath noon.  
 But sith I hadde hem hoolly in myn hand,  
 And sith that they hadde yiven me al hir land,  
 What° sholde I take keep° hem for to plese, *why / care*  
 220 But it were for my profit and myn ese?  
 I sette hem so awerke,° by my fay,° *awork / faith*  
 That many a night they songen° wailaway. *sang*

8. The *Almagest*, an astronomical work by the Greek astronomer and mathematician Ptolemy (second century A.D.), contains no such aphorism. The aphorism does, however, appear in a collection

ascribed to him.

9. If I speak according to my whim.

1. I set no store by it.

2. Set no value on.

3. Busy herself constantly.

- The bacon was nat fet<sup>o</sup> for hem, I trowe, *brought back*  
 That some men han in Essexe at Dunmowe.<sup>4</sup>  
 225 I governed hem so wel after<sup>o</sup> my lawe *according to*  
 That eech of hem ful blisful was and fawe<sup>o</sup> *glad*  
 To bringe me gaye thinges fro the faire;  
 They were ful glade whan I spak hem faire,  
 For God it woot, I chidde<sup>o</sup> hem spitously.<sup>o</sup> *chided / cruelly*  
 230 Now herkneth how I bar me<sup>5</sup> proprely:  
 Ye wise wives, that conne understonde,  
 Thus sholde ye speke and bere him wrong on honde<sup>6</sup>—  
 For half so boldely can ther no man  
 Swere and lie as a woman can.  
 235 I saye nat this by wives that been wise,  
 But if it be whan they hem misavise.<sup>7</sup>  
 A wis wif, if that she can hir good,<sup>8</sup>  
 Shal bere him on hande the cow is wood,<sup>9</sup>  
 And take wisse of hir owene maide  
 240 Of hir assent.<sup>1</sup> But herkneth how I saide:  
 “Sire olde cainard,<sup>o</sup> is this thyn array?<sup>2</sup> *sluggard*  
 Why is my neighebores wif so gay?  
 She is honoured overal ther she gooth:  
 I sitte at hoom; I have no thrifty<sup>o</sup> cloth. *decent*  
 245 What doostou at my neighebores hous?  
 Is she so fair? Artou so amorous?  
 What rounde<sup>o</sup> ye with oure maide, benedicite?<sup>3</sup> *whisper*  
 Sire olde lechour, lat thy japes<sup>o</sup> be. *tricks, intrigues*  
 And if I have a gossib<sup>o</sup> or a freend, *confidant*  
 250 Withouten gilt ye chiden as a feend,  
 If that I walke or playe unto his hous.  
 Thou comest hoom as dronken as a mous,  
 And prechest on thy bench, with yvel preef.<sup>4</sup>  
 Thou saist to me, it is a greet meschief<sup>o</sup> *misfortune*  
 255 To wedde a poore womman for costage.<sup>5</sup>  
 And if that she be riche, of heigh parage,<sup>o</sup> *descent*  
 Thanne saistou that it is a tormentrye  
 To suffre hir pride and hir malencolye.  
 And if that she be fair, thou verray knave,  
 260 Thou saist that every holour<sup>o</sup> wol hire have: *whoremonger*  
 She may no while in chastitee abide  
 That is assailed upon eech a side.  
 “Thou saist som folk desiren us for richesse,

4. The Dunmow fitch was awarded to the couple who after a year of marriage could claim no quarrels, no regrets, and the desire, if freed, to remarry one another.

5. Bore myself, behaved.

6. Accuse him falsely.

7. When they make a mistake.

8. If she knows what's good for her.

9. Shall persuade him the chough has

gone crazy. The chough, or jackdaw, was popularly supposed to tell husbands of their wives' infidelity.

1. And call as a witness her maid, who is on her side.

2. I.e., is this how you behave?

3. Bless me.

4. I.e., (may you have) bad luck.

5. Because of the expense.

	Som <sup>6</sup> for oure shap, and som for oure fairnesse,	
265	And som for she can outhere <sup>o</sup> singe or daunce,	<i>either</i>
	And som for gentilnesse and daliaunce, <sup>o</sup>	<i>flirtatiousness</i>
	Som for hir handes and hir armes smale <sup>o</sup> —	<i>slender</i>
	Thus gooth al to the devel by thy tale! <sup>7</sup>	
	Thou saist men may nat keepe <sup>8</sup> a castel wal,	
270	It may so longe assailed been overal. <sup>o</sup>	<i>everywhere</i>
	And if that she be foul, thou saist that she	
	Coveiteth <sup>o</sup> every man that she may see;	<i>desires</i>
	For as a spaniel she wol on him lepe,	
	Til that she finde som man hire to chepe. <sup>o</sup>	<i>buy</i>
275	Ne noon so grey goos gooth ther in the lake,	
	As, saistou, wol be withoute make; <sup>o</sup>	<i>mate</i>
	And saist it is an hard thing for to weelde <sup>o</sup>	<i>possess</i>
	A thing that no man wol, his thankes, heelde. <sup>o</sup>	
	Thus saistou, lorel, <sup>o</sup> whan thou goost to bedde,	<i>loafer</i>
280	And that no wis man needeth for to wedde,	
	Ne no man that entendeth <sup>o</sup> unto hevenc—	<i>aims</i>
	With wilde thonder-dint <sup>1</sup> and fry leve	
	Mote thy welked nekke be tobroke! <sup>2</sup>	
	Thou saist that dropping <sup>o</sup> houses and eek smoke	<i>leaking</i>
285	And chiding wives maken men to flee	
	Out of hir owene hous: a, benedicite, <sup>o</sup>	<i>blesse me!</i>
	What aileth swich an old man for to chide?	
	Thou saist we wives wil oure vices hide	
	Til we be fast, <sup>3</sup> and thanne we wol hem shewe—	
290	Wel may that be a proverbe of a shrewel <sup>o</sup>	<i>villain</i>
	Thou saist that oxen, asses, hors, <sup>o</sup> and houndes,	<i>horses</i>
	They been assayed at diverse stoundes; <sup>o</sup>	<i>times</i>
	Bacins, lavours, <sup>o</sup> er that men hem bye,	<i>washbowls</i>
	Spoons, stooles, and al swich housbondrye, <sup>o</sup>	<i>household goods</i>
295	And so be <sup>o</sup> pottes, clothes, and array <sup>o</sup> —	<i>are / clothing</i>
	But folk of wivcs maken noon assay	
	Til they be wedded—olde dotard shrewel!	
	And thanne, saistou, we wil oure vices shewe.	
	Thou saist also that it displeseth me	
300	But if that thou wolt praise my beautce,	
	And but thou poure alway upon my face,	
	And clepe me 'Faire Dame' in every place,	
	And but thou make a feeste on thilke day	
	That I was born, and make me fressh and gay,	
305	And but thou do to my norice <sup>o</sup> honour,	<i>nurse</i>
	And to my chamberere within my bowr, <sup>4</sup>	
	And to my fadres folk, and his allies <sup>5</sup> —	

6. "Som," in this and the following lines, means "one."

7. I.e., according to your story.

8. I.e., keep safe.

9. No man would willingly hold.

1. Thunderbolt; "leve": lightning.

2. May thy withered neck be broken!

3. I.e., married.

4. And to my chambermaid within my bedroom.

5. Relatives by marriage.



- Thus saistou, olde barel-ful of lies.  
 And vit of our apprentice Janekin,  
 310 For his criske° heer, shining as gold so fin, curly  
 And for he squiereth me bothe up and down,  
 Yit hastou caught a fals suspeciou;      want / dead  
 I wil° him nat though thou were deed° tomorwe.  
 "But tel me this, why hidestou with sorwe"<sup>6</sup>
- 315 The keyes of thy cheste away fro me?  
 It is my good° as wel as thyn, pardee. property  
 What, wecestou° make an idiot of oure dame? do you think to  
 Now by that lord that called is Saint Jame,  
 Thou shalt nought bothe, though thou were wood,° furious  
 320 Be maister of my body and of my good:  
 That oon thou shalt forgo, maugree thine yēn.<sup>7</sup>  
 "What helpeth it of me enquire° and spyen? inquire  
 I trowe thou woldest loke° me in thy cheste. lock  
 Thou sholdest saye, 'Wif, go wher thee leste.° it may please  
 325 Taak youre disport. I nil leve° no tales: believe  
 I knowe you for a trewe wif, dame Alis.'  
 We love no man that taketh keep or charge<sup>8</sup>  
 Wher that we goon: we wol been at oure large.<sup>9</sup>  
 Of alle men yblessed mote he be
- 330 The wise astrologen° daun Ptolomee, astronomer  
 That saith this proverbe in his *Almagest*:  
 'Of alle men his wisdom is the hyste  
 That rekketh° nat who hath the world in honde.' cares  
 By this proverbe thou shalt understonde,  
 335 Have thou<sup>1</sup> ynough, what thar° thee rekke or care need  
 How merily that othere folkes fare?  
 For certes, olde dotard, by youre leve,  
 Ye shal han queinte° right ynough at eve: pudendum  
 He is too greet a nigard that wil werne° refuse
- 340 A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;  
 He shal han nevere the lasse° lighte, pardee. less  
 Have thou ynough, thee thar nat plaine thee.<sup>2</sup>  
 "Thou saist also that if we make us gay  
 With clothing and with precious array,  
 345 That it is peril of oure chastitee,  
 And yit with sorwe thou moste enforce thee,<sup>3</sup>  
 And saye these wordes in th'Apostles name:  
 'In habit° maad with chastitee and shame clothing  
 Ye wommen shal appaile you,' quod he,  
 350 'And nat in tressed heer<sup>4</sup> and gay perree,° jewelry  
 As perles ne with gold ne clothes riche.'<sup>5</sup>

6. I.e., with sorrow to you.

7. Despite your eyes—i.e., despite anything you can do about it.

8. Notice or interest.

9. I.e., liberty.

1. If you have.

2. I.e., you need not complain.

3. Strengthen your position.

4. I.e., elaborate hairdo.

5. See I Timothy ii.9.

	After thy text, ne after thy rubriche, <sup>6</sup>	
	I wol nat werke as muchel as a gnat.	
	Thou saigest this, that I was lik a cat:	
355	For whoso wolde senge <sup>o</sup> a cattes skin,	<i>singe</i>
	Thanne wolde the cat wel dwellen in his in; <sup>o</sup>	<i>lodging</i>
	And if the cattes skin be slik <sup>o</sup> and gay,	<i>sleek</i>
	She wol nat dwelle in house half a day,	
	But forth she wol, er any day be dawed, <sup>7</sup>	
360	To shewe her skin and goon a-caterwawed. <sup>o</sup>	<i>caterwauling</i>
	This is to saye, if I be gay, sire shrewe,	
	I wol renne <sup>o</sup> out, my borel <sup>o</sup> for to shewe.	<i>run / clothing</i>
	Sire olde fool, what helpeth <sup>8</sup> thee t'espyen?	
	Though thou praye Argus with his hundred yēn	
365	To be my wardecors, <sup>o</sup> as he can best,	<i>bodyguard</i>
	In faith, he shal nat keepe <sup>o</sup> me but me lest: <sup>9</sup>	<i>guard</i>
	Yit coude I make his beard, <sup>1</sup> so mote I thee. <sup>o</sup>	<i>thrive</i>
	“Thou saigest eek that ther been thinges thre,	
	The whiche thinges troublen al this crthe,	
370	And that no wight may endure the fertlic. <sup>o</sup>	<i>fourth</i>
	O leve <sup>o</sup> sire shrewe, Jesu shorte <sup>o</sup> thy lif!	<i>dear / shorten</i>
	Yit prechesteou and saist an hateful wif	
	Yrekened is for oon of these meschaunces.	
	Been ther nat none othre ressemblaunces	
375	That ye may likne youre parables to, <sup>2</sup>	
	But if <sup>3</sup> a sely <sup>o</sup> wif be oon of tho?	<i>innocent</i>
	“Thou liknest eek wommanes love to helle,	
	To bareine <sup>o</sup> land ther water may nat dwelle;	<i>barren</i>
	Thou liknest it also to wilde fir—	
380	The more it brenneth, <sup>o</sup> the more it hath desir	<i>burns</i>
	To consumen every thing that bren <sup>o</sup> wol be;	<i>burned</i>
	Thou saist right <sup>o</sup> as wormes shende <sup>o</sup> a tree,	<i>just / destroy</i>
	Right so a wif destroyeth hir housbonde—	
	This knowen they that been to wives bonde.” <sup>o</sup>	<i>bound</i>
385	Lordinges, right thus, as ye han understonde,	
	Bar I stifly mine olde housbondes on honde <sup>4</sup>	
	That thus they saiden in hir dronkenesse—	
	And al was fals, but that I took witnessse	
	On Janekin and on my nece also.	
390	O Lord, the paine I dide hem and the wo,	
	Ful giltelces, by Goddes sweete pine! <sup>o</sup>	<i>suffering</i>
	For as an hors I coude bite and whine; <sup>o</sup>	<i>whinny</i>
	I coude plaine <sup>o</sup> and <sup>o</sup> I was in the gilt,	<i>complain / if</i>
	Or elles often time I hadde been spilt. <sup>o</sup>	<i>ruined</i>
395	Whoso that first to mille comth first grint. <sup>o</sup>	<i>grinds</i>

6. Rubric, i.e., direction.

7. Has dawned.

8. What doe it help.

9. Unless I please.

1. I.e., deceive him.

2. Isn't there something else appro-

priate that you can apply your metaphors to?

3. Unless.

4. I rigorously accused my old husbands.

I plained first: so was oure werre stint.<sup>5</sup>  
 They were ful glade to excusen hem ful blive<sup>6</sup> *quickly*  
 Of thing of which they nevere agilte hir live.<sup>6</sup>  
 Of wenches wolde I bren hem on honde,  
 400 Whan that for sik<sup>7</sup> they mighte unnethe<sup>8</sup> stonde, *scarcely*  
 Yit tikled I his herte for that he  
 Wende<sup>8</sup> I hadde had of him so greet cheertee.<sup>8</sup> *thought*  
 I swoor that al my walking out by night  
 Was for to espye wenches that he dighte.<sup>9</sup>  
 405 Under that colour<sup>1</sup> hadde I many a mirthe.  
 For al swich wit is given us in oure birthe:  
 Deceite, weeping, spinning God hath yive  
 To wommen kindly<sup>9</sup> whil they may live. *naturally*  
 And thus of oo thing I avaunte me:<sup>2</sup>  
 410 At ende I hadde the bet<sup>9</sup> in ecch degre, *better*  
 By sleighte or force, or by som manere thing,  
 As by continuel murmur<sup>9</sup> or grucching;<sup>9</sup> *complaint / grumbling*  
 Namely<sup>9</sup> abedde hadden they meschaunce: *especially*  
 Ther wolde I chide and do hem no plesaunce;<sup>3</sup>  
 415 I wolde no lenger in the bed abide  
 If that I felte his arm over my side,  
 Til he hadde maad his raunson<sup>9</sup> unto me; *ransom*  
 Thanne wolde I suffre him do his nicetec.<sup>9</sup> *lust*  
 And therefore every man this tale I telle:  
 420 Winne whoso may, for al is for to selle;  
 With empty hand men may no hawkes lure.  
 For winning<sup>9</sup> wolde I al his lust endure, *profit*  
 And make me a feined appetit—  
 And yit in bacon<sup>4</sup> hadde I nevere delit.  
 425 That made me that evere I wolde hem chide;  
 For though the Pope hadde seten<sup>9</sup> hem beside, *sat*  
 I wolde nought spare hem at hir owene boord.  
 For by my trouthe, I quitte<sup>9</sup> hem word for word. *repaid*  
 As help me verray God omnipotent,  
 430 Though I right now sholde make my testament,  
 I ne owe hem nat a word that it nis quit.  
 I broughte it so aboute by my wit  
 That they moste yive it up as for the beste,  
 Or elles hadde we nevere been in reste;  
 435 For though he looked as a wood<sup>9</sup> leoun, *furiosus*  
 Yit sholde he faile of his conclusioun.<sup>9</sup> *object*  
 Thanne wolde I saye, "Goodelief, taak keep,<sup>5</sup>  
 How mekely looketh Wilekin, oure sheep!

5. Our war brought to an end.

6. Of a thing in which they never offended in their lives.

7. I.e., sickness.

8. Affection.

9. Had intercourse with.

1. I.e., excuse.

2. Boast.

3. Show them no affection.

4. I.e., old meat.

5. Good friend, take notice.

- Com neer my spouse, lat me ba° thy cheeke— kiss  
 440 Ye sholden be al pacient and meeke,  
 And han a sweete-spiced<sup>6</sup> conscience,  
 Sith ye so preche of Jobes pacience;  
 Suffreth alway, sin ye so wel can preche;  
 And but ye do, certain, we shal you teche  
 445 That it is fair to han a wif in pees.  
 Oon of us two moste bowen, doutelees,  
 And sith a man is more resonable  
 Than womman is, ye mosten been suffrable.° patient  
 What aileth you to grucche° thus and grone?  
 450 Is it for ye wolde have my queinte° allone? grumble  
 Why, taak it al—lo, have it everydeel.° pudendum  
 Peter, I shrewe° you but ye love it weel. altogether  
 For if I wolde selle my bele chose,<sup>7</sup> curse  
 I coude walke as fressh as is a rose;  
 455 But I wol keepe it for youre owene tooth.° taste  
 Ye be to blame. By God, I saye you sooth!"  
 Swiche manere° wordes hadde we on honde. kind of  
 Now wol I speke of my ferthe° housbonde. fourth  
 My ferthe housbonde was a revelour—  
 460 This is to sayn, he hadde a paramour°— mistress  
 And I was yong and ful of ragerye,° wantonness  
 Stibourne° and strong and joly as a pie:° untamable / magpie  
 How coude I daunce to an harpe smale,° gracefully  
 And singe, ywis,° as any nightingale, indeed  
 465 Whan I hadde dronke a draughte of sweete win.  
 Metellius, the foule cherl, the swin,  
 That with a staf birafte° his wif hir lif deprived  
 For° she drank win, though I hadde been his wif, because  
 Ne sholde nat han daunted me fro drinke;  
 470 And after win on Venus moste° I thinke, must  
 For also siker° as cold engendreth hail, sure  
 A likerous° mouth moste han a likerous° tail: greedy / lecherous  
 In womman vinolent° is no defence— bibulous  
 This knowen lechours by experience.  
 475 But Lord Crist, whan that it remembreth me<sup>8</sup>  
 Upon my youthe and on my jolitee,  
 It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote—  
 Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote° good  
 That I have had my world as in my time.  
 480 But age, allas, that al wol envenime,° poison  
 Hath me biraft<sup>9</sup> my beautee and my pith—  
 Lat go, farewell, the devel go therwith!  
 The flour is goon, ther is namore to telle:  
 The bren° as I best can now moste I selle;  
 485 But yit to be right merye wol I fonde.° bran  
strive

6. I.e., delicate.

7. Fair thing.

8. When I look back.

9. Has taken away from me.

Now wol I tellen of my ferthe housbonde.

I saye I hadde in herte gret despit

That he of any other hadde delit,

But he was quit,<sup>o</sup> by God and by Saint Joce:

*paid back*

490 I made him of the same wode a croce<sup>1</sup>—

Nat of my body in no foul manere—

But, certainly, I made folk swich cheere

That in his owene grece I made him frye,

For angre and for verray jalousye.

495 By God, in erthe I was his purgatorye,

For which I hope his soule be in glòrye.

For God it woot, he sat ful ofte and soong<sup>o</sup>

*sang*

Whan that his sho ful bitterly him wroong.<sup>o</sup>

*pinched*

Ther was no wight save God and he that wiste<sup>o</sup>

*knew*

500 In many wise how sore I him twiste.

He deide whan I cam fro Jerusalem,

And lith ygrave under the roode-beem,<sup>2</sup>

Al<sup>o</sup> is his tombe nought so curious<sup>3</sup>

*although*

As was the sepulcre of him Darius,

505 Which that Apelles wroughte subtilly:<sup>4</sup>

It nis but wast to burye him preciously.<sup>o</sup>

*expensively*

Lat him fare wel, God yive his soule reste;

He is now in his grave and in his cheste.

Now of my fifthe housbonde wol I telle—

510 God lete his soule nevere come in helle—

And yit he was to me the moste shrewe:<sup>5</sup>

That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe,<sup>6</sup>

And evere shal unto myn ending day.

But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,

515 And therwithal so wel coulde he me glose<sup>o</sup>

*wheedle*

Whan that he wolde han my bele chose,

That though he hadde me bet<sup>o</sup> on every boon,<sup>o</sup>

*beaten / bone*

He coude winne again my love anon.<sup>o</sup>

*immediately*

I trowe I loved him best for that he

520 Was of his love daungerous<sup>7</sup> to me.

We wommen han, if that I shal nat lie,

In this matere a quainte fantasye:

Waite what<sup>8</sup> thing we may nat lightly<sup>o</sup> have,

*easily*

Therafter wol we crye al day and crave;

525 Forbede us thing, and that desiren we;

Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we flee.

With daunger oute we al oure chaffare:<sup>9</sup>

Gret prees<sup>o</sup> at market maketh dere<sup>o</sup> ware, *crowd / expensive*

1. I made him a cross of the same wood. The proverb has much the same sense as the one quoted in line 493.

2. And lies buried under the rood beam (the crucifix beam running between nave and chancel).

3. Carefully wrought.

4. According to medieval legend, the

artist Apelles decorated the tomb of Darius, king of the Persians.

5. Worst rascal.

6. In a row.

7. I.e., he played hard to get.

8. "Waite what": whatever.

9. With coyness, we spread out our merchandise.

- And too greet chepe is holden at litel pris.<sup>1</sup>  
 530 This knoweth every womman that is wis.  
 My fifthe housbonde—God his soule blesse!—  
 Which that I took for love and no richesse,  
 He somtime was a clerk at Oxenforde,  
 And hadde laft<sup>o</sup> scole and wente at hoom to boorde *left*  
 535 With my gossib,<sup>o</sup> dwelling in oure town— *confidante*  
 God have hir soule!—hir name was Alisoun;  
 She knew myn herte and eek my privetee<sup>o</sup> *secrets*  
 Bet<sup>o</sup> than oure parissch preest, as mote I thee.<sup>o</sup> *better / thrive*  
 To hire biwrayed<sup>o</sup> I my conseil<sup>o</sup> al, *disclosed / secrets*  
 540 For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal,  
 Or doon a thing that sholde han cost his lif,  
 To hire,<sup>o</sup> and to another worthy wif, *her*  
 And to my nece which I loved weel,  
 I wolde han told his conseil everydeel;<sup>o</sup> *entirely*  
 545 And so I dide ful often, God it woot,  
 That made his face often reed<sup>o</sup> and hoot<sup>o</sup> *red / hot*  
 For verray shame, and blamed himself for þe  
 Hadde told to me so greet a privetee.  
 And so bifel that ones in a Lente—  
 550 So often times I to my gossib wente,  
 For evere yit I loved to be gay,  
 And for to walke in March, Averil, and May,  
 From hous to hous, to heere sondry tales—  
 That Janekin clerk and my gossib dame Alis  
 555 And I myself into the feeldes wente.  
 Myn housbonde was at London al that Lente:  
 I hadde the better leiser for to playe,  
 And for to see, and eek for to be scye<sup>o</sup> *seen*  
 Of lusty folk—what wiste I wher my grace<sup>o</sup> *luck*  
 560 Was shapen<sup>o</sup> for to be, or in what place? *destined*  
 Therefore I made my visitaciouns  
 To vigilies<sup>2</sup> and to processions,  
 To preching eek, and to thise pilgrimages,  
 To playes of miracles and to mariages,  
 565 And wered upon<sup>3</sup> my gaye scarlet gites<sup>o</sup>— *dress*  
 Thise wormes ne thise motthes ne thise mites,  
 Upon my peril, frete<sup>o</sup> hem neveradeel: *ate*  
 And woostou why? For they were used weel.  
 Now wol I tellen forth what happed me.  
 570 I saye that in the feeldes walked we,  
 Til trewely we hadde swich daliaunce,<sup>o</sup> *flirtation*  
 This clerk and I, that of my purveyaunce<sup>o</sup> *foresight*  
 I spak to him and saide him how that he,  
 If I were widwe, sholde wedde me.

1. Too good a bargain is held at little value.

2. Feasts preceding a saint's day.

3. Wore.

575 For certainly, I saye for no bobauce,<sup>o</sup> boast  
 Yit was I nevere withouten purveyaunce  
 Of mariage n'of othere thinges eek:  
 I holde a mouses herte nought worth a leek  
 That hath but oon hole for to sterte<sup>o</sup> to, run

580 And if that faile thanne is al ydo.<sup>4</sup>  
 I bar him on hand<sup>5</sup> he hadde enchaunted me  
 (My dame taughte me that subtiltee);  
 And eek I saide I mette<sup>o</sup> of him al night: dreamed  
 He wolde han slain me as I lay upright,<sup>o</sup> supine

585 And al my bed was ful of verray blood—  
 “But yit I hope that ye shul do me good;  
 For blood bitokeneth gold, as me was taught.”  
 And al was fals, I dremed of it right naught,  
 But as I folwed ay my dames<sup>o</sup> lore<sup>o</sup> mother's / teaching

590 As wel of that as othere thinges more.  
 But now sire—lat me see, what shal I sayn?  
 Aha, by God, I have my tale again.  
 Whan that my ferthe housbonde was on beere,<sup>o</sup> bier  
 I weep<sup>o</sup> algate,<sup>o</sup> and made sory cheere, wept / anyhow  
 595 As wives moten,<sup>o</sup> for it is usage,<sup>o</sup> must / custom  
 And with my coverchief covered my visage;  
 But for I was purveyed<sup>o</sup> of a make.<sup>o</sup> provided / mate  
 I wepte but smale, and that I undertake.<sup>o</sup> guarantee

To chirche was myn housbonde born amorwe<sup>6</sup>

600 With neighebores that for him maden sorwe,  
 And Janekin oure clerk was oon of tho.  
 As help me God, whan that I saw him go  
 After the beere, me thoughte he hadde a paire  
 Of legges and of feet so clene<sup>7</sup> and faire,

605 That al myn herte I yaf unto his hold.<sup>o</sup> possession  
 He was, I trowe,<sup>o</sup> twenty winter old, believe  
 And I was fourty, if I shal saye sooth—  
 But yit I hadde alway a coltes tooth:<sup>8</sup>  
 Gat-toothed<sup>o</sup> was I, and that bicam me weel; gap-toothed

610 I hadde the prente<sup>9</sup> of Sainte Venus seel.  
 As help me God, I was a lusty oon,  
 And fair and riche and yong and wel-bigoon,<sup>o</sup> well-situated  
 And trewely, as mine housbondes tolde me,  
 I hadde the beste quoniam<sup>o</sup> mighte be. pudendum

615 For certes I am al Venerien<sup>1</sup>  
 In feeling, and myn herte is Marcien:  
 Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,<sup>o</sup> lecherousness  
 And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse.

4. I.e., the game is up.

5. I pretended to him.

6. In the morning.

7. I.e., neat.

8. I.e., youthful appetites.

9. Print, i.e., a birthmark; “seel”: seal.

1. Astrologically influenced by Venus;  
 “Marcien”: influenced by Mars.

- Myn ascendent was Taur<sup>2</sup> and Mars therinne—  
 620 Allas, allas, that evere love was sinnel  
 I folwed ay° my inclinacioun *ever*  
 By vertu of my constellacioun;<sup>3</sup>  
 That made me I coude nought withdrawe  
 My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.  
 625 Yit have I Martes° merk upon my face, *Mars'*  
 And also in another privee place.  
 For God so wis° be my savacioun,° *surely / salvation*  
 I loved nevere by no discrecioun,  
 But evere folwede myn appetit,  
 630 Al were he short or long or blak or whit;  
 I took no keep,° so that he liked° me, *heed / pleased*  
 How poore he was, ne eek of what degree.  
 What sholde I saye but at the monthes ende  
 This joly clerk Janekin that was so hende° *nice*  
 635 Hath wedded me with greet solempnitee,° *splendor*  
 And to him yaf I al the land and fee° *property*  
 That cvere was me yiven therbifore—  
 But afterward repented me ful sore:  
 He nolde suffre no thing of my list.° *pleasure*  
 640 By God, he smoot° me ones on the list° *struck / ear*  
 For that I rente° out of his book a leef, *tore*  
 That of the strook° myn ere weex° al deef. *blow / grew*  
 Stibourne° I was as is a leonesse, *stubborn*  
 And of my tonge a verray jangleresse,° *blabbermouth*  
 645 And walke I wolde, as I hadde doon biforn,  
 From hous to hous, although he hadde it<sup>4</sup> sworn;  
 For which he often times wolde preche,  
 And me of olde Romain geestes° teche, *stories*  
 How he Simplicius Gallus lafte° his wif, *left*  
 650 And hire forsook for terme of al his lif,  
 Nought but for open-heveded he hire sey<sup>5</sup>  
 Looking out at his dore upon a day.  
 Another Romain tolde he me by name  
 That, for his wif was at a someres° game *summer's*  
 655 Withouten his witing,° he forsook hire eke; *knowledge*  
 And thanne wolde he upon his Bible seeke  
 That ilke proverbe of Ecclesiaste<sup>6</sup>  
 Where he comandeth and forbedeth faste° *strictly*  
 Man shal nat suffre his wif go roule° aboute; *roam*  
 660 Thanne wolde he saye right thus withouten doute:  
 "Whoso that buildeth his hous al of salves,° *willow sticks*  
 And priketh° his blinde hors over the falwes,<sup>7</sup> *rides*

2. My birth sign was the constellation Taurus.

3. I.e., horoscope.

4. I.e., the contrary.

5. Just because he saw her bareheaded.

6. Ecclesiasticus (xxv.25).

7. Plowed land.



And suffreth his wif to go seeken halwes,<sup>o</sup> shrines  
 Is worthy to be hanged on the galwes."<sup>o</sup> gallows  
 665 But al for nought—I sette nought an hawe<sup>8</sup>  
 Of his proverbes n'of his olde sawe;  
 N'I wolde nat of him corrected be:  
 I hate him that my vices telleth me,  
 And so doon mo, God woot, of us than I.  
 670 This made him with me wood al outrely:<sup>9</sup>  
 I nolde nought forbere<sup>o</sup> him in no cas. submit to  
 Now wol I saye you sooth, by Saint Thomas,  
 Why that I rente<sup>o</sup> out of his book a leef, tore  
 For which he smoot me so that I was deaf.  
 675 He hadde a book that gladly night and day  
 For his disport he wolde rede alway.  
 He cleped it *Valerie*<sup>1</sup> and *Theofraste*,  
 At which book he lough<sup>o</sup> alway ful faste; laughed  
 And eek ther was somtime a clerk at Rome,  
 680 A cardinal, that highte Saint Jerome,  
 That made a book<sup>2</sup> again Jovinian;  
 In which book eek ther was Tertulan,<sup>3</sup>  
 Crysippus, Trotula, and Helouis,  
 That was abbesse nat fer fro Paris;  
 685 And eek the Parables of Salomon,<sup>4</sup>  
 Ovides *Art*, and bookes many oon—  
 And alle these were bounden in oo volume.  
 And every night and day was his custume,  
 Whan he hadde leiser and vacacioun  
 690 From other worldly occupacioun,  
 To reden in this book of wikked wives.  
 He knew of hem mo legendes and lives  
 Than been of goode wives in the Bible.  
 For trusteth wel, it is an impossible<sup>o</sup> impossibility  
 695 That any clerk wol speke good of wives,  
 But if it be of holy saintes lives,  
 N'of noon other womman nevere the mo—  
 Who painted the leon, tel me who?<sup>5</sup>  
 By God, if wommen hadden writen stories,  
 700 As clerkes han within hir oratories,

8. I did not rate at the value of a hawthorn berry.

9. Entirely.

1. I.e., the *Letter of Valerius Concerning Not Marrying*, by Walter Map; "*Theofraste*": Theophrastus' *Book Concerning Marriage*. Medieval manuscripts often contained a number of different works, sometimes, as here, dealing with the same subject.

2. St. Jerome's antifeminist *Reply to Jovinian*; "again": against.

3. Tertullian, author of treatises on sexual modesty. Crysippus (or Chrysi-

pus), in the next line, is mentioned by Jerome as an antifeminist; Trotula was a female doctor whose presence here is unexplained; "Helouis" is Eloise, whose love affair with the great scholar Abelard was a medieval scandal.

4. The Biblical Book of Proverbs; "*Ovides Art*": Ovid's *Art of Love*.

5. In one of Aesop's fables, the lion, shown a picture of a man killing a lion, asked who painted the picture. Had a lion been the artist, of course, the roles would have been reversed.

- They wolde han writen of men more wikkednesse  
 Than al the merk<sup>6</sup> of Adam may redresse.  
 The children of Mercurye and Venus<sup>7</sup>  
 Been in hir werking<sup>o</sup> ful contrarious:<sup>o</sup>      *operation / opposed*
- 705 Mercurye loveth wisdom and science,  
 And Vcnus loveth riot<sup>o</sup> and dispencc;<sup>o</sup>      *parties / expenditures*  
 And for hir diverse disposicioun  
 Each falleth in otheres exaltacioun,<sup>8</sup>  
 And thus, God woot, Mercurye is desolat  
 In Pisces wher Venus is exaltat,<sup>9</sup>  
 And Venus falleth ther Mercurye is raised:  
 Therefore no womman of no clerk is praised.  
 The clerk, whan he is old and may nought do  
 Of Vcnus werkes worth his olde sho,<sup>o</sup>      *shoe*
- 715 Thanne sit<sup>o</sup> he down and writ<sup>o</sup> in his dotage      *sits / writes*  
 That women can nat keepe hir mariage.  
 But now to purpose why I tolde thee  
 That I was beten for a book, pardee:  
 Upon a night Janckin, that was oure sire,<sup>1</sup>  
 720 Redde on his book as he sat by the fire  
 Of Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse  
 Was al mankinde brought to wrecchednesse,  
 For which that Jesu Crist himself was slain  
 That boughte<sup>o</sup> us with his herte blood again—      *redeemed*
- 725 Lo, heer expres of women may ye finde  
 That womman was the los<sup>o</sup> of al mankinde.<sup>2</sup>      *ruin*  
 Tho<sup>o</sup> redde he me how Sampson loste his heres:      *then*  
 Sleeping his lemman<sup>o</sup> kitte<sup>o</sup> it with hir shercs,      *mistress / cut*  
 Thurgh which treson loste he both his yēn.  
 730 Tho redde he me, if that I shal nat lien,  
 Of Ercules and of his Dianire,<sup>3</sup>  
 That caused him to sette himself afre.  
 No thing forgat he the sorwe and wo  
 That Socrates hadde with his wives two—
- 735 How Xantippa caste pisse upon his heed:  
 This sely<sup>o</sup> man sat stille as he were deed;      *silly*  
 He wiped his heed, namore dorste he sayn  
 But “Er that thonder stinte,<sup>o</sup> comth a rain.”      *stops*  
 Of Pasipha<sup>4</sup> that was the queene of Crete—
- 740 For shrewednesse<sup>o</sup> him thoughte the tale sweete—      *malice*

6. Mark, sex.

7. I.e., clerks and women, astrologically ruled by Mercury and Venus respectively.

8. Because of their contrary positions (as planets), each one descends (in the belt of the zodiac) as the other rises; hence one loses its power as the other becomes dominant.

9. I.e., Mercury is deprived of power in Pisces (the sign of the Fish), where

Venus is most powerful.

1. My husband.

2. The stories of wicked women Chaucer drew mainly from St. Jerome and Walter Map.

3. Dejanira unwittingly gave Hercules a poisoned shirt, which hurt him so much that he committed suicide by fire.

4. Pasiphaë, who fell in love with a bull.

Fy, speek namore, it is a grisly thing  
 Of hir horrible lust and hir liking.<sup>o</sup> *pleasure*  
 Of Clytermistra<sup>5</sup> for hir lecherye  
 That falsly made hir housbonde for to die,  
 He redde it with ful good devocioun.  
 745 He tolde me eek for what occasioun  
 Amphiorax<sup>6</sup> at Thebes loste his lif:  
 Myn housbonde hadde a legende of his wif  
 Eriphylem, that for an ouche<sup>o</sup> of gold *trinket*  
 750 Hath prively unto the Greekes told  
 Wher that hir housbonde hidde him in a place,  
 For which he hadde at Thebes sory grace.  
 Of Livia<sup>7</sup> tolde he me and of Lucie:  
 They bothe made hir housbondes for to die,  
 755 That oon for love, that other was for hate;  
 Livia hir housbonde on an even late  
 Empoisoned hath for that she was his fo;  
 Lucia likerous<sup>o</sup> loved hir housbonde so *lecherous*  
 That for<sup>o</sup> he sholde alway upon hire thinke, *in order that*  
 760 She yaf him swich a manere love-drinke  
 That he was deed er it were by the morwe.<sup>8</sup>  
 And thus algates<sup>o</sup> housbondes han sorwe. *constantly*  
 Thanne tolde he me how oon Latumius  
 Complained unto his felawe Arrius  
 765 That in his gardin growed swich a tree,  
 On which he saide how that his wives three  
 Hanged himself for herte despitous.<sup>9</sup>  
 "O leve<sup>o</sup> brother," quod this Arrius, *dear*  
 "Yif me a plante of thilke blessed tree,  
 770 And in my gardin planted shal it be."  
 Of latter date of wives hath he red  
 That some han slain hir housbondes in hir bed  
 And lete hir lechour dighte<sup>1</sup> hire al the night,  
 Whan that the cors<sup>o</sup> lay in the floor upright;<sup>o</sup> *corpse / supine*  
 775 And some han driven nailes in hir brain  
 Whil that they sleepe, and thus they han hem slain;  
 Some han hem yiven poison in hir drinke.  
 He spak more harm than herte may bithinke,<sup>o</sup> *imagine*  
 And therwithal he knew of mo proverbes  
 780 Than in this world ther growen gras or herbes:  
 "Bet is," quod he, "thyn habitacioun  
 Be with a leon or a foul dragoun

5. Clytemnestra, who, with her lover Aegisthus, slew her husband Agamemnon.

6. Amphiarus, betrayed by his wife Eriphyle and forced to go to the war against Thebes.

7. Livia murdered her husband in behalf of her lover Sejanus. "Lucie": Lu-

cilla, who was said to have poisoned her husband, the poet Lucretius, with a potion designed to keep him faithful.

8. He was dead before it was near morning.

9. For malice of heart.

1. Have intercourse with.

- Than with a womman using° for to chide.” *accustomed*  
 “Bet is,” quod he, “hve in the roof abide  
 785 Than with an angry wif down in the hous:  
 They been so wikked° and contrarious, *perverse*  
 They haten that hir housbondes loveth ay.”  
 He saide, “A womman cast° hir shame away *casts*  
 When she cast of° hir smok,”<sup>2</sup> and ferthermo, *off*  
 790 “A fair womman, but she be chast also,<sup>3</sup>  
 Is like a gold ring in a sowes nose.” *psalms interpreted incorrectly,*  
 Who wolde weene,° or who wolde suppose *“chaste” think*  
 The wo that in myn herte was and pine?° *should suffering*  
 And whan I sawgh he wolde nevere fine° *probably be end*  
 795 To reden on this cursed book al night, *“wise”*  
 Al sodeinly three leves have I plight° *snatched*  
 Out of his book right as he redde, and eke  
 I with my fist so took<sup>3</sup> him on the cheeke  
 That in oure fir he fil° bakward adown. *fell*  
 800 And up he sterte as dooth a wood° leoun, *raging*  
 And with his fist he smoot me on the heed° *head*  
 That in the floor I lay as I were deed.  
 And whan he sawgh how stille that I lay,  
 He was agast, and wolde have fled his way,  
 805 Til atte laste out of my swough° I braide:° *swoon / started*  
 “O hastou slain me, false thief?” I saide,  
 “And for my land thus hastou mordred° me? *murdered*  
 Er I be deed° yit wol I kisse thee.” *dead*  
 And neer he cam and kneeled faire adown,  
 810 And saide, “Dere suster Alisoun,  
 As help me God, I shal thee nevere smite.  
 That I have doon, it is thyself to wite.° *blame*  
 Foryif it me, and that I thec biseeke.”  
 And yit eftsoones° I hitte him on the cheeke, *again*  
 815 And saide, “Thief, thus muchel am I wreke.° *avenged*  
 Now wol I die: I may no lenger speke.”  
 But at the laste with muchel care and wo  
 We fille<sup>4</sup> accorded by us selven two.  
 He yaf me al the bridel° in myn hand, *bridle*  
 820 To han the governance of hous and land,  
 And of his tonge and his hand also;  
 And made<sup>5</sup> him brenne° his book anoonright tho. *burn*  
 And whan that I hadde geten unto me  
 By maistrye° al the soverainetee,° *skill / dominion*  
 825 And that he saide, “Myn owene trewe wif,  
 Do as thee lust° the terme of al thy lif; *it pleases*  
 Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estat,”  
 After that day we hadde nevere debat.

2. Undergarment.  
 3. I.e., bit.

4. I.e., became.  
 5. I.e., I made.

God help me so, I was to him as kinde  
 830 As any wif from Denmark unto Inde,  
 And also trewe, and so was he to me.  
 I praye to God that sit° in majestee, sits  
 So blesse his soule for his mercy dere.  
 Now wol I saye my tale if ye wol heere.

[ANOTHER INTERRUPTION]

835 The Frere lough° whan he hadde herd al this: laughed  
 "Now dame," quod he, "so have I joye or blis,  
 This is a long preamble of a tale."  
 And whan the Somnour herde the Frere gale,° exclaim  
 "Lo," quod the Somnour, "Goddess armes two,  
 840 A frere wol entremette him<sup>6</sup> everemo!  
 Lo, goode men, a flye and eek a frere  
 Wol falle in every dissh and eek matere.  
 What spekestou of preambulacioun?  
 What, amble or trotte or pisse or go sitte down!  
 845 Thou lettest° oure disport in this manere." hinder  
 "Ye, woltou so, sire Somnour?" quod the Frere.  
 "Now by my faith, I shal er that I go  
 Telle of a somnour swich a tale or two  
 That al the folk shal laughen in this place."  
 850 "Now elles, Frere, I wol bishrewe° thy face," curse  
 Quod this Somnour, "and I bishrewe me,  
 But if I telle tales two or three  
 Of freres, er I come to Sidingborne,<sup>7</sup>  
 That I shal make thyn herte for to moorne—  
 855 For wel I woot thy pacience is goon."  
 Oure Hoste cride, "Pees, and that anon!"  
 And saide, "Lat the womman telle hir tale:  
 Ye fare as folk that dronken been of ale.  
 Do, dame, tel forth youre tale, and that is best."  
 860 "Al redy, sire," quod she, "right as you lest°— it pleases  
 If I have licence of this worthy Frere."  
 "Yis, dame," quod he, "tel forth and I wol heere."

6. Intrude himself.

7. Sittingbourne (a town forty miles from London).

The Tale<sup>1</sup>

In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour,  
 Of which that Britouns° speken greet honour, Bretons  
 865 Al was this land fulfild of fairye.<sup>2</sup>  
 The elf-queene with hir joly compaignye  
 Daunced ful ofte in many a greene mede°— meadow  
 This was the olde opinion as I rede;  
 I speke of many hundred yeres ago.  
 870 But now can no man see none elves mo,  
 For now the grete charitee and prayeres  
 Of limitours,<sup>3</sup> and othere holy freres,  
 That serchen every land and every stream,  
 As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,  
 875 Blessing halles, chambres, kichenes, bowres,  
 Citees, burghes,° castels, hye towres, townships  
 Thropes, bernes, shipnes,<sup>4</sup> dayeries—  
 This maketh that ther been no faïries.  
 For ther as wont to walken was an elf  
 880 Ther walketh now the limitour himself,  
 In undermeles° and in morweninges,° afternoons / mornings  
 And saith his Matins and his holy thinges,  
 As he gooth in his limitacioun.<sup>5</sup>  
 Wommen may go sauffly° up and down: safely  
 885 In every bussh or under every tree  
 Ther is noon other incubus<sup>6</sup> but he,  
 And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.  
 And so bifel it that this King Arthour  
 Hadde in his hous a lusty bachelor,  
 890 That on a day cam riding fro river,<sup>7</sup>  
 And happed° that, allonc as he was born, it happened

1. The story of the knight who fully realizes what women most desire only after having been told it in a number of ways was popular in Chaucer's time and a natural one for him to assign to the Wife of Bath, whose well-loved fifth husband had also been slow to learn. But Chaucer reshaped the tale in such a way as to make it fit the Wife and her thesis even more closely. In the other medieval versions of the story the knight is guiltless of any offense to womanhood, and in several of them he is Sir Gawain, traditional model of chivalric courtesy, who weds the hideous hag to save not his own life but that of his lord, King Arthur. Chaucer has made the knight a most ill-behaved and ill-mannered man who needs to learn what women most desire as much in order to redeem his disagreeably virile character as to save his neck. Because within her story he is the sole male in a world of women, Dame Alice is able not only to prove conclusively the value of woman's sovereignty, but also to pay

her respects to a world of men that had preached antifeminism, a world here represented by a single rapist.

The story is suited to the Wife's own character psychologically as well as dramatically, for she, like the old hag, had wedded a young man—though unlike the hag she could not restore her former beauty. But if there is a touch of melancholy in the incompleteness of this similarity, it is sharply dispelled by the Wife's final comments, which reassert the sturdy fighting spirit that permeates her Prologue.

2. I.e., filled full of supernatural creatures.

3. Friars licenced to beg in a certain territory.

4. Thorps (villages), barns, stables.

5. I.e., the friar's assigned area. His "holy thinges" are prayers.

6. A spirit that lies with mortal women. "Ne \* \* \* but" in the next line means "only."

7. Hawking, usually carried out on the banks of a stream.

He sawgh a maide walking him biforn;  
 Of which maide anoon, maugree hir heed,<sup>8</sup>  
 By verray force he rafte<sup>o</sup> hir maidenheed;  
 895 For which oppression<sup>o</sup> was swich clamour,  
 And swich pursuite<sup>o</sup> unto the King Arthour,  
 That dampned was this knight for to be deed<sup>9</sup>  
 By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed—  
 Paraventure<sup>o</sup> swich was the statut tho—  
 900 But that the queene and othere ladies mo  
 So longe prayeden the king of grace,  
 Til he his lif him graunted in the place,  
 And yaf him to the queene, al at hir wille,  
 To chese<sup>o</sup> whether she wolde him save or spille.<sup>1</sup>  
 905 The queene thanked the king with al hir might,  
 And after this thus spak she to the knight,  
 Whan that she saw hir time upon a day:  
 "Thou standest yit," quod she, "in swich array<sup>o</sup>  
 That of thy lif vit hastou no suretee.<sup>o</sup>  
 910 I graunte thee lif if thou canst tellen me  
 What thing it is that wommen most desiren:  
 Be war and keep thy nekke boon<sup>o</sup> from iren.  
 And if thou canst nat tellen me anoon,  
 Yit wol I yive thee leve for to goon  
 915 A twelfmonth and a day to seeche<sup>o</sup> and lere<sup>o</sup>  
 An answer suffisant<sup>o</sup> in this matere,  
 And suretee wol I han er that thou pace,<sup>o</sup>  
 Thy body for to yeelden in this place."  
 Wo was this knight, and sorwefully he siketh.<sup>o</sup>  
 920 But what, he may nat doon al as him liketh,  
 And atte laste he chees<sup>o</sup> him for to wende,  
 And come again right at the yeres ende,  
 With swich answeere as God wolde him purveye,<sup>o</sup>  
 And taketh his leve and wendeth forth his waye.  
 925 He seeketh every hous and every place  
 Wher as he hopeth for to finde grace,  
 To lerne what thing wommen love most.  
 But he ne coude arriven in no coost<sup>2</sup>  
 Wher as he mighte finde in this matere  
 930 Two creatures according in fere.<sup>3</sup>  
 Some saiden wommen loven best richesse;  
 Some saide honour, some saide jolinesse;<sup>o</sup>  
 Some riche array, some saiden lust<sup>o</sup> abedde,  
 And ofte time to be widwe and wedde.  
 935 Somc saide that oure herte is most esed  
 Whan that we been yflatered and yplesed—  
 He gooth ful neigh the soothe, I wol nat lie:  
 A man shal winne us best with flaterye,

deprived her of  
rape  
petitioning

perhaps

choose

condition  
guarantee

bone

search / learn  
satisfactory  
pass

sighs

chose

provide

wantonness  
pleasure

8. Despite her head, i.e., despite anything she could do.

9. This knight was condemned to death.

1. Put to death.

2. I.e., country.

3. Agreeing together.

- And with attendance and with bisnesse°  
 940 Been we ylimed,° bothe more and lesse.  
 And some sayen that we loven best  
 For to be free, and do right as us lest,°  
 And that no man repreve° us of oure vice,  
 But saye that we be wise and no thing nice.°  
 945 For trewely, ther is noon of us alle,  
 If any wight wol clawe us on the galle,°  
 That we nil kike° for° he saith us sooth:  
 Assaye and he shal finde it that so dooth.  
 For be we nevere so vicious withinne,  
 950 We wol be holden° wise and clene of sinne.  
 And some sayn that greet delit han we  
 For to be holden stable and eek secree,<sup>4</sup>  
 And in oo purpos stedefastly to dwelle,  
 And nat biwraye° thing that men us telle—  
 955 But that tale is nat worth a rake-stele.°  
 Pardee, we wommen conne no thing hele:°  
 Witnessse on Mida.° Wol ye heere the tale?  
 Ovide, amonges othere thinges smale,  
 Saide Mida hadde under his longe heres,  
 960 Growing upon his heed, two asses eres,  
 The whiche vice° he hidde as he best mighte  
 Ful subtilly from every mannes sighte,  
 That save his wif ther wiste° of it namo.  
 He loved hire most and trusted hire also.  
 965 He prayed hire that to no creature  
 She sholde tellen of his disfigure.°  
 She swoor him nay, for al this world to winne,  
 She nolde do that vilainye or sinne  
 To make hir housbonde han so foul a name:  
 970 She nolde nat telle it for hir owene shame.  
 But nathelees, hir thoughte that she dyde°  
 That she so longe sholde a conseil° hide;  
 Hire thoughte it swal° so sore aboute hir herte  
 That nedely som word hire moste asterte,<sup>5</sup>  
 975 And sith she dorste nat telle it to no man,  
 Down to a marcis° faste° by she ran—  
 Til she cam there hir herte was afire—  
 And as a bitore<sup>6</sup> bombleth in the mire,  
 She laide hir mouth unto the water down:  
 980 “Biwray° me nat, thou water, with thy soun,”°  
 Quod she. “To thee I telle it and namo:°  
 Myn housbonde hath longe asses eres two.  
 Now is myn herte al hool,<sup>7</sup> now is it oute.  
 I mighte no lenger keepe it, out of doute.”  
 985 Here may ye see, though we a time abide,

*assiduousness*  
*ensnared*

*it pleases*  
*reprove*  
*foolish*

*sore spot*  
*kick / because*

*considered*

*disclose*  
*rake handle*  
*conceal*  
*Midas*

*defect*

*knew*

*deformity*

*would die*  
*secret*  
*swelled*

*marsh / close*

*betray / sound*  
*to no one else*

4. Reliable and also close-mouthed.  
 5. Of necessity some word must escape her.

6. Bittern, a heron. “Bombleth”: makes a booming noise.  
 7. I.e., sound.



- Yit oute it moot:° we can no conseil hide. must  
 The remenant of the tale if ye wol heere,  
 Redeth Ovide, and ther ye may it lere.<sup>8</sup>
- This knight of which my tale is specially,  
 990 Whan that he sawgh he mighte nat come therby—  
 This is to saye what women loven most—  
 Within his brest ful sorweful was his gost,<sup>o</sup> spirit  
 But hoom he gooth, he mighte nat sojurne:° delay  
 The day was come that hoomward moste° he turne. must
- 995 And in his way it happed him to ride  
 In al this care under a forest side,  
 Wher as he sawgh upon a daunce go  
 Of ladies foure and twenty and yit mo;  
 Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,<sup>9</sup>
- 1000 In hope that som wisdom sholde he lerne.  
 But certainly, er he cam fully there,  
 Vanissed was this daunce, he niste° where. knew not  
 No creature sawgh he that bar° lif, bore  
 Save on the greene he sawgh sitting a wif—
- 1005 A fouler wight ther may no man devise:° imagine  
 Again<sup>1</sup> the knight this olde wif gan rise,  
 And saide, "Sire knight, heer forth lith° no way.° lies / road  
 Telle me what ye seeken, by youre fay.° faith  
 Paraventure it may the better be:
- 1010 This olde folk conne° muchel thing," quod she. know  
 "My leve moder,"° quod this knight, "certain, mother  
 I nam but deed but if that I can sayn  
 What thing it is that women most desire.  
 Coude ye me wisse,° I wolde wel quite youre hire."<sup>2</sup> teach
- 1015 "Plight me thy trouthe here in myn hand," quod she,  
 "The nexte thing that I requere° thee, require of  
 Thou shalt it do, if it lie in thy might,  
 And I wol telle it you er it be night."  
 "Have heer my trouthe," quod the knight. "I graunte."<sup>o</sup>
- 1020 "Thanne," quod she, "I dar me wel avaunte° boast  
 Thy lif is sauf,° for I wol stande therby. safe  
 Upon my lif the queene wol saye as I.  
 Lat see which is the pruddeste° of hem alle proudest  
 That wereth on<sup>3</sup> a coverchief or a calle° headdress
- 1025 That dar saye nay of that I shal thee teche.  
 Lat us go forth withouten lenger speche."  
 Tho rouned° she a pistel° in his ere, whispered / sentence  
 And bad him to be glad and have no fere.
- Whan they be comen to the court, this knight  
 1030 Saide he hadde holde his day as he hadde hight,° promised  
 And redy was his answer, as he saide.  
 Ful many a noble wif, and many a maide,

8. Learn. The reeds disclosed the secret by whispering "aures aselli" (asses' ears).  
 9. Drew very quickly.

1. I.e., to meet.  
 2. Repay your trouble.  
 3. That wears.

- And many a widwe—for that they been wise—  
 The queene hirself sitting as justise,  
 1035 Assembled been this answer for to heere,  
 And afterward this knight was bode<sup>o</sup> appere. *bidden to*  
 To every wight comanded was silence,  
 And that the knight sholde telle in audience<sup>o</sup> *pen hearing*  
 What thing that worldly wommen loven best.  
 1040 This knight ne stood nat stille as dooth a best,<sup>o</sup> *beast*  
 But to his question anoon answerde  
 With manly vois that al the court it herde.  
 “My lige<sup>o</sup> lady, generally,” quod he, *liege*  
 “Wommen desire to have soverainetee<sup>o</sup> *dominion*  
 1045 As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,  
 And for to been in maistrye him above.  
 This is youre moste desir though ye me kille.  
 Dooth as you list:<sup>o</sup> I am here at youre wille.” *please*  
 In al the court ne was ther wif ne maide  
 1050 Ne widwe that contraried<sup>o</sup> that he saide, *contradicted*  
 But saiden he was worthy han<sup>o</sup> his lif. *to have*  
 And with that word up stertere<sup>o</sup> that olde wif, *started*  
 Which that the knight sawgh sitting on the greene;  
 “Mercy,” quod she, “my soverain lady queene,  
 1055 Er that youre court departe, do me right.  
 I taughte this answer unto the knight,  
 For which he plighte me his trouthe there  
 The firste thing I wolde him requere<sup>o</sup> *require*  
 He wolde it do, if it laye in his might.  
 1060 Bifore the court thanne praye I thee, sire knight,”  
 Quod she, “that thou me take unto thy wif,  
 For wel thou woost that I have kept<sup>o</sup> thy lif. *saved*  
 If I saye fals, say nay, upon thy fay.”  
 This knight answerde, “Allas and wailaway,  
 1065 I woot right wel that swich was my biheeste.<sup>o</sup> *promise*  
 For Goddes love, as chees<sup>o</sup> a newe requeste: *choose*  
 Taak al my good and lat my body go.”  
 “Nay thanne,” quod she, “I shrewe<sup>o</sup> us bothe two. *curse*  
 For though that I be foul and old and poore,  
 1070 I nolde for al the metal ne for ore  
 That under erthe is grave<sup>o</sup> or lith<sup>o</sup> above, *buried / lies*  
 But if thy wif I were and eek thy love.”  
 “My love,” quod he. “Nay, my dampnacioun!<sup>o</sup> *damnation*  
 Allas, that any of my nacioun<sup>4</sup>  
 1075 Sholde evere so foule disparaged<sup>o</sup> be.” *disgraced*  
 But al for nought, th’ende is this, that he  
 Constrained was: he needes moste hire wedde,  
 And taketh his olde wif and gooth to bedde.  
 Now wolden some men saye, paraventure,  
 1080 That for my negligence I do no cure<sup>5</sup>  
 To tellen you the joy and al th’array

4. I.e., family.

5. I do not take the trouble.

- That at the feeste was that ilke day.  
 To which thing shortly answer I shal:  
 I saye ther nas no joye ne feeste at al;  
 1085 Ther nas but hevynesse and muche sorwe.  
 For prively he wedded hire on morwe,<sup>6</sup>  
 And al day after hidde him as an owle,  
 So wo was him, his wif looked so foule.
- Greet was the wo the knight hadde in his thought:  
 1090 Whan he was with his wif abedde brought,  
 He walweth<sup>o</sup> and he turneth to and fro. *tosses*  
 His olde wif lay smiling everemo,  
 And saide, "O dere housbonde, benedicite,<sup>o</sup> *bless me*  
 Fareth<sup>o</sup> every knight thus with his wif as ye? *behaves*
- 1095 Is this the lawe of King Arthures hous?  
 Is every knight of his thus daungerous?<sup>o</sup> *stand-offish*  
 I am youre owene love and youre wif;  
 I am she which that saved hath youre lif;  
 And certes yit ne dide I you nevere unright.
- 1100 Why fare ye thus with me this firste night?  
 Ye faren like a man hadde lost his wit.  
 What is my gilt? For Goddes love, telle it,  
 And it shal been amended if I may."  
 "Amended!" quod this knight. "Allas, nay, nay,
- 1105 It wol nat been amended neveremo.  
 Thou art so lothly<sup>o</sup> and so old also, *loathsome*  
 And therto comen of so lowe a kinde,<sup>o</sup> *race*  
 That litel wonder is though I walwe and winde.<sup>o</sup> *turn*  
 So wolde God myn herte wolde breste!"<sup>o</sup> *break*
- 1110 "Is this," quod she, "the cause of youre unreste?"  
 "Ye, certainly," quod he. "No wonder is."  
 "Now sire," quod she, "I coude amende al this,  
 If that me liste, er it were dayes three,  
 So<sup>o</sup> wel ye mighte bere you<sup>7</sup> unto me. *provided that*
- 1115 "But for ye speken of swich gentillesse  
 As is descended out of old richesse—  
 That therfore sholden ye be gentilmen—  
 Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.  
 Looke who that is most vertuouse alway,
- 1120 Privee and apert,<sup>8</sup> and most entendeth ay  
 To do the gentil deedes that he can,  
 Taak him for the gretteste<sup>o</sup> gentilman. *greatest*  
 Crist wol<sup>o</sup> we claime of him oure gentillesse, *desires that*  
 Nat of oure eldres for hir 'old richesse."<sup>9</sup>
- 1125 For though they yive us al hir heritage,  
 For which we claime to been of heigh parage,<sup>o</sup> *descent*  
 Yit may they nat biquethe for no thing  
 To noon of us hir vertuous living,  
 That made hem gentilmen ycalled be,

6. In the morning.  
 7. Behave.

8. Privately and publicly.  
 9. See Chaucer's *Gentillesse*, line 16.

- 1130 And bad<sup>1</sup> us folwen hem in swich degree.  
 “Wel can the wise poete of Florence,  
 That highte Dant,<sup>2</sup> speken in this sentence;°  
 Lo, in swich manere rym is Dantes tale:  
 ‘Ful selde° up riseth by his braunches<sup>3</sup> smale  
 1135 Prowesse° of man, for God of his prowesse  
 Wol that of him we claime oure gentillesse.’  
 For of oure eldres may we no thing claime  
 But temporel thing that man may hurte and maim.  
 Eek every wight woot this as wel as I,  
 1140 If gentillesse were planted naturelly  
 Unto a certain linage down the line,  
 Privee and apert, thanne wolde they nevere fine°  
 To doon of gentillesse the faire office°—  
 They mighte do no vilainye or vice.  
 1145 “Taak fir and beer° it in the derkeste hous  
 Bitwixe this and the Mount of Caucasus,  
 And lat men shette° the dores and go thenne,°  
 Yit wol the fir as faire lie<sup>4</sup> and brenne°  
 As twenty thousand men mighte it biholde:  
 1150 His° office natureel ay wol it holde,  
 Up° peril of my lif, til that it die.  
 Heer may ye see wel how that gentrye°  
 Is nat annexed° to possessioun,<sup>5</sup>  
 Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun  
 1155 Alway, as dooth the fir, lo, in his kinde.°  
 For God it woot, men may wel often finde  
 A lordes sone do shame and vilainye;  
 And he that wol han pris of his gentrye,<sup>6</sup>  
 For he was boren° of a gentil hous,  
 1160 And hadde his eldres noble and vertuons,  
 And nil himselven do no gentil deedes,  
 Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed° is,  
 He nis nat gentil, be he duc or erl—  
 For vilaines sinful deedes maken a cherl.  
 1165 Thy gentillesse<sup>7</sup> nis but renomee°  
 Of thine auncestres for hir heigh bountee,°  
 Which is a straunge° thing for thy persone.  
 For gentillesse<sup>8</sup> cometh fro God allone.  
 Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace:  
 1170 It was no thing biquethe us with oure place.  
 Thinketh how noble, as saith Valerius,<sup>9</sup>  
 Was thilke Tullius Hostilius  
 That out of povert° roos to heigh noblesse.  
 Redeth Senek,° and redeth eek Boece:°  
 1175 Ther shul ye seen expres that no drede° is

topic

seldom  
excellencecease  
function

bear

shut / thence  
burnits  
upon  
gentility  
related

nature

born

dead

renown  
magnanimity  
alienpoverty  
Seneca / Boethius  
doubt

1. I.e., they bade.  
 2. Dante; see his *Convivio*.  
 3. I.e., by its own efforts.  
 4. I.e., remain.  
 5. I.e., inheritable property.

6. Have credit for his noble birth.  
 7. I.e., the gentility you claim.  
 8. I.e., true gentility.  
 9. A Roman historian.

	That he is gentil that dooth gentil deedes. And therefore, leve housbonde, I thus conlude: Al were it that mine auncestres weren rude, <sup>1</sup> Yit may the hye God—and so hope I—	
1180	Graunte me grace to liven vertuously. Thanne am I gentil whan that I biginne To liven vertuously and waive <sup>o</sup> sinne.	<i>avoid reprove</i>
1185	“And ther as ye of poverte me repreve, <sup>o</sup> The hye God, on whom that we bileve, In wilful <sup>o</sup> poverte chees <sup>o</sup> to live his lif; And certes every man, maiden, or wif May understonde that Jesus, hevene king, Ne wolde nat chese <sup>o</sup> a vicious living. Glad poverte is an honeste <sup>o</sup> thing, certain;	<i>voluntary / chose  choose honorable</i>
1190	This wol Senek and othere clerkes sayn. Whoso that halt him paid of <sup>2</sup> his poverte, I holde him riche al hadde he nat a sherte. <sup>o</sup> He that coveiteth <sup>3</sup> is a poore wight, For he wolde han that is nat in his might;	<i>shirt</i>
1195	But he that nought hath, ne coveiteth <sup>o</sup> have, Is riche, although we holde him but a knave. Verray poverte it singeth proprely. <sup>o</sup> Juvenal saith of poverte, ‘Merily The poore man, whan he gooth by the waye, Biforn the theves he may singe and playe.’ Poverte is hateful good, and as I gesse, A ful greet bringere out of businesse; <sup>4</sup> A greet amendere eek of sapience To him that taketh it in pacience;	<i>desires to  appropriately</i>
1200	Poverte is thing, although it seeme elenge, <sup>o</sup> Possession that no wight wol challenge; <sup>5</sup> Poverte ful often, whan a man is lowe, Maketh <sup>6</sup> his God and eek himself to knowe; Poverte a spectacle <sup>o</sup> is, as thinketh me, Thurgh which he may his verray freendes see. And therefore, sire, sin that I nought you greve, Of my poverte namore ye me repreve. <sup>o</sup> “Now sire, of elde <sup>o</sup> ye repreve me: And certes sire, though noon auctoritee Were in no book, ye gentils of honour Sayn that men sholde an old wight doon favour, And clepe him fader for youre gentillesse— And auctours <sup>7</sup> shal I finden, as I gesse. “Now ther ye saye that I am foul and old: Thanne drede you nought to been a cokewold, <sup>o</sup> For filthe and elde, also mote I thee, <sup>8</sup> Been grete wardeins <sup>o</sup> upon chastitee.	<i>wretched  pair of spectacles  reproach old age  cuckold guardians</i>

1. I.e., low born.  
2. Considers himself satisfied with.  
3. I.e., suffers desires.  
4. I.e., cares.

5. Claim as his property.  
6. I.e., makes him.  
7. I.e., authorities.  
8. So may I thrive.

- But nathelees, sin I knowe your delit,  
I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit.
- 1225 "Chees now," quod she, "oon of these things twaye:  
To han me foul and old til that I deye  
And be to you a trewe humble wif,  
And nevere you displese in al my lif,  
Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
- 1230 And take youre aventure° of the repair<sup>9</sup> *chance*  
That shal be to youre hous by cause of me—  
Or in som other place, wel may be.  
Now chees youreselven whether° that you liketh." *whichever*  
This knight aviseth him<sup>1</sup> and sore siketh;° *sighs*
- 1235 But atte laste he saide in this manere:  
"My lady and my love, and wif so dere,  
I putte me in youre wise governaunce:  
Cheseth° youreself which may be most plesaunce<sup>2</sup> *choose*  
And most honour to you and me also.
- 1240 I do no fors the wheither<sup>3</sup> of the two,  
For as you liketh it suffiseth° me." *satisfies*  
"Thanne have I gete° of you maistrye," quod she, *got*  
"Sin I may chese and governe as me lest?"° *it pleases*  
"Ye, certes, wif," quod he. "I holde it best."
- 1245 "Kisse me," quod she. "We be no lenger wrothe.  
For by my trouthe, I wol be to you bothe—  
This is to sayn, ye, bothe fair and good.  
I praye to God that I mote sterven wood,<sup>4</sup>  
But° I to you be al so good and trewe *unless*  
1250 As evere was wif sin that the world was newe. *tomorrow morning*  
And but I be tomorn° as fair to seene  
As any lady, emperisse, or queene,  
That is bitwixe the eest and eek the west,  
Do with my lif and deeth right as you lest:
- 1255 Caste up the curtin, looke how that it is."  
And whan the knight sawgh verraily al this,  
That she so fair was and so yong therto,  
For joye he hente° hire in his armes two; *took*  
His herte bathed in a bath of blisse;  
1260 A thousand time arewe° he gan hire kisse, *in a row*  
And she obeyed him in every thing  
That mighte do him plesance or liking.° *pleasure*  
And thus they live unto hir lives ende  
In parfit° joye. And Jesu Crist us sende *perfect*  
1265 Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresshe abedde—  
And grace t'overbide° hem that we wedde. *outlive*  
And eek I praye Jesu shorte° hir lives *shorten*  
That nought wol be governed by hir wives,  
And olde and angry nigardes of dispençe°—  
1270 God sende hem soone a verray° pestilence! *expenditure*  
*veritable*

9. I.e., visits.  
1. Considers.  
2. Pleasure.

3. I do not care whichever.  
4. Die mad.

The Franklin's Tale<sup>1</sup>The Introduction<sup>2</sup>

"In faith, Squier, thou hast thee wel yquit<sup>o</sup> acquitted  
 And gentilly. I praise wel thy wit,"  
 Quod the Frankelain. "Considering thy youthe,  
 So feelingly thou spekest, sire, I allowe<sup>o</sup> thee: praise  
 5 As to my doom<sup>o</sup> ther is noon that is heer judgment  
 Of eloquence that shal be thy peer,  
 If that thou live. God give thee good chaunce,  
 And in vertu sende thee continuance,  
 For of thy speche I have greet daintee.<sup>o</sup> delight  
 10 I have a sone, and by the Trinitee,  
 I hadde levere than twenty pound worth land,  
 Though it right now were fallen<sup>3</sup> in myn hand,  
 He were a man of swich discrecioun  
 As that ye been. Fy on possessioun  
 15 But if<sup>4</sup> a man be vertuous withal!  
 I have my sone snibbed<sup>o</sup> and yit shal scolded  
 For he to vertu listeth nat entende,<sup>o</sup> attend  
 But for to playe at dees<sup>o</sup> and to dispende,<sup>5</sup> dice  
 And lese<sup>o</sup> al that he hath is his usage. lose  
 20 And he hath levere talken with a page

1. The Franklin says that his tale is a Breton lay, a sub-genre of romance of which *Sir Orfeo* is the best English representative. Indeed, the Franklin's definition of the Breton lay resembles the definition at the beginning of *Sir Orfeo* so closely that it has led to suspicions that the latter was not only the Franklin's source but the chief source of Chaucer's own knowledge of the genre. The source of the Franklin's Tale itself is probably not a lost Breton lay but an old story told by, among others, Boccaccio. But in any case, features found in Breton lays also occur in the Franklin's Tale: a rash promise that must be kept; a supernatural intervention in a plot containing a love situation; stylistic simplicity; and a generally optimistic spirit.

The Franklin is a fine type of the man of humble origins who has risen to the middle class and has adopted the aspirations of the aristocracy while accumulating wealth. His tale shows a nice blend of unselfconscious interest in the value of money and a self-conscious one in *gentillesse*, the gentle behavior which should distinguish not only the nobly born but (as the Wife of Bath's old hag tells her husband) any free-born man. In this tale *gentillesse* embraces the virtues of patience (which Dorigen has to learn the hard way) and, more significantly, of *trouthe* and *freedom*, "integrity" and

"generosity." Though the Franklin shows no awareness of the Biblical text, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John viii.32), his tale exemplifies it almost in the manner of a parable. The characters concerned resolve to maintain their *trouthe*—their pledged word—and this sets up a chain reaction of *freedom* which releases them from the dire consequences that keeping their word would entail: when the old law of the covenant is honored, it brings into being the new law of forgiveness. The word *franklin* means "freeman," a meaning Chaucer seems to be playing on when in the last lines of the tale he has the Franklin ask about the three men in the story, "Which was the most free?"

2. The Squire has been speaking for more than 650 lines but has not made much narrative progress in his enormously over-plotted Oriental tale of Cambuskan and his three children when the Franklin speaks, apparently interrupting the story. It is uncertain, however, whether the Franklin's words represent an intentional interruption or whether they were written to be spoken at the end of the Squire's Tale, which Chaucer intended sometime to complete.

3. I.e., delivered.

4. Unless.

5. Spend money.

- Than to commune with any gentil wight,  
 Where he mighte lerne gentillesse° aright.”
- “Straw for thy gentillesse!” Quod oure Host.  
 “What, Frankelain, pardee sire, wel thou woost°  
 25 That eech of you moot° tellen atte leeste  
 A tale or two, or breken his biheeste.”°  
 “That knowe I wel, sire,” quod the Frankelain.  
 “I praye you, haveth me nat in desdain,  
 Though to this man I speke a word or two.”
- 30 “Tel on thy tale withouten wordes mo.”  
 “Gladly, sire Host,” quod he, “I wol obeye  
 Unto youre wil. Now herkneth what I saye.  
 I wol you nat contrarien<sup>6</sup> in no wise  
 As fer as that my wittes wol suffise.
- 35 I praye to God that it may plesen you:  
 Thanne woot I wel that it is good ynow.”°

### The Prologue

- Thise olde gentil Britons° in hir dayes  
 Of diverse adventures maden layes,  
 Rymeyed<sup>7</sup> in hir firste Briton tonge;
- 40 Whiche layes with hir instruments they songe,°  
 Or elles reddene° hem for hir plesaunce;  
 And oon of hem have I in remembraunce,  
 Which I shal sayn with good wil as I can.
- But sires, by cause I am a burel° man,  
 45 At my biginning first I you biseeche  
 Have me excused of my rude speche.  
 I lerned nevere retorike,° certain:  
 Thing that I speke it moot° be bare and plain;  
 I sleep° nevere in the Mount of Parnaso,<sup>8</sup>
- 50 Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero;°  
 Colours<sup>9</sup> ne knowe I noon, withouten drede,°  
 But swiche colours as growen in the mede,°  
 Or elles swiche as men dye or painte;  
 Colours of retorike been too quainte:°
- 55 My spirit feeleth nat of swich matere.  
 But if you list, my tale shul ye heere.

### The Tale

- In Armorik,° that called is Britaine,° *Armorica / Brittany*  
 Ther was a knight that loved and dide his paine<sup>1</sup>  
 To serve a lady in his beste wise;
- 60 And many a labour, many a greet emprise° *enterprise*

6. Act contrary to.

7. Composed in rhyme.

8. Parnassus, home of the Muses.

9. I.e., rhetorical figures.

1. I.e., made every effort.



- He for his lady wroughte er she were wonne,  
 For she was oon<sup>2</sup> the faireste under sonne,  
 And eek therto come of so heigh kinrede<sup>3</sup> *kindred*  
 That wel unnethes<sup>3</sup> dorste this knight for drede  
 65 Telle hire his wo, his paine, and his distresse.  
 But atte laste she for his worthinesse,  
 And namely<sup>4</sup> for his meeke obeisaunce,<sup>5</sup> *especially / obedience*  
 Hath swich a pitee caught of his penaunce<sup>6</sup> *suffering*  
 That prively she fil of<sup>4</sup> his accord  
 70 To taken him for hir housbonde and hir lord,  
 Of swich lordshipe as men han over hir wives.  
 And for to lede the more in blisse hir lives,  
 Of his free wil he swoor hire as a knight  
 That nevere in al his lif he day ne night  
 75 Ne sholde upon him take no maistrye<sup>7</sup> *dominion*  
 Again hir wil, ne kithe<sup>8</sup> hire jealousye, *show*  
 But hire obeye and folwe hir wil in al,  
 As any love to his lady shal<sup>8</sup>— *ought*  
 Save that the name of sovereignete,<sup>9</sup> *sovereignty*  
 80 That wolde he have, for shame of<sup>5</sup> his degree.  
 She thanked him, and with ful greet humblesse  
 She saide, “Sire, sith of youre gentilesse  
 Ye profre me to have so large<sup>6</sup> a reine.  
 Ne wolde nevere God bitwixe us twaine,  
 85 As in<sup>7</sup> my gilt, were outhere<sup>8</sup> werre<sup>8</sup> or strif. *either / war*  
 Sire, I wol be your humble, trewe wif—  
 Have heer my trouthe<sup>8</sup>—til that myn herte breste.”<sup>9</sup> *break*  
 Thus been they bothe in quiete and in reste.  
 For oo thing, sires, sauffy<sup>9</sup> dar I saye: *safely*  
 90 That freendes<sup>9</sup> everich<sup>9</sup> other moot<sup>9</sup> obeye, *lovers / each / must*  
 If they wol longe holden compaignye.  
 Love wol nat be constrained by maistrye:<sup>9</sup> *force*  
 Whan maistrye comth, the God of Love anon  
 Beteth his wings and farewel, he is goon!  
 95 Love is a thing as any spirit free;  
 Wommen of kinde<sup>9</sup> desiren libertee,  
 And nat to been constrained as a thral<sup>9</sup>— *slave*  
 And so doon men, if I sooth sayen shal.  
 Looke who that is most pacient in love,  
 100 He is at his avantage al above.  
 Pacience is an heigh vertu, certain,  
 For it venquisshe<sup>9</sup>, as these clerkes sayn, *vanquishes*  
 Things that rigour sholde nevere attaine.<sup>1</sup>  
 For<sup>9</sup> every word men may nat chide or plaine:<sup>9</sup> *at / complain*  
 105 Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so mote I goon,<sup>2</sup>

2. I.e., one of.

3. With difficulty.

4. I.e., fell in.

5. Out of respect for.

6. I.e., free.

7. As a result of.

8. Troth, word of honor.

9. By nature.

1. I.e., overcome.

2. So may I walk.

- Ye shul it lerne, wherso° ye wol or noon. *whether*  
 For in this world, certain, ther no wight is  
 That he ne dooth or saith somtime amis:  
 Ire, siknesse, or constellacioun,<sup>3</sup>  
 110 Win, wo, or chaunging of complexioun<sup>4</sup>  
 Causeth ful ofte to doon amis or speken.  
 On every wrong a man may nat be wreken:° *avenged*  
 After the time moste° be temperaunce *must*  
 To every wight that can on governaunce.<sup>5</sup>  
 115 And therefore hath this wise worthy knight  
 To live in ese suffraunce° hire bihight,° *toleration / promised*  
 And she to him ful wisly° gan to swere *surely*  
 That nevere sholde ther be defaute° in here. *defect*  
 Here may men seen an humble wis accord:  
 120 Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord—  
 Servant in love and lord in marriage.  
 Thanne was he bothe in lordshipe and servage.<sup>6</sup>  
 Servage? Nay, but in lordshipe above,  
 Sith° he hath bothe his lady and his love; *since*  
 125 His lady, certes, and his wif also,  
 The which that<sup>7</sup> lawe of love accordeth to.  
 And whan he was in this prosperitee,  
 Hoom with his wif he gooth to his contree,  
 Nat fer fro Pedmark<sup>8</sup> ther his dwelling was,  
 130 Wher as he liveth in blisse and in solas.° *delight*  
 Who coude telle but he hadde wedded be  
 The joye, the ese, and the prosperitee  
 That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wif?  
 A yeer and more lasted this blisful lif,  
 135 Til that the knight of which I speke of thus,  
 That of Kairrud<sup>9</sup> was cleped° Arveragus, *called*  
 Shoop him<sup>1</sup> to goon and dwelle a yeer or twaine *also*  
 In Engelond, that cleped was eek° Britaine,  
 To seeke in armes worshippe and honour—  
 140 For al his lust° he sette in swich labour— *pleasure*  
 And dwelled ther two yeer, the book saith thus.  
 Now wol I stinte° of this Arveragus, *cease*  
 And speke I wol of Dorigen his wif,  
 That loveth hir housbonde as hir hertes lif.  
 145 For his absence weepeth she and siketh,° *sighs*  
 As doon thise noble wives whan hem liketh.<sup>2</sup>  
 She moorneth, waketh, waileth, fasteth, plaineth;° *complains*  
 Desir of his presence hire so distraineth° *afflicts*  
 That al this wide world she sette<sup>3</sup> at nought.  
 150 Hir freendes, whiche that knewe hir hevye thought,

3. I.e., planetary influences.

4. The balance of humors in the body.

5. Is capable of self-control.

6. Position of a servant.

7. As.

8. Penmarch, in Brittany.

9. Kerru, a town in Brittany.

1. Prepared.

2. It pleases.

3. I.e., valued.

- Conforten hire in al that evere they may:  
 They prechen hire, they telle hire night and day  
 That causelees she sleeth<sup>o</sup> hirself, allas; *slays*  
 And every confort possible in this cas  
 155 They doon to hire with al hir businesse,<sup>o</sup> *assiduousness*  
 Al for to make hire leve<sup>o</sup> hir hevinesse. *abandon*  
 By proces,<sup>4</sup> as ye knowen everichoon,  
 Men may so longe graven<sup>o</sup> in a stoon *engrave*  
 Til som figure therinne emprinted be:  
 160 So longe han they confortd hire til she  
 Received hath, by hope and by resoun,  
 The emprinting of hir consolacioun,  
 Thurgh which hir grete sorwe gan assuage:  
 She may nat alway duren<sup>o</sup> in swich rage.<sup>o</sup> *remain / passion*  
 165 And eek Arveragus in al this care  
 Hath sent hir lettres hoom of his welfare,  
 And that he wol come hastily again—  
 Or elles hadde this sorwe hir herte slain.  
 Hir freendes sawe hir sorwe gan to slake,<sup>o</sup> *diminish*  
 170 And prayed hire on knees, for Goddes sake.  
 To come and romen hire in compaignye,  
 Away to drive hir derke fantasye,  
 And finally she graunted that requeste:  
 For wel she saw that it was for the beste.  
 175 Now stood hir castel faste by the see,  
 And often with hir freendes walketh she,  
 Hire to disporte upon the bank an heigh,  
 Wher as she many a ship and barge<sup>o</sup> seigh,<sup>o</sup> *vessel / saw*  
 Sailing hir cours wher as hem liste go—  
 180 But thanne was that a parcel<sup>o</sup> of hir wo, *component*  
 For of hirself ful ofte, “Allas!” saith she,  
 “Is ther no ship of so manye as I see  
 Wol bringen hoom my lord? Thanne were myn herte  
 Al warished<sup>o</sup> of his bittre paines smerte.” *recovered*  
 185 Another time ther wolde she sitte and thinke,  
 And caste hir yēn downward fro the brinke;  
 But whan she sawgh the grisly rokkes blake,  
 For verray<sup>o</sup> fere so wolde hir herte quake *real*  
 That on hir feet she mighte hire nat sustene:<sup>o</sup> *sustain*  
 190 Thanne wolde she sitte adown upon the grene  
 And pitously into the see biholde,  
 And sayn right thus, with sorweful sikes<sup>o</sup> colde:<sup>5</sup> *sighs*  
 “Eterne God that thurgh thy purveyaunce<sup>o</sup> *providence*  
 Ledest the world by certain governaunce,  
 195 In idel,<sup>6</sup> as men sayn, ye nothing make:  
 But Lord, thise grisly feendly<sup>o</sup> rokkes blake, *hostile*  
 That seemen rather a foul confusioun

4. Course of time.  
 5. I.e., grievous.

6. I.e., without purpose.

- Of werk, than any fair creacioun  
 Of swich a parfit<sup>o</sup> wis God and a stable, *perfect*
- 200 Why han ye wrought this werk unresonable?  
 For by this werk south, north, ne west ne eest,  
 Ther nis yfostred man ne brid<sup>7</sup> ne beest:  
 It dooth no good, to my wit, but anoyeth.  
 See ye nat, Lord, how mankinde it destroyeth?
- 205 An hundred thousand bodies of mankinde  
 Han rokkes slain, al<sup>o</sup> be they nat in minde: *although*  
 Which mankinde is so fair part of thy werk  
 That thou it madest lik to thyn owene merk:<sup>8</sup>  
 Thanne seemed it ye hadde a greet cheertee<sup>o</sup> *affection*
- 210 Toward mankinde. But how thanne may it be  
 That ye swiche menes<sup>o</sup> make it to destroyen?— *means*  
 Whiche menes do no good, but evere anoyen.  
 I woot wel clerkes wol sayn as hem leste,<sup>9</sup>  
 By arguments, that al is for the beste,
- 215 Though I ne can the causes nat yknowe.  
 But thilke<sup>o</sup> God that made wind to blowe, *that*  
 As keepe my lord! This<sup>1</sup> my conclusioun.  
 To clerkes lete<sup>o</sup> I al disputisoun,<sup>o</sup> *leave / disputation*  
 But wolde God that alle these rokkes blake
- 220 Were sonken<sup>o</sup> into helle for his sake! *sunken*  
 These rokkes slain myn herte for the fere.”  
 Thus wolde she sayn with many a pitous tere.  
 Hir freendes sawe that it was no disport  
 To romen by the see, but disconfort,
- 225 And shopen<sup>o</sup> for to playen somwher elles: *arranged*  
 They leden hire by rivers and by welles,<sup>o</sup> *springs*  
 And eek in othere places delitable<sup>o</sup>; *delightful*  
 They dauncen and they playen at ches and tables.<sup>o</sup> *backgammon*  
 So on a day, right in the morwetide,<sup>o</sup> *morning*
- 230 Unto a gardin that was ther biside,  
 In which that they hadde maad hir ordinaunce<sup>o</sup> *arrangements*  
 Of vitale<sup>o</sup> and of other purveyaunce,<sup>o</sup> *food / provisions*  
 They goon and playe hem al the longe day.  
 And this was on the sixte morwe<sup>o</sup> of May, *morning*
- 235 Which May had painted with his softe showres  
 This gardin ful of leves and of flowres;  
 And craft of mannes hand so curiously<sup>o</sup> *skillfully*  
 Arrayed hadde this gardin trewely  
 That nevere was ther gardin of swich pris,<sup>o</sup> *excellence*
- 240 But if<sup>2</sup> it were the verray Paradis.  
 The odour of flowres and the fresshe sighte  
 Wolde han makid any herte lighte  
 That evere was born, but if too greet siknesse,

7. Bird; “yfostred”: fed.

8. Mark, i.e., image.

9. May please.

1. I.e., this is.

2. Unless.

- Or too greet sorwe heeld it in distresse,  
 245 So ful it was of beautee with plesaunce.  
 At after-diner gonne they to daunce,  
 And singe also, save Dorigen allone,  
 Which made alway hir complainte and hir mone,<sup>°</sup> *moan*  
 For she ne sawgh him on the daunce go  
 250 That was hir housbonde and hir love also.  
 But nathelees she moste<sup>°</sup> a time abide, *must*  
 And with good hope lete<sup>°</sup> hir sorwe slide. *make*  
 Upon this daunce, amonges othere men,  
 Daunced a squier bifore Dorigen  
 255 That fressher was and jolier<sup>°</sup> of array, *gayer*  
 As to my doom,<sup>°</sup> than is the month of May. *judgment*  
 He singeth, daunceth, passing<sup>°</sup> any man *surpassing*  
 That is or was sith<sup>°</sup> that the world bigan. *since*  
 Therwith he was, if men him sholde describe,<sup>°</sup> *describe*  
 260 Oon of the beste-faring<sup>°</sup> man on live: *handsomest*  
 Yong, strong, right vertuous, and riche and wis,  
 And wel-biloved, and holden in greet pris.<sup>°</sup> *repute*  
 And shortly, if the soothe I tellen shal,  
 Unwiting of<sup>3</sup> this Dorigen at al,  
 265 This lusty squier, servant to Venus,  
 Which that ycleped<sup>°</sup> was Aurelius, *called*  
 Hadde loved hire best of any creature  
 Two yeer and more, as was his aventure.  
 But nevere dorste he tellen hire his grevaunce:  
 270 Withouten coppe<sup>°</sup> he drank al his penaunce.<sup>4</sup> *cup*  
 He was despaired, no thing dorste he saye—  
 Save in his songes somewhat wolde he wraye<sup>°</sup> *disclose*  
 His wo, as in a general complaining:  
 He saide he loved and was biloved no thing;<sup>5</sup>  
 275 Of which matere made he manye layes,  
 Songes, complaintes, roundels, virelayes,<sup>6</sup>  
 How that he dorste nat his sorwe telle,  
 But languishsheth as a furye dooth in helle;  
 And die he moste,<sup>°</sup> he saide, as dide Ekko *must*  
 280 For Narcisus that dorste nat telle hir wo.<sup>7</sup>  
 In other manere than ye heere me saye  
 Ne dorste he nat to hire his wo biwraye,<sup>°</sup> *disclose*  
 Save that paraventure<sup>°</sup> som time at daunces, *perchance*  
 Ther yonge folk keepen hir observaunces,<sup>8</sup>  
 285 It may wel be he looked on hir face  
 In swich a wise as man that asketh grace;  
 But no thing wiste<sup>°</sup> she of his entente. *knew*

3. Unknown to.

4. Suffering; i.e., he suffered in silence.

5. Not at all.

6. The lover unable to declare his love conventionally expressed his frustration by writing verse: Aurelius produced five

kinds of verse, but only rondels and virelays are strictly defined forms.

7. Echo was unable to communicate her love for Narcissus and eventually died in despair.

8. Carry on their rituals.

- Nathelees° it happed, er they thennes°  
 wente, *nevertheless / thence*
- By cause that he was hir neighebour,  
 290 And was a man of worshipe and honour,  
 And hadde<sup>9</sup> yknowen him of time yore,<sup>1</sup>  
 They fille° in speeche, and forth more and more *fell*  
 Unto his purpos drow° Aurelius, *drew*  
 And whan he sawgh his time, he saide thus:
- 295 "Madame," quod he, "by God that this world made,  
 So that I wiste° it mighte youre herte glade,° *knew / gladden*  
 I wolde that day that youre Arveragus  
 Wente over the see that I, Aurelius,  
 Hadde went ther nevere I sholde have come again.
- 300 For wel I woot my service is-in vain:  
 My gerdon° is but bresting° of myn herte. *reward / breaking*  
 Madame, reweth<sup>2</sup> upon my paines smerte,  
 For with a word ye may me slee° or save. *slay*  
 Here at youre feet God wolde that I were grave!° *buried*
- 305 I ne have as now no leiser more to saye:  
 Have mercy, sweete, or ye wol do° me deye." *make*  
 She gan to looke upon Aurelius:  
 "Is this youre wil?" quod she, "and saye ye thus?  
 Nevere erst,"° quod she, "ne wiste I what ye mente. *before*
- 310 But now, Aurelie, I knowe youre entente,  
 By thilke° God that yaf me soule and lif, *that*  
 Ne shal I nevere been untrewē wif,  
 In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit.  
 I wol be his to whom that I am knit:° *joined*
- 315 Take this for final answerē as of me."  
 But after that in play thus saide she:  
 "Aurelie," quod she, "by hye God above,  
 Yit wolde I graunte you to been youre love,  
 Sin° I you see so pitously complaine, *since*
- 320 Looke what day that endelong° Britaine *along*  
 Ye remeve° alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon, *remove*  
 That they ne lette° ship ne boot° to goon. *hinder / boat*  
 I saye, whan ye han maad the coost° so clene *coast*  
 Of rokkes that there nis no stoon yseene,
- 325 Thanne wol I love you best of any man—  
 Have heer my trouthe°—in al that evere I can. *word*  
 For wel I woot that it shal nevere bitide.  
 Lat swiche folies out of youre herte slide!  
 What daintee° sholde a man han by his lif *delight*
- 330 For to love another mannes wif,  
 That hath hir body whan so that him liketh?"<sup>3</sup>  
 Aurelius ful ofte sore siketh:° *sighs*

9. I.e., she had.

1. Long past.

2. Have pity on.

3. It pleases.

- “Is ther noon other grace in you?” quod he.  
 “No, by that Lord,” quod she, “that maked me.”
- 335 Wo was Aurelie whan that he this herde,  
 And with a sorweful herte he thus answerde.  
 “Madame,” quod he, “this were an impossible.  
 Thanne moot° I die of sodein deeth horrible.” *must*  
 And with that word he turned him anoon.
- 340 Tho° come hir othere freendes many oon, *then*  
 And in the aleyes° romeden up and down, *paths*  
 And no thing wiste of this conclusioun,  
 But sodeinly bigonne revel newe,  
 Til that the bryghte sonne loste his hewe,
- 345 For th’ orisonte° hath reft<sup>4</sup> the sonne his light— *horizon*  
 This is as muche to saye as it was night.  
 And hoom they goon in joye and in solas,° *delight*  
 Save only wrecche° Aurelius, allas. *wretched*  
 He to his hous is goon with sorweful herte;
- 350 He seeth he may nat from his deeth asterte;° *escape*  
 Him seemed that he felte his herte colde;  
 Up to the hevене his handes he gan holde,  
 And on his knees bare he sette him down,  
 And in his raving saide his orisoun.
- 355 For verray wo out of his wit he braide;° *went*  
 He niste<sup>5</sup> what he spak, but thus he saide;  
 With pitous herte his plainte° hath he bigonne *lament*  
 Unto the goddes, and first unto the sonne:  
 He saide, “Appollo, god and governour
- 360 Of every plaunte, herbe, tree and flowr,  
 That yivest after thy declinacioun<sup>6</sup>  
 To eech of hem his time and his sesoun,  
 As thyn herberwe<sup>7</sup> chaungeth, lowe or hye;  
 Lord Phebus, cast thy merciabele° yē *merciful*
- 365 On wrecche Aurelie which that am but lorn.° *lost*  
 Lo, lord, my lady hath my deeth ysworn  
 Withouten gilt, but° thy benignitee *unless*  
 Upon my deedly herte have som pitee;  
 For wel I woot, lord Phebus, if you lest,<sup>8</sup>
- 370 Ye may me helpen, save my lady, best.<sup>9</sup> *describe*  
 Now voucheth sauf that I may you devise° *helped*  
 How that I may been holpe,° and in what wise: *bright*  
 Youre blisful suster, Lucina<sup>1</sup> the sheene,  
 That of the see is chief goddesse and queene—
- 375 Though Neptunus have deitee in the see,  
 Yit emperisse° aboven him is she— *empress*  
 Ye knowen wel, lord, that right as hir desir

4. Deprived of.

5. Knew not.

6. Who give, according to your position in the sky.

7. Lodging, i.e., one of the astrological houses in which the planets reside in al-

ternation.

8. It pleases.

9. Except for my lady, you may help me best.

1. I., e., Diana, the Moon.

- Is to be quiked° and lighted of youre fir,  
 For which she folweth you ful bisily,°
- 380 Right so the see desireth naturelly  
 To folwen hire, as she that is goddesse  
 Bothe in the see and rivers more and lesse;  
 Wherefore, lord Phebus, this is my requeste:  
 Do this miracle—or do° myn herte breste°—
- 385 That now next at this opposicioun,<sup>2</sup>  
 Which in the signe shal be of the Leoun,  
 As prayeth hire so greet a flood to bringe.  
 That five fadme° at the leeste it overspringe°
- 390 And lat this flood endure yeres twaine:  
 Thanne certes to my lady may I saye,  
 ‘Holdeth youre heeste,° the rokkes been awaye.’
- Lord Phebus, dooth this miracle for me!  
 Praye hire she go no faster cours than ye—
- 395 I saye this, prayeth youre suster that she go  
 No faster cours than ye thise yeres two:  
 Thanne shal she been evene at the fulle alway,  
 And spring-flood lasten bothe night and day.  
 And but° she vouche sauf in swich manere
- 400 To graunte me my soverain lady dere,  
 Praye hire<sup>3</sup> to sinken every rok adown  
 Into hir owene derke regioun  
 Under the ground ther Pluto dwelleth inne,  
 Or nevere mo° shal I my lady winne.
- 405 Thy temple in Delphos<sup>5</sup> wol I barefoot seeke.  
 Lord Phebus, see the teres on my cheeke,  
 And of my paine have som compassioun.”  
 And with that word in swoun° he fil° adown,  
 And longe time he lay forth in a traunce.
- 410 His brother, which that knew of his penaunce,°  
 Up caughte him, and to bedde he hath him brought.  
 Despaired in this torment and this thought  
 Lete° I this woful creature lie—  
 Chese<sup>4</sup> he for me wher° he wol live or die.
- 415 Arveragus with hele° and greet honour,  
 As he that was of chivalrye the flour,  
 Is comen hoom, and othere worthy men:  
 O, blisful artou now, thou Dorigen,  
 That hast thy lusty housbonde in thine armes,
- 420 The fresshe knight, the worthy man of armes,  
 That loveth thee as his owene hertes lif.  
 No thing list<sup>5</sup> him to been imaginatif  
 If any wight hadde spoke whil he was oute
- quicken*  
*constantly*
- make / break*
- fathoms / overrun*
- promise*
- unless*
- more*  
*Delphi*
- swoon / fell*
- pain*
- leave*  
*whether*  
*prosperity*

2. The position of the sun and moon when they are at a 180-degree angle from one another as seen from the earth.

3. I.e., Diana in her capacity as goddess of the underworld.

4. Let him choose.

5. It pleases.



- To hire of love; he ne hadde of it no doute:  
 425 He nought entendeth<sup>6</sup> to swich matere,  
 But daunceth, justeth,<sup>o</sup> maketh hire good cheere. *jousts*  
 And thus in joye and blisse I lete hem dwelle,  
 And of the sike Aurelius wol I telle.  
 In langour and in torment furios  
 430 Two yeer and more lay wrecche Aurelius,  
 Er any foot he mighte on erthe goon,  
 Ne confort in this hadde he noon,  
 Save of his brother, which that was a clerk:  
 He knew of al this wo and al this werk,  
 435 For to noon other creature, certain,  
 Of this matere he dorste no word sayn.  
 Under his brest he bar it more secree<sup>o</sup> *secret*  
 Than evere dide Pamphilus for Galathee.<sup>7</sup>  
 His brest was hool<sup>o</sup> withoute<sup>o</sup> for to seene, *whole / outwardly*  
 440 But in his herte ay<sup>o</sup> was the arwe keene; *ever*  
 And wel ye knowe that of a sursanure<sup>8</sup>  
 In surgerye is perilous the cure,  
 But<sup>o</sup> men mighte touche the arwe or come therby. *unless*  
 His brother weep<sup>o</sup> and wailed prively, *wept*  
 445 Til at the laste him fil in remembrance<sup>9</sup>  
 That whiles he was at Orliens<sup>o</sup> in France,  
 As yonge clerkes that been likerous<sup>o</sup> *Orleans*  
 To reden artes<sup>1</sup> that been curious,<sup>o</sup> *desirous*  
 Seeken in every halke and every herne<sup>2</sup> *occult*  
 450 Particuler<sup>3</sup> sciences for to lerne,  
 He him remembred that, upon a day,  
 At Orliens in studye a book he sey<sup>o</sup> *saw*  
 Of magik naturel,<sup>4</sup> which his felawe,  
 That was that time a bachelor of lawe—  
 455 Al were he<sup>5</sup> ther to lerne another craft—  
 Hadde prively upon his desk ylaft:<sup>o</sup> *left*  
 Which book spak muchel of the operaciouns  
 Touching the eighte and twenty mansiouns<sup>6</sup>  
 That longen<sup>o</sup> to the moone—and swich folye *belong*  
 460 As in oure dayes is nat worth a flye,  
 For holy chirches faith in oure bileve<sup>o</sup> *creed*  
 Ne suffreth noon illusion us to greve.  
 And whan this book was in his remembraunce,  
 Anoon for joye his herte gan to daunce,  
 465 And to himself he saide prively,  
 “My brother shal be warissed<sup>o</sup> hastily, *cured*  
 For I am siker<sup>o</sup> that ther be sciences *sure*

6. Pays attention.

7. Pamphilus and Galataea are the lovers in the medieval Latin *Pamphilus de Amore*.

8. Superficially healed wound.

9. I.e., he happened to remember.

1. Study subjects.

2. Every nook and cranny.

3. Out of the way.

4. Natural magic employs astrological knowledge rather than spirits.

5. Although he was.

6. I.e., daily positions.

- By whiche men make diverse apparences,<sup>o</sup> *apparitions*  
 Swiche as thise subtil tregettoures<sup>o</sup> playe; *magicians*  
 470 For ofte at feestes have I wel herd saye  
 That tregettours withinne an halle large  
 Have maad come in a water and a barge,<sup>o</sup> *ship*  
 And in the halle rowen up and down;  
 Som time hath seemed come a grim leoun;  
 475 Som time flowres springe<sup>o</sup> as in a mede; *grow*  
 Som time a vine and grapes white and rede;  
 Som time a castel al of lim<sup>o</sup> and stoon— *lime*  
 And whan hem liked voided<sup>7</sup> it anoon:  
 Thus seemed it to every mannes sighte.  
 480 Now thanne conclude I thus: that if I mighte  
 At Orliens som old felawe yfnde  
 That hadde these moones mansions in minde,  
 Or other magik naturel above,  
 He sholde wel make my brother han his love.  
 485 For with an apparence a clerk may make  
 To mannes sighte that alle the rokkes blake  
 Of Britaine were yvoided everichoon,  
 And shippes by the brinke comen and goon,  
 And in swich forme enduren a day or two:  
 490 Thanne were my brother warisshed<sup>o</sup> of his wo; *cured*  
 Thanne moste<sup>o</sup> she needes holden hir biheeste,<sup>o</sup> *must / promise*  
 Or elles he shal shame hire at the leeste.”  
 What sholde I make a lenger<sup>o</sup> tale of this? *longer*  
 Unto his brothers bed he comen is,  
 495 And swich confort he yaf him for to goon  
 To Orliens, that up he sterte<sup>o</sup> anoon, *started*  
 And on his way forthward thanne is he fare,  
 In hope for to been lissed<sup>o</sup> of his care. *assuaged*  
 Whan they were come almost to that citee,  
 500 But if it were a two furlong or three,  
 A yong clerk roming by himself they mette,  
 Which that in Latin thriftily<sup>o</sup> hem grette,<sup>o</sup> *properly / greeted*  
 And after that he saide a wonder thing:  
 “I knowe,” quod he, “the cause of your coming.”  
 505 And er they ferther any foote wente,  
 He tolde hem al that was in hir entente.  
 This Briton clerk him axed<sup>o</sup> of felawes, *asked*  
 The whiche that he hadde knowe in olde dawes,<sup>o</sup> *days*  
 And he answerde him that they dede<sup>o</sup> were; *dead*  
 510 For which he weep<sup>o</sup> ful ofte many a tere. *wept*  
 Down of his hors Aurelius lighte anoon,  
 And with this magicien forth is he goon  
 Hoom to his hous, and maden hem wel at ese:  
 Hem lakked no vitaille that mighte hem plesse;  
 515 So wel arrayed hous as ther was oon  
 Aurelius in his lif saw nevere noon.

7. Caused to disappear.

	Ne his rootes, <sup>7</sup> ne his othere geres, <sup>o</sup>	<i>paraphernalia</i>
605	As been his centres and his arguments, <sup>8</sup> And his proporcionels convenients, <sup>9</sup> For his equacions in every thing; And by his eighte spere <sup>1</sup> in his werking <sup>o</sup>	<i>operation</i>
610	He knew ful wel how fer Alnath was shove <sup>2</sup> Fro the heed of thilke fixe Aries above That in the ninte spere considered is: <sup>3</sup> Ful subtilly he calculated <sup>o</sup> al this.	<i>calculated</i>
	When he hadde founde his firste mansioun, <sup>4</sup> He knew the remenant by proporcioun, <sup>5</sup>	
615	And knew the arising of his moone weel, And in whos face and terme <sup>6</sup> and every deel, <sup>o</sup> And knew ful wel the moones mansioun Accordant <sup>7</sup> to his operacioun,	<i>part</i>
620	And knew also his othere observaunces <sup>o</sup> For swiche illusions and swiche meschaunces As hethen folk useden in thilke <sup>o</sup> dayes; For which no lenger maked he delayes, But, thurgh his magik, for a wike <sup>o</sup> or twaye	<i>rules</i> <i>those</i> <i>week</i>
625	It seemed that alle the rokkes were awaye. Aurelius, which that yit despaired is Wher <sup>o</sup> he shall han his love or fare amis, Awaiteth night and day on this miracle; And whan he knew that there was noon obstacle, That voided were thise rokkes everichoon,	<i>whether</i>
630	Down to his maistres feet he fil <sup>o</sup> anoon, And saide, "I, woful wrecche Aurelius, Thanke you, lord, and lady myn Venus, That me han holpen <sup>o</sup> fro my cares colde." And to the temple his way forth hath he holde,	<i>fell</i> <i>helped</i>
635	Wher as he knew he sholde his lady see. And whan he saw his time, anoon right he, With dredful <sup>o</sup> herte and with ful humble cheere, Salued <sup>o</sup> hath his sovereign lady dere.	<i>fear-struck</i> <i>greeted</i>
	"My right <sup>8</sup> lady," quod this woful man, 640 "Whom I most drede and love as best I can, And lothest were of al this world displese, Nere it <sup>9</sup> that I for you have swich disese That I moste <sup>o</sup> dien heer at youre foot anoon,	<i>must</i>

7. Tables for making astrological propositions concerning planetary position, degrees of influence, etc.

8. Centers and arguments are astronomical instruments for determining the positions of planets in relation to fixed stars.

9. Fitting proportionals, i.e., special tables for scaling down more general planetary motions to the most particular.

1. Sphere: i.e., the sphere of the fixed stars.

2. He knew full well how far Alnath

(the star Aries) had moved.

3. From the head of that fixed star Aries which is considered to be above, in the ninth sphere.

4. I.e., the first position of the moon.

5. He knew the remnant (rest of the positions) by the use of proportion.

6. Face and term are sectors of the signs of the zodiac.

7. I.e., to be comfortable.

8. Own true.

9. Were it not.

- Nought wolde I telle how me is wo-bigoon.  
 645 But certes, outhere<sup>o</sup> moste I die or plaine:<sup>o</sup> *either / complain*  
 Ye sleen<sup>o</sup> me giltelees for verray paine; *slay*  
 But of my deeth though that ye have no routhe,<sup>o</sup> *pity*  
 Aviseth you<sup>1</sup> er that ye breke youre trouthe.  
 Repenteth you, for thilke God above,  
 650 Er ye me sleen<sup>o</sup> by cause that I you love. *slay*  
 For Madame, wel ye woot what ye han hight<sup>o</sup>— *promised*  
 Not that I challenge any thing of right  
 Of you, my sovereign lady, but youre grace:  
 But in a gardin yond at swich a place,  
 655 Ye woot right wel what ye bihighten<sup>o</sup> me, *promised*  
 And in myn hand youre trouthe plighthen ye  
 To love me best. God woot ye saiden so,  
 Al<sup>o</sup> be that I unworthy am therto. *although*  
 Madame, I speke it for the honour of you  
 660 More than to save myn hertes lif right now.  
 I have do so as ye comanded me,  
 And if ye vouche sauf, ye may go see.  
 Dooth as you list, have youre biheeste<sup>o</sup> in minde, *promise*  
 For quik<sup>o</sup> or deed<sup>o</sup> right ther ye shal me finde. *living / dead*  
 665 In you lith<sup>o</sup> al to do<sup>o</sup> me live or deye: *lies / cause*  
 But wel I woot the rokkes been awaye.”  
 He taketh his leve and she astoned<sup>o</sup> stood: *astonished*  
 In al hir face nas a drope of blood;  
 She wende<sup>o</sup> nevere have come in swich a trappe. *thought*  
 670 “Allas,” quod she, “that evere this sholde happe!  
 For wende I nevere by possibilitee  
 That swich a monstre<sup>o</sup> or merveile mighte be; *wonder*  
 It is agains the proces<sup>2</sup> of nature.”  
 And hoom she gooth a sorweful creature.  
 675 For verray fere unnethe<sup>o</sup> may she go.<sup>o</sup> *scarcely / walk*  
 She weepeth, wailleth al a day or two,  
 And swouneth<sup>o</sup> that it routhe<sup>o</sup> was to see. *swoons / pity*  
 But why it was to no wight tolde she,  
 For out of town was goon Arveragus.  
 680 But to hirself she spak and saide thus,  
 With face pale and with ful sorweful cheere,<sup>o</sup> *countenance*  
 In hir complainte, as ye shal after heere:  
 “Allas,” quod she, “on thee, Fortune, I plaine,<sup>o</sup> *complain*  
 That unwar<sup>o</sup> wrapped hast me in thy chaine, *unawares*  
 685 For which t’ escape woot I no socour<sup>o</sup>— *help*  
 Save only deeth or dishonour:  
 Oon of these two bihoveth me to chese.<sup>o</sup> *choose*  
 But natheles yit have I levere to lese<sup>o</sup> *lose*  
 My lif, than of my body to have a shame,  
 690 Or knowen myselven fals or lese my name,

1. Consider.

2. Due course.

And with my deeth I may be quit,<sup>3</sup> ywis.  
 Hath ther nat many a noble wif er this,  
 And many a maide, yslain hirself, allas,  
 Rather than with hir body doon trespas?<sup>o</sup> sin  
 695 Yis, certes, lo, these stories beren witness:  
 When thrifty tyrants ful of cursednesse<sup>o</sup> wickedness  
 Hadde slain Phidon<sup>4</sup> in Atthenes atte feeste,  
 They comanded his doughtren for t'arreste,  
 And bringen hem biforn hem in despit<sup>o</sup> scorn  
 700 Al naked, to fulfille hir foule delit,  
 And in hir fadres blood they made hem daunce  
 Upon the pavement—God give hem meschaunce!  
 For which these woful maidens, ful of drede,  
 Rather than they wolde lese<sup>o</sup> hir maidenhede, lose  
 705 They prively been stert<sup>5</sup> into a welle,  
 And dreinte<sup>o</sup> hemselven, as the bookes telle. drowned  
 They of Messene lete enquire and seeke<sup>6</sup>  
 Of Lacedomye<sup>o</sup> fifty maidens eke, Lacedaemonia  
 On whiche they wolden doon hir lecherye;  
 710 But ther was noon of al that compaignye  
 That she nas slain, and with a good entente  
 Chees<sup>o</sup> rather for to die than assente chose  
 To been oppressed<sup>o</sup> of hir maidenhede: ravished  
 Why sholde I thanne to die been in drede?  
 715 Lo, eek, the tyrant Aristoclidēs  
 That loved a maiden highte Stymphalides,<sup>o</sup> Stymphalis  
 Whan that hir fader slain was on a night,  
 Unto Dianes temple gooth she aright,  
 And hente<sup>o</sup> the image in hir handes two; seized  
 720 Fro which image wolde she nevere go:  
 No wight ne mighte hir handes of it arace,<sup>o</sup> tear  
 Til she was slain right in the selve<sup>o</sup> place. same  
 Now sith<sup>o</sup> that maidens hadden swich despit<sup>o</sup> since / indignation  
 To been defouled with mannes foul delit,  
 725 Wel ought a wif rather hirselveslee<sup>o</sup> slay  
 Than be defouled, as it thinketh me.  
 What shal I sayn of Hasdrubales wif  
 That at Cartage birafte<sup>7</sup> hirself hir lif?  
 For whan she saw that Romains wan<sup>o</sup> the town, won  
 730 She took hir children alle and skipte adown  
 Into the fir, and chees rather to die  
 Than any Romain dide hire vilainye.  
 Hath nat Lucrece yslain hirself, allas,

3. Freed from dilemma.

4. The story of Phidon's daughters and the thirty tyrants, as well as all the following stories about virtuous women, are from St. Jerome's tract against Jovinian.

5. Have jumped.

6. Had inquiries and searches made.

7. Deprived; Hasdrubal was King of Carthage when it was destroyed by the Romans.

- At Rome whan that she oppressed° was *raped*  
 735 Of° Tarquin, for hire thoughte it was a shame *by*  
 To liven whan that she hadde lost hir name?  
 The sevene maidens of Milesie° also *Miletus*  
 Han slain hemself for verray drede and wo  
 Rather than folk of Gaule hem sholde oppresse:  
 740 Mo° than a thousand stories, as I gesse, *more*  
 Coude I now telle as touching this matere.  
 Whan Habradate° was slain, his wif so dere *Abradates*  
 Hirselves slow,° and leet hir blood to glide *slew*  
 In Habradates woundes deepe and wide,  
 745 And saide, 'My body at the leeste way  
 Ther shal no wight defoulen, if I may.'<sup>8</sup>  
 What sholde I mo ensamples° herof sayn? *examples*  
 Sith° that so manye han hemselven slain *since*  
 Wel rather than they wolde defouled be,  
 750 I wol conclude that it is bet° for me *better*  
 To sleen° myself than been defouled thus: *slay*  
 I wol be trewe unto Arveragus,  
 Or rather slee myself in som manere—  
 As dide Demociones° doughter dere, *Demotion's*  
 755 By cause that she wolde nat defouled be.  
 O Cedasus,° it is ful greet pitee *Scedasus*  
 To reden how thy doughtren deide, allas,  
 That slowe hemself for<sup>9</sup> swich manere cas.  
 As greet a pitee was it, or wel moor,  
 760 The Theban maiden that for Nichanor° *Nicanor*  
 Hirselves slow right for swich manere wo.  
 Another Theban maiden dide right so:  
 For oon of Macedonie hadde hire oppressed,  
 She with hir deeth hir maidenhede redressed.<sup>1</sup>  
 765 What shal I sayn of Nicerates wif  
 That for swich caas birafte himself hir lif?  
 How trewe eek was to Alcebiades<sup>2</sup>  
 His love, that rather for to dien chees° *chose*  
 Than for to suffre his body unburied be.  
 770 Lo, which a wif was Alceste,"<sup>3</sup> quod she.  
 "What saith Omer<sup>4</sup> of goode Penelopee?  
 Al Greece knoweth of hir chastitee.  
 Pardee, of Laodomia<sup>5</sup> is writen thus,  
 That whan at Troye was slain Protheselaus,

8. If I can help it.

9. I.e., for fear of.

1. Made amends for.

2. Alcibiades' mistress risked death by burying his body after he had been decapitated by the Spartan Lysander; she did not, however, lose her life as a result.

3. Alcestis, the proposed heroine of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, died in her husband's place.

4. Homer relates Odysseus' return from Troy to his faithful wife Penelope.

5. Lacomia followed her dead husband Proteslaus to the underworld.

- 775 No lenger wolde she live after his day.  
 The same of noble Porcia<sup>6</sup> telle I may:  
 Withoute Brutus coude she nat live,  
 To whom she hadde al hool<sup>o</sup> hir herte yive. *whole*
- The parfit wifhood of Arthemesie<sup>7</sup>
- 780 Honoured is thurgh al the Barbarye.  
 O Teuta<sup>8</sup> queen, thy wify chastitee  
 To alle wives may a mirour be!  
 The same thing I saye of Bilia,  
 Of Rodogone, and eek Valeria."<sup>9</sup>
- 785 Thus plained<sup>d</sup> Dorigen a day or twaye, *lamented*  
 Purposing evere that she wolde deye.  
 But natheles upon the thridde night  
 Hoom cam Arveragus, this worthy knight,  
 And axed<sup>o</sup> hire why that she weep<sup>o</sup> so sore, *asked / wept*
- 790 And she gan weepen evere lenger the more.<sup>1</sup>  
 "Allas," quod she, "that evere I was born:  
 Thus have I said," quod she; "thus have I sworn—"  
 And tolle him al as ye han herd bifore:  
 It needeth nat reherce it you namore.
- 795 This housbonde with glad cheer<sup>o</sup> in frendly wise *manner*  
 Answerde and saide as I shal you devise:  
 "Is there ought elles, Dorigen, but this?"  
 "Nay, nay," quod she, "God help me so as wis,<sup>o</sup> *surely*  
 This is too muche, and<sup>o</sup> it were Goddes wille." *if*
- 800 "Ye, wif," quod he, "lat sleepen that<sup>o</sup> is stille. *what*  
 It may be wel paraunter<sup>o</sup> yit today. *perhaps*  
 Ye shul youre trouthe<sup>2</sup> holden, by my fay,<sup>o</sup> *faith*  
 For God so wisly<sup>o</sup> have mercy upon me, *surely*  
 I hadde wel levere ystiked<sup>o</sup> for to be, *stabbed*
- 805 For verray love which that I to you have,  
 But if<sup>3</sup> ye sholde youre trouthe keepe and save:  
 Trouthe is the hyeste thing<sup>4</sup> that man may keepe."  
 But with that word he brast<sup>o</sup> anoon to weepe, *burst*  
 And saide, "I you forbede, up<sup>o</sup> paine of deeth, *upon*
- 810 That nevere whil thee lasteth lif ne breeth,  
 To no wight tel thou of this aventure.  
 As I may best I wol my wo endure,  
 Ne make no countenance<sup>o</sup> of hevynesse, *appearance*  
 That folk of you may deemen<sup>o</sup> harm or gesse." *suspect*

6. Portia swallowed burning coals on learning of Brutus' death at the battle of Philippi.

7. Artemesia built for her husband King Mausolus the famed tomb called the Mausoleum.

8. Teuta, Queen of Illyria, was unmarried; Dorigen seems to be stretching a point.

9. Bilia's prowess seems to have con-

sisted in enduring her husband's bad breath in uncomplaining silence; Rhodogone slew her nurse, who suggested that she remarry; Valeria refused to marry again.

1. Always more and more.

2. Pledged word.

3. Unless.

4. Legal bond.

- 815 And forth he cleped° a squier and a maide: *called*  
 "Go forth anon with Dorigen," he saide,  
 "And bringeth hire to swich a place anon."  
 They toke hir leve and on hir way they goon,  
 But they ne wiste° why they thider wente: *knew*
- 820 He nolde no wight tellen his entente.  
 Paraventure an heep of you, ywis,° *indeed*  
 Wol holden him a lewed° man in this, *stupid*  
 That he wol putte his wif in jupartye.° *jeopardy*  
 Herkneþ the tale er ye upon hire crye:
- 825 She may have better fortune than you seemeth,<sup>5</sup>  
 And whan that ye han herd the tale, deemeth.° *judge*  
 This squier which that highte Aurelius,  
 On Dorigen that was so amorous,  
 Of aventure<sup>6</sup> happed° hire to meete *happened*
- 830 Amide the town, right in the quikkeste° streete, *busiest*  
 As she was boun° to goon the way forth right° *prepared / direct*  
 Toward the gardin ther as she hadde hight;° *promised*  
 And he was to the gardinward also,  
 For wel he spied whan she wolde go
- 835 Out of hir hous to any manere place.  
 But thus they meete of aventure or grace,  
 And he salueth° hire with glad entente, *greet*  
 And axed° of hire whiderward she wente. *asked*
- 840 And she answerde half as she were mad,  
 "Unto the gardin as myn housbonde bad,<sup>7</sup> *bade*  
 My trouthe for to holde, allas, allas!"  
 Aurelius gan wondren on this cas,  
 And in his herte hadde greet compassioun
- 845 And of Arveragus, the worthy knight,  
 That bad hire holden al that she hadde hight,  
 So loth him was his wif sholde breke hir trouthe;  
 And in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe,° *pity*  
 Considering the beste on every side
- 850 That fro his lust° yit were him levere abide<sup>7</sup> *pleasure*  
 Than doon so heigh a cherlish wrecchednesse<sup>8</sup>  
 Agains franchise° and alle gentillesse; *generosity*  
 For which in fewe wordes saide he thus:-  
 "Madame, sayeth to youre lord Arveragus
- 855 That sith° I see his grete gentillesse *since*  
 To you, and eek I see wel youre distresse,  
 That him were levere han shame—and that were routhe—  
 Than ye to me sholde breke thus youre trouthe,  
 I have wel levere<sup>9</sup> evere to suffre wo

5. It seems.

6. By chance.

7. I.e., abstain.

8. I.e., low-born, miserable act.

9. Had much rather.



- 860 Than I departe° the love bitwixe you two. *divide*  
 I you releesse, Madame, into youre hond,  
 Quit every serement° and every bond *oath*  
 That ye han maad to me as herbiforn,  
 Sith° thilke time which that ye were born. *since*
- 865 My trouthe I plighte, I shal you nevere repreve° *reproach*  
 Of no biheeste.° And here I take my leve, *promise*  
 As of the treweste and the beste wif  
 That evere yit I knew in al my lif.  
 But every wif be war of hir biheeste:
- 870 On Dorigen remembreth at the leeste.  
 Thus can a squier doon a gentil deede  
 As wel as can a knight, withouten drede.”° *doubt*  
 She thanketh him upon hir knees al bare,  
 And hoom unto hir housbonde is she fare,
- 875 And tolde him al as ye han herd me said.  
 And be ye siker,° he was so wel apaid° *sure / pleased*  
 That it were impossible me to write.  
 What sholde I lenger of this caas endite?  
 Arveragus and Dorigen his wif
- 880 In sovereign blisse leden forth hir lif.  
 Never eft° ne was ther ange hem bitweene: *again*  
 He cherisseth hire as though she were a queene,  
 And she was to him trewe of everemore.  
 Of these two folk ye gete of me namore.
- 885 Aurelius, that his cost hath al forlorn,° *lost*  
 Curseth the time that evere he was born.  
 “Allas,” quod he, “allas that I bihighte° *promised*  
 Of pured° gold a thousand pound of wighte° *refined / weight*  
 Unto this philosophre. How shall I do?
- 890 I see namore but that I am fordo.° *ruined*  
 Myn heritage moot° I needes selle *must*  
 And been a beggere. Here may I nat dwelle,  
 And shamen al my kinrede° in this place, *kindred*  
 But° I of him may gete better grace. *unless*
- 895 But natheles I wol of him assaye  
 At certain dayes yeer by yere to paye,  
 And thanke him of his grete curteisye:  
 My trouthe wol I keepe, I nil nat lie.”
- 900 With herte soor he gooth unto his cofre,  
 And broughte gold unto this philosophre  
 The value of five hundred pound, I gesse,  
 And him biseecheth of his gentillesse  
 To graunten him dayes<sup>1</sup> of the remenaunt,° *remainder*  
 And saide, “Maister, I dar wel make avaunt° *boast*
- 905 I failed nevere of my trouthe as yit,  
 For sikerly° my dette shal be quit *surely*

1. I.e., extended terms.

- Towardes you, how evere that I fare,  
 To goon abegged° in my kirtel° bare. *abegging / undergarment*  
 But wolde ye vouche sauf upon suretee° *security*
- 910 Two yer or three for to respiten<sup>2</sup> me,  
 Thanne were I wel, for elles moot° I selle *must*  
 Myn heritage: ther is namore to telle.”
- This philosophre sobrely answerde,  
 And saide thus, whan he thise wordes herde,  
 915 “Have I nat holden covenant unto thee?”  
 “Yis, certes, wel and trewely,” quod he.  
 “Hastou nat had thy lady as thee liketh?”<sup>3</sup>  
 “No, no,” quod he and sorwefully he siketh.° *sighs*  
 “What was the cause? Tel me if thou can.”
- 920 Aurelius his tale anoon bigan,  
 And tolde him al as ye han herd bifore:  
 It needeth nat to you reherce it more.  
 He saide, “Arveragus, of gentillesse,  
 Hadde levere die in sorwe and in distresse  
 925 Than that his wif were on hir trouthe fals.”  
 The sorwe of Dorigen he tolde him als,° *also*  
 How loth hire was to been a wikked wif,  
 And that she levere hadde lost that day hir lif,  
 And that hir trouthe she swoor thurgh innocence:  
 930 She nevere erst° hadde herd speke of apparence.° *before / illusion*  
 “That made me han of hire so greet pitee;  
 And right as freely° as he sente hire me, *generously*  
 As freely sente I hire to him again:  
 This al and som,<sup>4</sup> ther is namore to sayn.”
- 935 This philosophre answerde, “Leve° brother, *dear*  
 Everich of you dide gentilly to other.  
 Thou art a squier, and he is a knight:  
 But God forbede, for his blisful might,  
 But if a clerk coude doon a gentil deede  
 940 As wel as any of you, it is no drede.° *doubt*  
 Sire, I releesse thee thy thousand pound,  
 As thou right now were copen out of the ground,<sup>5</sup>  
 Ne nevere er° now ne haddest knowen me. *before*  
 For sire, I wol nat take a peny of thee,  
 945 For al my craft° ne nought for my travaile.° *art / labor*  
 Thou hast ypayed wel for my vitaile:° *food*  
 It is ynough. And farewel, have good day.”  
 And took his hors and forth he gooth his way.
- Lordinges, this question thanne wol I axe now:  
 950 Which was the moste free,° as thinketh you? *generous*  
 Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende.  
 I can namore: my tale is at an ende.

2. Give respite.  
 3. It pleases.

4. This is all there is to it.  
 5. Had crept.

# The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale<sup>1</sup>

## The Introduction

Oure Hoste gan to swere as he wre wood;° insane  
 "Harrow,"° quod he, "by nailcs<sup>2</sup> and by blood, help

1. The Pardoner is the chief actor in a grim comedy which shows how a clever hypocrite exploits Christian principles in order to enrich himself—and which, in the Epilogue, suggests that the exploiter of Christian principles is not immune to their operation. The medieval pardoner's function was to collect money for charitable enterprises supported by branches of the church and to act as the Pope's agent in rewarding donors with some temporal remission of their sins. According to theological doctrine, St. Peter—and through him his papal successors—received from Christ the power to make a gift of mercy from God's infinite treasury to those of the faithful that had earned special favor, such as contributors to charity. The charitable enterprises themselves—generally hospitals—hired pardoners to raise money, but the pardoners had also to be licensed by the Pope to pass on to contributors the papal indulgence. By canon law pardoners were permitted to work only in a prescribed area; within that area they might visit churches during Sunday service, briefly explain their mission, receive contributions, and, in the Pope's name, issue indulgence, which was considered not a sale, but a free gift made in return for a free gift. In actual fact pardoners seem seldom to have behaved as the law required them. Since a parish priest was forbidden to exclude properly licensed pardoners, they made their way into churches at will, and once there did not confine themselves to a mere statement of their business, but rather, in order to make the congregation free of its gifts, preached highly emotive sermons and boasted of the extraordinary efficacy of their own particular pardon, claiming for it powers that not even the Pope could have invested it with. An honest pardoner, if such existed, was entitled to a percentage of his collections; dishonest pardoners took more than their share, and some took everything; indeed, some were complete frauds, bearing forged credentials which, in an age when even clerical illiteracy was common, were no less impressive than if they had been real.

While Chaucer's Pardoner belongs, as he boastfully tells us, to the most dishonest class of fund-gatherers, he is an extremely able one. His text is al-

ways the same: *Radix malorum est cupiditas*, "The love of money is the root of all evil," and he uses it most effectively in order to frighten his hearers into a generosity that will fulfill his own cupidity. The Pardoner's audacious description of his behavior in a parish church is followed by a sample sermon on his invariable text. Aware that his audience is more interested in narrative than in the moralization one expects of a sermon he first introduces the three dissolute young men of his *exemplum*, that is, of the story which is to illustrate concretely the sermon's point. Having titillated his hearers with the promise of a lurid story, he proceeds to the moralization; curiously enough, this does not concern the sin of avarice, but drunkenness, gluttony, lechery, gambling, and cursing. Yet the apparent lack of logic serves the Pardoner's deeper purpose, for these are the sins people find it exciting to hear about. When his audience has thus been emotionally prepared by a discussion of the debauchees' more flamboyant sins, the Pardoner tells his *exemplum* of the destructiveness of avarice, shutting it off at the moment of highest interest, and concluding with a demand to the congregation for money in return for his pardon.

The story of the young men who seek Death only to find him in a treasure that had made them forget him is a masterpiece of irony, and indeed the Pardoner is in all ways a master ironist. So highly developed is his own sense of irony that it enables him to feel superior not only to other men but to God, for he dares to exempt himself from the effect of his Christian text. Yet the brief Epilogue seems to show that God's irony, like His other attributes, is supreme. The one fact that the Pardoner's candid confession has concealed—that it was perhaps spoken in order to conceal—is that he is a eunuch. When in the Epilogue his proud avarice leads him to see if he can get money from the pilgrims to whom he has revealed his hypocrisy, the Pardoner's secret is revealed by the Host's coarse response, and the verbal facility by which he maintains his superiority fails him.

2. I.e., God's nails.

desire

- This was a fals cherl and a fals justise.<sup>3</sup>  
 As shameful deeth as herte may devise  
 5 Come to this juges and hir advocats.  
 Algate° this sely° maide is slain, allas! *at any rate / innocent*  
 Allas, too dere boughte she beautee!  
 Wherefore I saye alday° that men may see *always*  
 The yiftes of Fortune and of Nature  
 10 Been cause of deeth to many a creature.  
 As bothe yiftes that I speke of now,  
 Men han ful ofte more for harm than prow.<sup>o</sup> *benefit*  
 "But trewely, myn owene maister dere,  
 This is a pitous tale for to heere.  
 15 But nathelees, passe over, is no fors.<sup>4</sup>  
 I praye to God so save thy gentil cors,<sup>o</sup> *body*  
 And eek thine urinals and thy jurdones,<sup>5</sup>  
 Thyn ipocras<sup>6</sup> and eek thy galioncs,  
 And every boiste° ful of thy letuarve°— *box / medicine*  
 20 God blesse hem, and oure lady Sainte Marye.  
 So mote I theen,<sup>7</sup> thou art a propre man,  
 And lik a prelat, by Saint Ronian!<sup>8</sup>  
 Saide I nat wel? I can nat speke in terme.<sup>9</sup>  
 But wel I woot, thou doost° myn herte to erme° *make / grieve*  
 25 That I almost have caught a cardinacle.<sup>1</sup>  
 By corpus bones,<sup>2</sup> but if I have triacle,<sup>o</sup> *medicine*  
 Or elles a draughte of moiste° and corny° ale, *fresh / malty*  
 Or but I heere anoon° a merye tale, *at once*  
 Myn herte is lost for pitec of this maide.  
 30 "Thou bel ami,<sup>3</sup> thou Pardoner," he saide,  
 "Tel us som mirthe or japes° right anoon."  
 "It shal be doon," quod he, "by Saint Ronion.  
 But first," quod he, "here at this ale-stake<sup>4</sup>  
 I wol bothe drinke and eten of a cake."  
 35 And right anoon these gentils gan to crye,  
 "Nay, lat him telle us of no ribaudyc.<sup>o</sup> *ribaldry*  
 Tel us som moral thing that we may lere,<sup>o</sup> *learn*  
 Som wit,<sup>5</sup> and thanne wol we gladly heere."  
 "I graunte, ywis," quod he, "but I moot thinke  
 40 Upon som honeste° thing whil that I drinke." *decent*

3. The Host has been affected by the Physician's sad tale of the Roman maiden Virginia, whose great beauty caused a judge to attempt to obtain her person by means of a trumped-up lawsuit in which he connived with a "churl" who claimed her as his slave; in order to preserve her chastity, her father killed her.

4. I.e., never mind.

5. Jordans (chamber pots): the Host is somewhat confused in his endeavor to use technical medical terms.

6. A medicinal drink named after Hippocrates; "galioncs": a medicine, prob-

ably invented on the spot by the Host, named after Galen.

7. So might I thrive.

8. St. Ronan or St. Ninian, with a possible play on "runion" (sexual organ).

9. Speak in technical idiom.

1. Apparently a cardiac condition, confused in the Host's mind with a cardinal.

2. An illiterate oath, mixing "God's bones" with *corpus dei*. "But if": unless.

3. Fair friend.

4. Sign of a tavern.

5. I.e., something with significance.

The Prologue

Lordinges—quod he—in chirches whan I preche,  
 I paine me<sup>6</sup> to han an hautein° speche, loud  
 And ringe it out as round as gooth a belle,  
 For I can al by rote<sup>7</sup> that I telle.  
 45 My theme is alway oon,<sup>8</sup> and evere was:  
*Radix malorum est cupiditas.*<sup>9</sup>  
 First I pronounce whennes° that I come, whence  
 And thanne my bulles<sup>1</sup> shewe I alle and some:  
 Oure lige lordes seel on my patente,<sup>2</sup>  
 50 That shewe I first, my body to warente,<sup>o</sup> keep safe  
 That no man be so bold, ne preest ne clerk,  
 Me to destourbe of Cristes holy werk.  
 And after that thanne telle I forth my tales<sup>3</sup>—  
 Bulles of popes and of cardinales,  
 55 Of patriarkes and bisshopes I shewe,  
 And in Latin I speke a wordes fewe,  
 To saffron with<sup>4</sup> my predicacioun,<sup>o</sup> preaching  
 And for to stire hem to devocioun.  
 Thanne shewe I forth my longe crystal stones,<sup>o</sup> jars  
 60 Ycrammed ful of cloutes° and of bones— rags  
 Relikes been they, as weenen° they eechoon. suppose  
 Thanne have I in laton° a shulder-boon zinc  
 Which that was of an holy Jewes sheep.  
 “Goode men,” I saye, “take of my wordes keep:° notice  
 65 If that this boon be wasshe in any welle,  
 If cow, or calf, or sheep, or oxe swelle,  
 That any worm hath ete or worm ystonge,<sup>5</sup>  
 Take water of that welle and wassh his tonge,  
 And it is hool<sup>6</sup> anon. And ferthermoor,  
 70 Of pokkes° and of scabbe and every soor° pox / sore  
 Shal every sheep be hool that of this welle  
 Drinketh a draughte. Take keep eek° that I telle: also  
 If that the goode man that the beestes oweth° owns  
 Wol every wike,<sup>o</sup> er that the cok him croweth, week  
 75 Fasting drinken of this welle a draughte—  
 As thilke° holy Jew oure eldres taughte— that same  
 His beestes and his stoor° shal multiplye. stock  
 “And sire, also it heleth jalousye:  
 For though a man be falle in jalous rage,  
 80 Lat maken with this water his potage,<sup>o</sup> soup  
 And nevere shal he more his wif mistriste,<sup>o</sup> mistrust

6. Take pains.

7. I know all by heart.

8. I.e., the same.

9. Avarice is the root of evil (I Timothy vi.10).

1. Episcopal mandates; “alle and some”: each and every one.

2. I.e., the Pope's seal on my papal license.

3. I go on with my yarn.

4. To add spice to.

5. That has eaten or been bitten by any worm.

6. I.e., sound.

- Though he the soothe of hir defaute wiste,<sup>7</sup>  
 Al hadde she<sup>8</sup> taken preestes two or three.  
 "Here is a mitein<sup>o</sup> eek that ye may see: *mitten*
- 85 He that his hand wol putte in this mitein  
 He shal have multiplying of his grain,  
 Whan he hath sowen, be it whete or otes—  
 So that he offre pens or elles grotes.<sup>9</sup>  
 "Goode men and wommen, oo thing warne I you:
- 90 If any wight be in this chirche now  
 That hath doon sinne horrible, that he  
 Dar nat for shame of it yshiven<sup>o</sup> be, *absolved*  
 Or any womman, be she yong or old,  
 That hath ymaked hir housbonde cokewold,<sup>o</sup> *cuckold*
- 95 Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace  
 To offren to<sup>1</sup> my relikes in this place;  
 And whoso findeth him out of swich blame,  
 He wol come up and offre in Goddes name,  
 And I assoile<sup>o</sup> him by the auctoritee *absolve*
- 100 Which that by bulle ygraunted was to me."  
 By this gaude<sup>o</sup> have I wonne, yeer by yeer, *trick*  
 An hundred mark<sup>2</sup> sith<sup>o</sup> I was pardoner. *since*  
 I stonde lik a clerk in my pulpet,  
 And whan the lewed<sup>o</sup> peple is down yset, *ignorant*
- 105 I preche so as ye han herd bifore,  
 And telle an hundred false japes<sup>o</sup> more. *tricks*  
 Thanne paine I me<sup>3</sup> to strecche forth the nekke,  
 And east and west upon the peple I bekke<sup>4</sup>  
 As dooth a douve,<sup>o</sup> sitting on a berne;<sup>o</sup> *dove / barn*
- 110 Mine handes and my tonge goon so yerne<sup>o</sup> *fast*  
 That it is joye to see my bisnesse.  
 Of avarice and of swich cursednesse<sup>o</sup> *sin*  
 Is al my preching, for to make hem free<sup>o</sup> *generous*  
 To yiven hir pens, and namely<sup>o</sup> unto me, *especially*
- 115 For myn entente is nat but for to winne,<sup>5</sup>  
 And no thing for correccion of sinne:  
 I rekke<sup>o</sup> nevere whan that they been beried<sup>o</sup> *care / buried*  
 Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberied.<sup>6</sup>  
 For certes, many a predicacioun<sup>o</sup> *sermon*
- 120 Comth ofte time of yvel entencioun:  
 Som for plesance of folk and flaterye,  
 To been avaunced<sup>o</sup> by ypocrisye, *promoted*  
 And som for vaine glorye, and som for hate;  
 For whan I dar noon otherways debate,<sup>o</sup> *fight*
- 125 Thanne wol I stinge him with my tonge smerte  
 In preching, so that he shal nat asterte<sup>o</sup> *escape*  
 To been defamcd falsly, if that he

7. Knew the truth of her infidelity.

8. Even if she had.

9. Pennies, groats, coins.

1. To make gifts in reverence of.

2. Marks (pecuniary units).

manerly

3. I take pains.

4. I.e., I shake my head.

5. Only to gain.

6. Go blackberrying, i.e., go to hell.

Hath trespassed to<sup>7</sup> my bretheren or to me.  
 For though I telle nought his propre name,  
 130 Men shal wel knowe that it is the same  
 By signes and by othere circumstaunces.  
 Thus quite<sup>o</sup> I folk that doon us displesaunces;<sup>8</sup> *pay back*  
 Thus spete<sup>o</sup> I out my venim under hewe<sup>o</sup> *spit / color*  
 Of holinesse, to seeme holy and trewe.  
 135 But shortly myn entente I wol devise:<sup>o</sup> *describe*  
 I preche of no thing but for coveitise;  
 Therefore my theme is yit and evere was  
*Radix malorum est cupiditas.*  
 Thus can I preche again that same vice  
 140 Which that I use, and that is avarice.  
 But though myself be guilty in that sinne,  
 Yit can I make other folk to twinne<sup>o</sup> *separate*  
 From avarice, and sore to repente—  
 But that is nat my principal entente:  
 145 I preche no thing but for coveitise.  
 Of this matere it oughte ynough suffise.  
 Thanne telle I hem ensamples<sup>9</sup> many oon  
 Of olde stories longe time agoon,  
 For lewed<sup>o</sup> peple loven tales olde— *ignorant*  
 150 Swiche things can they wel reporte and holde.<sup>1</sup>  
 What, trowe<sup>o</sup> ye that whiles I may preche,  
 And winne gold and silver for<sup>o</sup> I teche,  
 That I wol live in poverté wilfully?  
 Nay, nay, I thoughte<sup>o</sup> it nevere, trewely, *intended*  
 155 For I wol preche and begge in sondry landes;  
 I wol nat do no labour with mine handes,  
 Ne make baskettes and live therby,  
 By cause I wol nat beggen idelly.<sup>2</sup>  
 I wol none of the Apostles countrefete:<sup>o</sup> *imitate*  
 160 I wol have moncy, wolle,<sup>o</sup> checse, and whete, *wool*  
 Al were it<sup>3</sup> yiven of the pooreste page,  
 Or of the pooreste widwe in a village—  
 Al sholde hir children sterve<sup>4</sup> for famine.  
 Nay, I wol drinke licour of the vine  
 165 And have a joly wenche in every town.  
 But herkneth, lordinges, in conclusioun,  
 Youré liking<sup>o</sup> is that I shal telle a tale: *pleasure*  
 Now have I dronke a draughte of corny ale,  
 By God, I hope I shal you telle a thing  
 170 That shal by rcon been at youre liking;  
 For though myself be a ful vicious man,  
 A moral tale yit I you telle can,  
 Which I am wont to preche for to winne.  
 Now holde youre pees, my tale I wol biginne.

7. Injured.

8. Do us discourtesies.

9. *Exempla* (stories illustrating moral principles).

1. Repeat and remember.

2. I.e., without profit.

3. Even though it were.

4. Even though her children should die.

## The Tale

- 175 In Flandres whilom<sup>o</sup> was a compaignye once  
 Of yonge folk that haunteden<sup>o</sup> folye— practiced  
 As riot, hasard, stewes,<sup>5</sup> and tavernes,  
 Wher as with harpes, lutes, and giternes<sup>o</sup> guitars  
 They daunce and playen at dees<sup>o</sup> bothe day and night, dice  
 180 And ete also and drinke over hir might,<sup>o</sup>  
 Thurgh which they doon the devel sacrifice  
 Within that develes temple in cursed wise  
 By superfluitee<sup>o</sup> abhominable. overindulgence  
 Hir othes been so grete and so dampnable 67  
 185 That it is grisly for to heere hem swere:  
 Oure blessed Lordes body they totere<sup>7</sup>—  
 Hem thoughte that Jewes rente<sup>o</sup> him nought ynough. tore  
 And eech of hem at otheres sinne lough.<sup>o</sup> laughed  
 And right anon thanne comen tombesteres,<sup>o</sup> dancing girls  
 190 Fetis<sup>o</sup> and smale,<sup>o</sup> and yonge fruteresters,<sup>8</sup> shapely / neat  
 Singeres with harpes, bawdes,<sup>o</sup> wafereres<sup>9</sup>— pimps  
 Whiche been the verray develes officers,  
 To kindle and blowe the fir of lecherye—  
That is annexed unto glotonye:<sup>1</sup>  
 195 The Holy Writ take I to my wittenesse  
 That luxure<sup>o</sup> is in win and dronkenesse. (A) lechery  
 Lo, how that dronken Lot<sup>2</sup> unkindely<sup>o</sup> unnaturally  
 Lay by his doughtres two unwitingly: 160  
 So dronke he was he niste<sup>o</sup> what he wroughte. didn't know  
 200 Herodes, who so wel the stories soughte,<sup>3</sup>  
 Whan he of win was repleet at his feeste,  
 Right at his owne table he yaf his heeste<sup>o</sup> command  
 To sleen<sup>o</sup> the Baptist John, ful giltelees. slay  
 Senek<sup>4</sup> saith a good word doutelces:  
 205 He saith he can no difference finde  
 Bitwixe a man that is out of his minde  
 And a man which that is dronkelewe,<sup>o</sup> drunken  
 But that woodnesse, yfallen in a shrewe,<sup>5</sup>  
 Persevereth lenger than dooth dronkenesse.  
 210 O glotonye, ful of cursednesse!<sup>o</sup> wickedness  
 O cause first of oure confusioun!<sup>o</sup> downfall  
 O original of oure dampnacioun,<sup>o</sup> damnation  
 Til Crist hadde bought<sup>o</sup> us with his blood again! redeemed  
 Lo, how dere, shortly for to sayn,  
 215 About<sup>o</sup> was thilke<sup>o</sup> cursed vilainye; paid for / that same  
 Corrupt was al this world for glotonye:

5. Wild parties, gambling, brothels.

6. Beyond their capacity.

7. Tear apart (a reference to oaths sworn by parts of His body, such as "God's bones!" or "God's teeth!").

8. Fruit-selling girls.

9. Girl cake-vendors.

1. I.e., closely related to gluttony.

2. For Lot, see Genesis xix.30-36.

3. For the story of Herod and St. John the Baptist, see Mark vi.17-29. "Who so \* \* \* soughte": i.e., whoever looked it up in the Gospel would find.

4. Seneca, the Roman Stoic philosopher.

5. But that madness, occurring in a wicked man.



Adam oure fader and his wif also  
 Fro Paradis to labour and to wo  
 Were driven for that vice, it is no drede.<sup>o</sup> *doubt*

220 For whil that Adam fasted, as I rede,  
 He was in Paradis; and whan that he  
 Eet<sup>o</sup> of the fruit defende<sup>o</sup> on a tree, *ate / forbidden*  
 Anoon he was out cast to wo and paine.  
 O glotonye, on thee wel oughte us plaine!<sup>o</sup> *complain*

225 O, wiste a man<sup>6</sup> how manye maladies  
 Folwen of excesse and of glotonies,  
 He wolde been the more mesurable<sup>o</sup> *moderate*  
 Of his dicte, sitting at his table.  
 Allas, the shorte throte, the tendre mouth,  
 230 Maketh that cest and west and north and south,  
 In crthe, in air, in water, men to swinke,<sup>o</sup> *work*  
 To gete a gloton daintee mete and drinke.  
 Of this matere, O Paul, wel canstou trete:  
 "Mete unto wombe,<sup>o</sup> and wombe eek unto mete, *belly*  
 235 Shal God destroyen bothe," as Paulus saith.<sup>7</sup>  
 Allas, a foul thing is it, by my faith,  
 To saye this word, and fouler is the deede  
 Whan man so drinketh of the white and rede<sup>8</sup>  
 That of his throte he maketh his privee<sup>o</sup> *privy*  
 240 Thurgh thilke cursed superfluitee.<sup>o</sup> *overindulgence*  
 The Apostle<sup>9</sup> weeping saith ful pitously,  
 "Ther walken manye of which you told have I—  
 I saye it now weeping with pitous vois—  
 They been enemies of Cristes crois,<sup>o</sup> *cross*  
 245 Of whiche the ende is deeth—wombe is hir god!"<sup>1</sup>  
 O wombe, O bely, O stinking cod,<sup>o</sup> *bag*  
 Fulfilled<sup>o</sup> of dong<sup>o</sup> and of corrupcioun! *filled full / dung*  
 At either ende of thee foul is the soun.<sup>o</sup> *sound*  
 How greet labour and cost is thee to finde!<sup>o</sup> *provide for*

250 Thisse cookes, how they stampe<sup>2</sup> and straine and grinde,  
 And turnen substance into accident<sup>3</sup>  
 To fulfillen al thy likerous<sup>o</sup> talent!<sup>o</sup> *dainty / appetite*  
 Out of the harde bones knocke they  
 The mary,<sup>o</sup> for they caste nought away *marrow*  
 255 That may go thurgh the golet<sup>4</sup> softe and soote.<sup>o</sup> *sweetly*  
 Of spicerye<sup>o</sup> of leef and bark and roote. *spices*  
 Shal been his sauce ymaked by dclit,  
 To make him yit a newer appetit.  
 But certes, he that haunteth swiche delices<sup>o</sup> *pleasures*  
 260 Is deed<sup>o</sup> whil that he liveth in tho<sup>o</sup> vices. *dead / those*  
 A lecherous thing is win, and dronkenesse

6. If a man knew.

7. See I Corinthians vi.13.

8. I.e., white and red wines.

9. I.e., St. Paul.

1. See Philippians iii.18.

2. Pound.

3. A philosophic joke, depending on the distinction between inner reality (substance) and outward appearance (accident).

4. Through the gullet.

- Is ful of striving<sup>o</sup> and of wrecchednesse. *quarreling*  
 O dronke man, disfigured is thy face!  
 Sour is thy breath, foul artou to embrace!
- 265 And thurgh thy dronke nose secmeth the soun  
 As though thou saidest ay,<sup>o</sup> "Sampson, Sampson." *always*  
 And yit, God woot,<sup>o</sup> Sampson drank nevere win.<sup>5</sup> *knows*  
 Thou fallest as it were a stiked swin;<sup>6</sup>  
 Thy tonge is lost, and al thyn honeste cure,
- 270 For dronkenesse is verrey sepulture<sup>o</sup> *burial*  
 Of mannes wit<sup>o</sup> and his discrecioun. *intelligence*  
 In whom that drinke hath dominacioun.  
 He can no conseil<sup>o</sup> keepe, it is no drede.<sup>o</sup> *secrets / doubt*  
 Now keepe you fro the white and fro the rede—
- 275 And namely<sup>o</sup> fro the white win of Lepe<sup>7</sup> *particularly*  
 That is to selle in Fissstrecte or in Chepe:<sup>8</sup>  
 The win of Spaine creepeth subtilly  
 In othere wines growing faste<sup>o</sup> by, *close*  
 Of which ther riseth swich fumositee<sup>o</sup> *heady fumes*
- 280 That whan a man hath dronken draughtes three  
 And weeneth<sup>o</sup> that he be at hoom in Chepe, *supposes*  
 He is in Spaine, right at the town of Leps,  
 Nat at The Rochele ne at Burdeux town;<sup>9</sup>  
 And thanne wol he sayn, "Sampson, Sampson."
- 285 But herkneth, lordinges, oo<sup>o</sup> word I you praye, *one*  
 That alle the sovereign actes,<sup>1</sup> dar I saye,  
 Of victories in the Olde Testament,  
 Thurgh verrey God that is omnipotent,  
 Were doon in abstinence and in prayere:
- 290 Looketh<sup>o</sup> the Bible and ther ye may it lere.<sup>o</sup> *behold / learn*  
 Looke Attila, the grete conquerour,<sup>2</sup>  
 Deide<sup>o</sup> in his sleep with shame and dishonour, *died*  
 Bleeding at his nose in dronkenesse:  
 A capitain sholde live in sobrenesse.
- 295 And overal this, aviseth you<sup>3</sup> right wel  
 What was comanded unto Lamuel<sup>4</sup>—  
 Nat Samuel, but Lamuel, saye I—  
 Redeth the Bible and finde it expresly,  
 Of win-yiving<sup>o</sup> to hem that han<sup>5</sup> justise: *wine-serving*
- 300 Namore of this, for it may wel suffise.  
 And now that I have spoken of glotonye,  
 Now wol I you defende<sup>o</sup> hasardrye:<sup>o</sup> *prohibit / gambling*  
 Hasard is verrey moder<sup>o</sup> of lesinges,<sup>o</sup> *mother / lies*

5. Before Samson's birth an angel told his mother that he would be a Nazarite throughout his life; members of this sect took no strong drink.

6. Stuck pig. "Honeste cure": care for self-respect.

7. A town in Spain.

8. Fishstreet and Cheapside in the London market district.

9. The Pardoner is joking about the

illegal custom of adulterating fine wines of Bordeaux and La Rochelle with strong Spanish wine.

1. Distinguished deeds.

2. Attila was the leader of the Huns who captured Rome in the 5th century.

3. Consider.

4. Lemuel's mother told him that kings should not drink (Proverbs xxxi.4-5).

5. I.e., administer.

And of deceite and cursed forsweringes,  
 305 Blaspheme of Crist, manslaughter, and wast° also      *waste*  
 Of catel° and of time; and ferthermo,      *property*  
 It is reprove° and contrarye of honour      *disgrace*  
 For to been holden a commune hasardour,°      *gambler*  
 And evere the hyer he is of estat  
 310 The more is he holden desolat.<sup>6</sup>  
 If that a prince useth hasardrye,  
 In alle governance and polycye  
 He is, as by commune opinioun,  
 Yholde the lasse° in reputacioun.      *less*  
 315 Stilbon, that was a wis embassadour,  
 Was sent to Corinthe in ful greet honour  
 Fro Lacedomye° to make hir alliaunce,      *Sparta*  
 And whan he cam him happede° parchaunce      *it happened*  
 That alle the gretteste° that were of that lond      *greatest*  
 320 Playing at the hasard he hem foond,      *found*  
 For which as soone as it mighte be  
 He stal him<sup>7</sup> hoom again to his contree,  
 And saide, "Ther wol I nat lese° my name,      *lose*  
 N'I wol nat take on me so greet defame°      *dishonor*  
 325 You to allye unto none hasardours:  
 Sendeth othere wise embassadours,  
 For by my trouthe, me were levere<sup>8</sup> die  
 Than I you sholde to hasardours allye.  
 For ye that been so glorious in honours  
 330 Shal nat allye you with hasardours  
 As by my wil, ne as by my trettee."<sup>9</sup>      *treaty*  
 This wise philosophre, thus saide he.  
 Looke eek that to the king Demetrius  
 The King of Parthes,° as the book<sup>9</sup> saith us,      *Parthians*  
 335 Sente him a paire of dees° of gold in scorn,      *dice*  
 For he hadde used hasard therbiforn,  
 For which he heeld his glorye or his renown  
 At no value or reputacioun.  
 Lordes may finden other manere play  
 340 Honeste° nough to drive the day away.      *honorable*  
 Now wol I speke of othes false and grete  
 A word or two, as olde bookes trete:  
 Greet swering is a thing abhominable,  
 And fals swering is yit more reproveable.°      *reprehensible*  
 345 The hye God forbad swering at al—  
 Witnesse on Mathew.<sup>1</sup> But in special  
 Of swering saith the holy Jemie,<sup>2</sup>  
 "Thou shalt swere sooth thine othes and nat lie,

6. I.e., dissolute.

7. He stole away.

8. I had rather.

9. The book that relates this and the previous incident is the *Policraticus* of

the 12th-century Latin writer, John of Salisbury.

1. "But I say unto you, Swear not at all" (Matthew v.34).

2. Jeremiah (iv.2).

- And swere in doom<sup>3</sup> and eek in rightwisnesse,  
 350 But idel swering is a cursednesse."<sup>o</sup> *wickedness*  
 Biholde and see that in the firste Table<sup>4</sup>  
 Of hie Goddes heestes<sup>o</sup> honorable *commandments*  
 How that the seconde heeste of him is this:  
 "Take nat my name in idel or amis."  
 355 Lo, rather<sup>o</sup> he forbedeth swich swering *sooner*  
 Than homicide, or many a cursed thing.  
 I saye that as by ordre thus it stondeth—  
 This knoweth that<sup>5</sup> his heestes understondeth  
 How that the seconde heeste of God is that.  
 360 And fertherover,<sup>o</sup> I wol thee telle al plat<sup>o</sup> *moreover / flat*  
 That vengeance shal nat parten<sup>o</sup> from his hous *depart*  
 That of his othes is too outrageous.  
 "By Goddes precious herte!" and "By his nailes!"<sup>o</sup> *fingernails*  
 And "By the blood of Crist that is in Hailes,<sup>6</sup>  
 365 Sevene is my chaunce, and thyn is cink and trayel!"<sup>7</sup>  
 "By Goddes armes, if thou falsly playe  
 This daggere shal thurghout thyn herte go!"  
 This fruit cometh of the bicche bones<sup>8</sup> two—  
 Forswering, ire, falsnesse, homicide.  
 370 Now for the love of Crist that for us dyde,  
 Lete<sup>o</sup> youre othes bothe grete and smale. *leave*  
 But sires, now wol I telle forth my tale.  
 These riotoures<sup>o</sup> three of whiche I telle, *revelers*  
 Longe erst er prime<sup>9</sup> ronge of any belle,  
 375 Were set hem in a tavernne to drinke,  
 And as they sat they herde a belle clinke  
 Biforn a cors<sup>o</sup> was caried to his grave. *corpse*  
 That oon of hem gan callen to his knave:<sup>o</sup> *servant*  
 "Go bet,"<sup>1</sup> quod he, "and axe<sup>o</sup> redily<sup>o</sup>" *ask / promptly*  
 380 What cors is this that passeth heer forby,  
 And looke<sup>o</sup> that thou reporte his name weel."<sup>o</sup> *be sure / well*  
 "Sire," quod this boy, "it needeth neveradcel:<sup>2</sup>  
 It was me told er ye cam heer two houres.  
 He was, pardee, an old felawe of yours,  
 385 And sodeinly he was yslein tonight,<sup>o</sup> *last night*  
 Fordronke<sup>o</sup> as he sat on his bench upright; *very drunk*  
 Ther cam a privee<sup>o</sup> thief men clepeth<sup>o</sup> Deeth, *stealthy / call*  
 That in this contree al the peple sleeth,<sup>o</sup> *slays*  
 And with his spere he smoot his herte atwo,  
 390 And wente his way withouten wordes mo.  
 He hath a thousand slain this<sup>o</sup> pestilence. *during this*  
 And maister, er ye come in his presence,

3. Equity; "rightwisnesse": righteousness.

4. I.e., the first four of the Ten Commandments.

5. I.e., he that.

6. An abbey in Gloucestershire sup-

posed to possess some of Christ's blood.

7. Five and three.

8. I.e., damned dice.

9. Long before 9 A.M.

1. Better, i.e., quick.

2. It isn't a bit necessary.

He thinketh that it were necessarye  
 For to be war of swich an adversarye;  
 395 Beeth redy for to meete him evermore:  
 Thus taughte me my dame.° I save namore.” *mother*  
 “By Sainte Marye,” saide this taverner,  
 “The child saith sooth, for he hath slain this yeer,  
 Henne° over a mile, within a greet village, *hence*  
 400 Bothe man and womman, child and hinc<sup>3</sup> and page.  
 I trowe° his habitacion be there. *believe*  
 To been avised° greet wisdom it were *wary*  
 Er that he dide a man a dishonour.”  
 “Ye, Goddes armes,” quod this riotour,  
 405 “Is it swich peril with him for to meete?  
 I shal him seeke by way and eek by streete,<sup>4</sup>  
 I make avow to Goddes digne° bones. *worthy*  
 Herkneht, felawes, we three been alle ones:° *of one mind*  
 Lat cech of us holde up his hand to other  
 410 And eech of us bicom e othere brother,  
 And we wol sleen this false traitour Deeth.  
 He shal be slain, he that so manye sleeth,  
 By Goddes dignitee, er it be night.”  
 Togidres han thise three hir trouthes plight<sup>5</sup>  
 415 To live and dien eech of hem with other,  
 As though he were his owene ybore° brother. *born*  
 And up they stertere,° al dronken in this rage, *started*  
 And forth they goon towards that village  
 Of which the taverner hadde spoke bifore.  
 420 And many a grisly ooth thanne han they sworn,  
 And Cristes blessed body they torente:° *tore apart*  
 Deeth shal be deed° if that they may him hente.° *dead / catch*  
 Whan they han goon nat fully half a mile,  
 Right as they wolde han treden° over a stilk, *stepped*  
 425 An old man and a poore with hem mette;  
 This olde man ful mekely hem grette,° *greeted*  
 And saide thus, “Now lordes, God you see.”<sup>6</sup>  
 The prудdeste° of thise riotoures thre *proudest*  
 Answerde again, “What, carl° with sory grace, *churl*  
 430 Why artou al forwrapped save thy face?  
 Why livestou so longe in so greet age?”  
 This olde man gan looke in his visage,  
 And saide thus, “For° I ne can nat finde *because*  
 A man, though that I walked into Inde,  
 435 Neither in citee ne in no village,  
 That wolde chaunge his youthe for myn age;  
 And therefore moot I han myn age stille,  
 As longe time as it is Goddes wille.  
 “Ne Deeth, allas, ne wol nat have my lif.  
 440 Thus walke I lik a restelee caitif,° *captive*

3. Farm laborer.

4. By highway and byway.

5. Pledged their words of honor.

6. May God protect you.

- And on the ground which is my modres<sup>o</sup> gate mother's  
 I knokke with my staf bothe erly and late,  
 And saye, 'Leve<sup>o</sup> moder, leet me in: dear  
 Lo, how I vanisshe, flessch and blood and skin.  
 445 Allas, whan shal my bones been at reste?  
 Moder, with you wolde I chaunge<sup>o</sup> my cheste<sup>7</sup> exchange  
 That in my chambre longe time hath be,  
 Ye, for an haire-clout<sup>8</sup> to wrappe me.'  
 But yit to me she wol nat do that grace,  
 450 For which ful pale and welked<sup>o</sup> is my face. withered  
 But sires, to you it is no curteisye  
 To speken to an old man vilainye,<sup>o</sup> rudeness  
 But<sup>o</sup> he trespasse<sup>o</sup> in word or elles in deede. unless / offend  
 In Holy Writ ye may yourself wel rede,  
 455 'Agains<sup>o</sup> an old man, hoor<sup>o</sup> upon his heed, hoar  
 Ye shal arise.<sup>1</sup> Wherfore I give you reed,<sup>o</sup> advice  
 Ne dooth unto an old man noon harm now,  
 Namore than that ye wolde men dide to you  
 In age, if that ye so longe abide.  
 460 And God be with you wher ye go<sup>o</sup> or ride: walk  
 I moot go thider as I have to go."  
 "Nay, olde cherl, by God thou shalt nat so,"  
 Saide this other hasardour anoon.  
 "Thou partest nat so lightly,<sup>o</sup> by Saint John!  
 465 Thou speke<sup>o</sup> right now of thilke traitour Deeth, easily  
 That in this contree alle oure freendes sleeth, spoke  
 Have here my trouthe, as thou art his espye,  
 Tel wher he is, or thou shalt it aby<sup>o</sup>, pay for  
 By God and by the holy sacrament!  
 470 For soothly thou art oon of his assent<sup>2</sup>  
 To sleen us yonge folk, thou false thief."  
 "Now sires," quod he, "if that ye be so lief<sup>o</sup> anxious  
 To finde Deeth, turne up this crooked way,  
 For in that grove I lafte<sup>o</sup> him, by my fay,<sup>o</sup> left / faith  
 475 Under a tree, and ther he wol abide:  
 Nat for youre boost<sup>o</sup> he wol him no thing hide. boast  
 See ye that ook?<sup>o</sup> Right ther ye shal him finde. oak  
 God save you, that boughte again<sup>3</sup> mankinde,  
 And you amende." Thus saide this olde man.  
 480 And everich of these riotoures ran  
 Til he cam to that tree, and ther they founde  
 Of florins<sup>o</sup> fine of gold ycoined rounde coins  
 Wel neigh an eghte bussshels as hem thoughte—  
 Ne lenger thanne after Deeth they soughte,  
 485 But eech of hem so glad was of the sighte,  
 For that the florins been so faire and bryghte,

7. Chest for one's belongings, used here as the symbol for life—or perhaps a coffin.

8. Haircloth, for a winding sheet.

9. In the presence of.

1. Cf. Leviticus xix.32.

2. I.e., one of his party.

3. Redeemed.

That down they sette hem by this precious hoord.

The worste of hem he spak the firste word:

"Bretheren," quod he, "take keep<sup>o</sup> what that I save: heed

490 My wit is greet though that I bourde<sup>o</sup> and playe. joke

This tresor hath Fortune unto us yiven

In mirthe and jolitee oure lif to liven,

And lightly<sup>o</sup> as it cometh so wol we spende. easily

Ey, Goddes precious dignitee, who wende<sup>4</sup>

495 Today that we sholde han so fair a grace?

But mighte this gold be caried fro this place

Hoom to myn hous—or elles unto youres—

For wel ye woot that al this gold is oures—

Thanne were we in heigh felicitee.

500 But trewely, by daye it mighte nat be:

Men wolde sayn that we were theves stronge,<sup>o</sup> flagrant

And for oure owene tresor doon us honge.<sup>5</sup>

This tresor moste ycaried be by nighte,

As wisely and as slyly as it mighte.

505 Therfore I rede<sup>o</sup> that cut<sup>o</sup> amonges us alle advise / lots

Be drawe, and lat see wher the cut wol falle;

And he that hath the cut with herte blithe

Shal renne<sup>o</sup> to the town, and that ful swithe,<sup>o</sup> run / quickly

And bringe us breed and win ful prively;

510 And two of us shal keepen<sup>o</sup> subtilly guard

This tresor wel, and if he wol nat tarye,

Whan it is night we wol this tresor carye

By oon assent wher as us thinketh best."

That oon of hem the cut broughte in his fest<sup>o</sup> fist

515 And bad hem drawe and looke wher it wol falle;

And it fil<sup>o</sup> on the yongeste of hem alle, fell

And forth toward the town he wente anoon.

And also<sup>o</sup> soone as that he was agoon,<sup>o</sup> as / gone away

That oon of hem spak thus unto that other:

520 "Thou knowest wel thou art my sworn brother;

Thy profit wol I telle thee anoon:

Thou woost wel that oure felawe is agoon,

And here is gold, and that ful greet plentee,

That shal departed<sup>o</sup> been among us three. divided

525 But natheles, if I can shape<sup>o</sup> it so arrange

That it departed were among us two,

Hadde I nat doon a freendes turn to thee?"

That other answerde, "I noot<sup>6</sup> how that may be:

He woot that the gold is with us twaye.

530 "What shal we doon? What shal we to him save?"

"Shal it be conseil?"<sup>7</sup> saide the firste shrewe.<sup>o</sup> villain

"And I shal telle in a wordes fewe

What we shul doon, and bringe it wel aboute."

"I graunte," quod that other, "out of doute,

4. Who would have supposed.

5. Have us hanged.

6. Don't know.

7. A secret.

- 535 That by my trouthe I wol thee nat biwraye."° *expose*  
 "Now," quod the firste, "thou woost wel we be twaye,  
 And two of us shal strengre° be than oon: *stronger*  
 Looke whan that he is set that right anoon  
 Aris as though thou woldest with him playe,  
 540 And I shal rive° him thurgh the sides twaye, *pierce*  
 Whil that thou strugelest with him as in game,  
 And with thy daggere looke thou do the same;  
 And thanne shal al this gold departed be,  
 My dere freend, bitwixc thee and me.  
 545 Thanne we may bothe oure lustes° al fulfille, *desires*  
 And playe at dees° right at oure owene wille." *dice*  
 And thus accorded been thisc shrewes twaye  
 To sleen the thridde, as ye han herd me saye.  
 This yongeste, which that wente to the town,  
 550 Ful ofte in herte he rolleth up and down  
 The beautee of thisc florins newe and brighte.  
 "O Lord," quod he, "if so were that I mighte  
 Have al this tresor to myself allone,  
 Ther is no man that liveth under the trone° *throne*  
 555 Of God that sholde live so meryc as I."  
 And at the laste the feend oure enemy  
 Putte in his thought that he sholde poison beye,° *buy*  
 With which he mighte sleen his felawes twaye—  
 Forwhy° the feend foud him in swich livinge *because*  
 560 That he hadde leve° him to sorwe bringe:° *permission*  
 For this was outrely° his fulle entente, *plainly*  
 To sleen hem bothe, and nevere to repente.  
 And forth he gooth—no lenger wolde he tarye—  
 Into the town unto a pothecarve,° *apothecary*  
 565 And prayed him that he him wolde selle  
 Som poison that he mighte his rattes quelle,° *kill*  
 And eek ther was a polcat° in his hawe° *yard*  
 That, as he saide, his capons hadde yslawe,° *slain*  
 And fain he wolde wreke him<sup>1</sup> if he mighte  
 570 On vermin that destroyed him<sup>2</sup> by nighte.  
 The pothecarye answerde, "And thou shalt have  
 A thing that, also° God my soule save,  
 In al this world there is no creature *as*  
 That ete or dronke hath of this confiture°— *mixture*  
 575 Nat but the mountance° of a corn° of whete— *amount / grain*  
 That he ne shal his lif anoon forlete.° *lose*  
 Ye, sterve° he shal, and that in lasse° while *die / less*  
 Than thou wolt goon a paas<sup>3</sup> nat but a mile,  
 The poison is so strong and violent."  
 580 This cursed man hath in his hand yhent° *taken*

8. Christian doctrine teaches that the devil may not tempt men except with God's permission.

9. A weasel-like animal.

1. He would gladly avenge himself.

2. I.e., were ruining his farming.

3. Take a walk.



This poison in a box and sith° he ran then  
 Into the nexte streete unto a man  
 And borwed of him large botels three,  
 And in the two his poison poured he—  
 585 The thridde he kepte clene for his drinke,  
 For al the night he shoop him<sup>4</sup> for to swinke° work  
 In caryng of the gold out of that place.  
 And whan this riotour with sory grace  
 Hadde filled with win his grete botels three,  
 590 To his felawes again repaireth he.  
 What needeth it to sermone of it more?  
 For right as they had cast° his deeth bifore, plotted  
 Right so they han him slain, and that anon.  
 And whan that this was doon, thus spak that oon:  
 595 “Now lat us sitte and drinke and make us merye,  
 And afterward we wol his body berye.”° bury  
 And with that word it happed him par cas<sup>5</sup>  
 To take the botel ther the poison was,  
 And drank, and yaf his felawe drinke also,  
 600 For which anon they storven° bothe two. died  
 But certes I suppose that Avicen  
 Wroot nevere in no canon ne in no *fen*<sup>6</sup>  
 Mo wonder signes<sup>7</sup> of empoisoning  
 Than hadde these wrecches two er hir ending:  
 605 Thus ended been these homicides two,  
 And eek the false empoisonere also.  
 O cursed sinne of alle cursednesse!  
 O traitours homicide, O wikkednesse!  
 O glotonye, luxure,° and hasardrye! lechery  
 610 Thou blasphemour of Crist with vilainye  
 And othes grete of usage° and of pride! habit  
 Allas, mankinde, how may it bitide  
 That to thy Creatour which that thee wroughte,  
 And with his precious herte blood thee boughte,° redeemed  
 615 Thou art so fals and so unkinde,° allas? unnatural  
 ¶ Now goode men, God foryive you youre trespas,  
 And ware° you fro the sinne of avarice: guard  
 Myn holy pardon may you alle warice°— save  
 So that ye offre nobles or sterlinges,<sup>8</sup>  
 620 Or elles silver brooches, spoones, ringes.  
 Boweth your heed under this holy bulle!  
 Cometh up, ye wives, offreth of youre wolle!° wool  
 Youre name I entre here in my rolle: anon  
 Into the blisse of hevене shul ye goon.  
 625 I you assoile° by myn heigh power— absolve  
 Ye that wol offre—as clene and eek as cleer,<sup>3</sup>

4. He was preparing.

5. By chance.

6. The *Canon of Medicine*, by Avicenna, an 11th-century Arabic philosopher,

was divided into sections called “*fens*.”

7. More wonderful symptoms.

8. “Nobles” and “sterlinges” were valuable coins.

As ye were born.—And lo, sires, thus I preche.  
 And Jesu Crist that is oure soules leech<sup>o</sup> *physician*  
 So graunte you his pardon to receive,  
 630 For that is best—I wol you nat deceive.

*The Epilogue*

“But sires, oo word forgat I in my tale:  
 I have relikes and pardon in my male<sup>o</sup> *bag*  
 As faire as any man in Engelond,  
 Whiche were me yiven by the Popes hond.  
 635 If any of you wol of devocioun  
 Offren and han myn absolucioun,  
 Come forth anoon, and knecleth here adown,  
 And mekely receiveth my pardoun,  
 Or elles taketh pardon as ye wende,  
 640 Al newe and fressh at every miles ende—  
 So that ye offre alway newe and newe<sup>o</sup>  
 Nobles or pens whiche that be goode and trewe.  
 It is an honour to everich that is heer  
 That ye have a suffisant<sup>o</sup> pardoner *competent*  
 645 T’assoile you in contrees as ye ride,  
 For adventures whiche that may bitide:  
 Paraventure ther may falle oon or two  
 Down of his hors and breke his nekke atwo;  
 Looke which a suretee<sup>o</sup> is it to you alle *safeguard*  
 650 That I am in youre felawshipe yfalle  
 That may assoile you, bothe more and lasse,<sup>1</sup>  
 Whan that the soule shal fro the body passe.  
 I rede<sup>o</sup> that oure Hoste shal biginne,  
 For he is most envoluped<sup>o</sup> in sinne. *advise*  
 655 Com forth, sire Host, and offre first anoon,  
 And thou shalt kisse the relikes everichoon,<sup>o</sup> *each one*  
 Ye, for a grote: unbokele<sup>o</sup> anoon thy purs.” *unbuckle*  
 “Nay, nay,” quod he, “thanne have I Cristes curs!  
 Lat be,” quod he, “it shal nat be, so theech!<sup>o</sup> *may I thrive*  
 660 Thou woldest make me kisse thyn olde breech<sup>o</sup> *breeches*  
 And swere it were a relik of a saint,  
 Though it were with thy fundamente depeint.<sup>o</sup> *stained*  
 But, by the crois which that Sainte Elaine foond,<sup>2</sup>  
 I wolde I hadde thy coilons<sup>o</sup> in myn hond, *testicles*  
 665 In stede of relikes or of saintuarve.<sup>o</sup> *relic-box*  
 Lat cutte hem of: I wol thee helpe hem carve.  
 They shal be shrined in an hogges tord.”<sup>o</sup> *turd*  
 This Pardoner answerde nat a word:  
 So wroth he was no word ne wolde he saye.  
 670 “Now,” quod oure Host, “I wol no lenger playe  
 With thee, ne with noon other angry man.”

9. Over and over.

1. Both high and low (i.e., everybody).

2. I.e., by the cross that St. Helena

found. Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, was reputed to have found the True Cross.

But right anon the worthy Knight bigan,  
 Whan that he sawgh that al the peple lough,<sup>o</sup> laughed  
 "Namore of this, for it is right ynough.  
 675 Sire Pardoner, be glad and merye of checre,  
 And ye, sire Host that been to me so dere,  
 I praye you that ye kisse the Pardoner,  
 And Pardoner, I praye thee, draw thee neer,  
 And as we diden lat us laughe and playe."  
 680 Anoon they kiste and riden forth hir waye.

### The Nun's Priest's Tale<sup>1</sup>

A poore widwe somdeel stape<sup>o</sup> in age advanced  
 Was whilom<sup>o</sup> dwelling in a narwe<sup>2</sup> cotage, once upon a time  
 Biside a grove, standing in a dale:  
 This widwe of which I telle you my tale,  
 5 Sin thilke<sup>o</sup> day that she was last a wif, that same  
 In pacience ladde<sup>o</sup> a ful simple lif. led  
 For litel was hir catel<sup>o</sup> and hir rente,<sup>o</sup> property / income  
 By housbondrye<sup>o</sup> of swich as God hire sente economy  
 She foond<sup>o</sup> hirself and cek hir doughtren two. provided for  
 10 Three large sowes hadde she and namo,  
 Three kin,<sup>o</sup> and eek a sheep that highte Malle. cows  
 Ful sooty was hir bowr<sup>o</sup> and eek hir halle. bedroom  
 In which she eet ful many a sclendre<sup>o</sup> meel; scanty  
 Of poinant<sup>o</sup> sauce hire needed neveradeel: pungent  
 15 No daintee morsel passed thurgh hir throte— NB

1. The Nun's Priest's Tale is an example of the literary genre known as the "beast fable," in which animals behave like human beings. The beast fable is inevitably injurious to man's dignity, since to pretend that animals behave like men is to suggest that men behave like animals, for a pig cannot look like a man unless a man in some way looks like a pig. In the Nun's Priest's Tale, as in its French source, the history of Reynard the Fox, the beast fable is combined with the mock heroic, and the result is doubly injurious to man's dignity. The elevated language of true heroic poetry means to enhance the splendid deeds of men of great stature, while the elevated language of mock heroic, by treating the trivial as if it were sublime, reveals man's lack of dignity in the awful gulf that separates the idealized language from the petty action it describes; and when the petty action is carried on not even by men, but by animals masquerading as men (that is, by men reduced to the status of animals), the loss of human dignity is even greater.

The nominal hero of the Tale is

Satirize man's generic pride

Chauntecleer, a fowl of courtly bearing, profound learning, and superior crowing. This rooster is, like Achilles or Aeneas, made the center of a "great" action—which, however, takes up a relatively small portion of the total number of lines in the poem. The hero of the larger portion, and the real hero of the poem, is rhetoric, which is responsible for all Chauntecleer's importance, though it almost drowns his story in its vast tumid flow. Rhetoric as employed by the Nun's Priest includes not only elevated speech, but proverbs, saws, conventional similes—all the clichés of formal language and thought. Epic mannerisms abound; proverbs fly thick and fast and contradict one another with impunity; sententious generalizations about the tragic inevitability of certain events, the bad counsel given by women, and the folly of heeding flattery are successively used to account for Chauntecleer's near-fall; and throughout the tale learned pedantry invokes rhetorical tradition to footnote the least original of ideas. All rhetoric's ordering devices achieve a fine disorder.

2. I.e., small.

	Hir diete was accordant to hir cote. <sup>o</sup>	<i>cottage</i>
	Repleccioun <sup>o</sup> ne made hire nevere sik:	<i>overeating</i>
	Attempre <sup>o</sup> dictc was al hir physik, <sup>o</sup>	<i>moderate / medicine</i>
	And exercise and hertes suffisaunce. <sup>o</sup>	<i>contentment</i>
20	The goute lette hire nothing for to daunce, <sup>3</sup>	
	N'apoplexye shente <sup>o</sup> nat hir heed. <sup>o</sup>	<i>hurt / head</i>
	No win ne drank she, neither whit ne reed: <sup>o</sup>	<i>red</i>
	Hir boord <sup>o</sup> was served most with whit and blak, <sup>4</sup>	<i>table</i>
	Milk and brown breed, in which she foond no lak; <sup>5</sup>	
25	Seind bacon, and somtime an ey <sup>o</sup> or twaye,	<i>egg</i>
	For she was as it were a manere daye. <sup>6</sup>	
	A yeerd <sup>o</sup> she hadde, enclosed al withoute	<i>yard</i>
	With stikkes, and a drye dich aboute,	
	In which she hadde a cok heet <sup>o</sup> Chauntecleer:	<i>named</i>
30	In al the land of crowing nas <sup>o</sup> his peer.	<i>was not</i>
	His vois was merier than the merye orgon	
	On massedayes that in the chirche goon; <sup>7</sup>	
	Wel sikerer <sup>8</sup> was his crowing in his logge <sup>o</sup>	<i>dwelling</i>
	Than is a klok or an abbeye orlogge; <sup>o</sup>	<i>timepiece</i>
35	By nature he knew eech ascensioun	
	Of th'quinoxial <sup>9</sup> in thilke town:	
	For whan degrees fifteene were ascended,	
	Thanne crew <sup>1</sup> he that it mighte nat been amended.	
	His comb was redder than the fin coral,	
40	And batailed <sup>o</sup> as it were a castel wal;	<i>battlemented</i>
	His bile <sup>o</sup> was blak, and as the jeet <sup>o</sup> it shoon;	<i>bill / jet</i>
	Like asure <sup>2</sup> were his legges and his toon; <sup>o</sup>	<i>toes</i>
	His nailes whitter <sup>o</sup> than the lilye flour,	<i>whiter</i>
	And lik the burned <sup>o</sup> gold was his colour.	<i>burnished</i>
45	This gentil cok hadde in his governaunce	
	Sevene hennes for to doon al his plesaunce, <sup>o</sup>	<i>pleasure</i>
	Whiche were his sustres and his paramours, <sup>3</sup>	
	And wonder like to him as of colours;	
	Of whiche the faireste hewed <sup>o</sup> on hir throte	<i>colored</i>
50	Was cleped faire damoisele Pertelote:	
	Curteis she was, discreet, and debonaire, <sup>o</sup>	<i>meeke</i>
	And compaignable, <sup>4</sup> and bar <sup>o</sup> himself so faire,	<i>bore</i>
	Sin thilke day that she was seven night old,	
	That trewely she hath the herte in hold	
55	Of Chauntecleer, loken <sup>o</sup> in every lith. <sup>o</sup>	<i>locked / limb</i>
	He loved hire so that wel was him therwith. <sup>5</sup>	

3. The gout didn't hinder her at all from dancing.

4. I.e., milk and bread.

5. Found no fault. "Seind": scorched (i.e., broiled).

6. I.e., a kind of dairymaid.

7. I.e., is played.

8. More reliable.

9. I.e., he knew by instinct each step in the progression of the celestial equa-

tor. The celestial equator was thought to make a 360-degree rotation around the earth every 24 hours; therefore a progression of 15 degrees would be equal to the passage of an hour (line 37).

1. Crowed; "amended": improved.

2. Lapis lazuli.

3. His sisters and his mistresses.

4. Companionable.

5. That he was well contented.

But swich a joye was it to heere hem singe,  
 Whan that the brighte sonne gan to springe,  
 In sweete accord *My Lief is Faren in Londe*<sup>6</sup>—

60 For thilke time, as I have understonde,  
 Beestes and briddes couden speke and singe.  
 And so bifel that in a daweninge,  
 As Chauntecleer among his wives alle  
 Sat on his perche that was in the halle,

65 And next him sat this faire Pertelote,  
 This Chauntecleer gan groningen in his throte,  
 As man that in his drem is drecched<sup>o</sup> sore. *troubled*

And whan that Pertelote thus herde him rore,  
 She was agast, and saide, "Herte dere,  
 70 What aileth you to grone in this manere?  
 Ye been a verray slepere,<sup>7</sup> fy, for shamel!"  
 And he answerde and saide thus, "Madame,  
 I praye you that ye take it nat agrief.<sup>o</sup> *amiss*  
 By God, me mette I was in swich meschief<sup>8</sup>  
 75 Right now, that yit myn herte is sore afright.  
 Now God," quod he, "my swevene recche aright,<sup>9</sup>  
 And keepe my body out of foul prisoun!  
 Me mette how that I romed up and down  
 Within oure yeerd, wher as I sawgh a beest,  
 80 Was lik an hound and wolde han maad arrest<sup>1</sup>  
 Upon my body, and han had me deed.<sup>2</sup>  
 His colour was bitwixe yelow and reed,  
 And tipped was his tail and bothe his eres  
 With blak, unlik the remenant<sup>o</sup> of his heres;<sup>o</sup> *rest / hairs*  
 85 His snoute smal, with glowing yen twaye.  
 Yit of his look for fere almost I deye:<sup>o</sup> *die*  
 This caused me my groning, doutelees."  
 "Avoi,"<sup>o</sup> quod she, "fy on you, hertelees!<sup>o</sup> *fie / coward*  
 Allas," quod she, "for by that God above,  
 90 Now han ye lost myn herte and al my love!  
 I can nat love a coward, by my faith.  
 For certes, what so any womman saith,  
 We alle desiren, if it mighte be,  
 To han housbondes hardy, wise, and free,<sup>o</sup> *generous*  
 95 And secree,<sup>o</sup> and no nigard, ne no fool, *discreet*  
 Ne him that is agast of every tool,<sup>o</sup> *weapon*  
 Ne noon avauntour.<sup>o</sup> By that God above, *boaster*  
 How dorste ye sayn for shame unto youre love  
 That any thing mighte make you aferd?  
 100 Have ye no mannes herte and han a beard?  
 Allas, and conne<sup>o</sup> ye been agast of swevenes?<sup>o</sup> *can / dreams*  
 No thing, God woot, but vanitee<sup>3</sup> in swevene is!

6. A popular song of the time.

7. Sound sleeper.

8. I dreamed that I was in such misfortune.

9. Interpret my dream correctly (i.e.,

in an auspicious manner).

1. Would have laid hold.

2. I.e., killed me.

3. I.e., empty illusion.

- Swevenes engendren of replexiouns,<sup>4</sup>  
 And ofte of fume° and of complexiouns,° *gas / bodily humors*  
 105 Whan humours been too habundant in a wight.<sup>5</sup>  
 Certes, this drem which ye han met° tonight *dreamed*  
 Comth of the grete superfluitee  
 Of youre rede colera,<sup>6</sup> pardee,  
 Which causeth folk to drcden° in hir dremes *fear*  
 110 Of arwes,° and of fir with rede lemes,° *arrows / flames*  
 Of rede beestes, that they wol hem bite,  
 Of kontek,° and of whelpes grete and lite<sup>7</sup>— *strife*  
 Right° as the humour of malencolye<sup>8</sup> *just*  
 Causeth ful many a man in sleep to crye  
 115 For fere of blake beres° or boles° blake, *bears / bulls*  
 Or elles blake develes wol hem take.  
 Of othere humours coude I tell also  
 That werken many a man in sleep ful wo,  
 But I wol passe as lightly° as I can. *quickly*  
 120 Lo, Caton,<sup>9</sup> which that was so wis a man,  
 Saide he nat thus? 'Ne do no fors of<sup>1</sup> dremes.'  
 Now, sire," quod she, "whan we flee fro the bemes,<sup>2</sup>  
 For Goddes love, as take som laxatif.  
 Up° peril of my soule and of my lif, *upon*  
 125 I conseile you the beste, I wol nat lie,  
 That bothe of colere and of malencolye  
 Ye purge you; and for° ye shal nat tarye, *in order that*  
 Though in this town is noon apothecarye,  
 I shal myself to herbes techen you,  
 130 That shal been for youre hele<sup>3</sup> and for youre prow,  
 And in oure yeerd tho herbes shal I finde,  
 The whiche han of hir propretee by kinde° *nature*  
 To purge you binethe and eek above.  
 Foryet° nat this, for Goddes owene love. *forget*  
 135 Ye been ful colerik° of complexioun;  
 Ware° the sonne in his ascencioun *bilious*  
 Ne finde you nat repleet° of humours hote;° *beware that*  
 And if it do, I dar wel laye° a grote *filled / hot*  
 That ye shul have a fevere terciane,<sup>4</sup> *bet*  
 140 Or an agu that may be youre bane.° *death*  
 A day or two ye shul han digestives  
 Of wormes, er ye take youre laxatives  
 Of lauriol, centaure, and fumetere,<sup>5</sup>

4. Dreams have their origin in over-eating.

5. I.e., when humors are too abundant in a person. Pertelote's diagnosis is based on the familiar concept that an overabundance of one of the bodily humors in a person affected his temperament.

6. Red bile.

7. And of big and little dogs.

8. I.e., black bile.

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

1. Pay no attention to.

2. Fly down from the rafters.

3. Health; "prow": benefit.

4. Tertian (recurring every other day).

5. Of laureole, centaury, and fumitory. These, and the herbs mentioned in the next lines, were all common medieval medicines used as cathartics.

- Or elles of ellebor° that groweth there, hellebore  
 145 Of catapuce, or of gaitres beries,<sup>6</sup>  
 Of herbe-ive° growing in oure yeerd ther merye is.<sup>7</sup> herb ivy  
 Pekke hem right up as they growe and ete hem in.  
 Be merye, housbonde, for youre fader kin!  
 Dredeth no dreem: I can saye you namore.”  
 150 “Madame,” quod he, “graunt mercy of youre lore.<sup>8</sup>  
 But natheles, as touching daun° Catoun, master  
 That hath of wisdom swich a greet renown,  
 Though that he bad no dremes for to drede,  
 By God, men may in olde bookes rede  
 155 Of many a man more of auctoritee° authority  
 Than ever Caton was, so mote I thee,° thrive  
 That al the revers sayn of his sentence,° opinion  
 And han wel founden by experience  
 That dremes been significaciouns  
 160 As wel of joye as tribulaciouns  
 That folk enduren in this lif present.  
 Ther needeth make of this noon argument:  
 The verray preve<sup>9</sup> sheweth it in deede.<sup>phrase</sup>  
 “Oon of the gretteste auctour<sup>1</sup> that men rede.<sup>phrase</sup>  
 165 Saith thus, that whilom two felawes wente  
 On pilgrimage in a ful good entente,  
 And happed so they comen in a town,  
 Wher as ther was swich congregacioun ~~th~~  
 Of peple, and eek so strait of herbergage.<sup>2</sup>  
 170 That they ne founde as muche as oo cotage  
 In which they bothe mighte ylogged° be; lodged  
 Wherefore they mosten° of necessitee must  
 As for that night departe° compaignye. part  
 And eech of hem gooth to his hostelrye,  
 175 And took his logging as it wolde fall.° befall  
 That oon of hem was logged in a stalle,  
 Fer° in a yeerd, with oxen of the plough;  
 That other man was logged wel ynough, far away  
 As was his aventure° or his fortune, lot  
 180 That us governeth alle as in commune.  
 And so bifel that longe er it were day,  
 This man mette° in his bed, ther as he lay, dreamed  
 How that his felawe gan upon him calle,  
 And saide, ‘Allas, for in an oxes stalle  
 185 This night I shal be mordred° ther I liel murdered  
 Now help me, dere brother, or I die!  
 In alle haste com to me,’ he saide.  
 “This man out of his sleep for fere abraide,° started up  
 But whan that he was wakened of his sleep,

6. Of caper berry or of gaiter berry.  
 7. Where it is pleasant.  
 8. Many thanks for your instruction.  
 9. Actual experience.

1. I.e., one of the greatest authors (perhaps Cicero).  
 2. And also such a shortage of lodging.

- 190 He turned him and took of this no keep:° heed  
 Him thoughte his drem nas but a vanitee.  
 Thus twies in his sleeping dremed he,  
 And atte thridde time yit his felawe  
 Cam, as him thoughte, and saide, 'I am now slawe:°' slain
- 195 Bihold my bloody woundes deepe and wide.  
 Aris up erly in the morwe tide<sup>3</sup>  
 And atte west gate of the town,' quod he,  
 'A carte ful of dong° ther shaltou see, dung  
 In which my body is hid ful prively:  
 200 Do thilke carte arresten boldely.<sup>4</sup>  
 My gold caused my mordre, sooth to sayn'—  
 And tolde him every point how he was slain,  
 With a ful pitous face, pale of hewe.  
 And truste wel, his drem he foond° ful trewe, found
- 205 For on the morwe° as soone as it was day, morning  
 To his felawes in° he took the way, lodging  
 And whan that he cam to this oxes stalle,  
 After his felawe he began to calle.  
 "The hostiler° answerde him anoon, innkeeper  
 210 And saide, 'Sire, youre felawe is agoon:°' gone away  
 As soone as day he wente out of the town.'  
 "This man gan fallen in suspecioun,  
 Remembring on his dremes that he mette;° dreamed  
 And forth he gooth, no lenger wolde he lette,° tarry
- 215 Unto the west gate of the town, and foond  
 A dong carte, wente as it were to donge° lond, put manure on  
 That was arrayed in that same wise  
 As ye han herd the dede° man devise; dead  
 And with an hardy herte he gan to crye,  
 220 'Vengeance and justice of this felonye!  
 My felawe mordred is this same night,  
 And in this carte he lith° gaping upright!° lies / supine  
 I crye out on the ministres,' quod he,  
 "That sholde keepe and rulen this citee.  
 225 Harrow,° allas, here lith my felawe slain!' help  
 What sholde I more unto this tale sayn?  
 The peple up sterte° and caste the carte to grounde, started  
 And in the middel of the dong they founde  
 The dede man that mordred was al newe,<sup>5</sup>
- 230 "O blisful God that art so just and trewe,  
 Lo, how that thou biwrayest° mordre alway! disclose  
 Mordre wol out, that see we day by day:  
 Mordre is so wlatson° and abhominable loathsome  
 To God that is so just and resonable,  
 235 That he ne wol nat suffre it heled° be, concealed  
 Though it abide a yeer or two or three.  
 Mordre wol out: this my conclusioun.

3. In the morning.

4. Boldly have this same cart stopped.

5. Recently.



- And right anon ministres of that town  
 Han hent° the cartere and so sore him pined,<sup>6</sup> *seized*  
 240 And eek the hostiler so sore engined,<sup>o</sup> *racked*  
 That they biknewe° hir wikkednesse anon, *confessed*  
 And were anhanged° by the nekke boon. *hanged*  
 Here may men seen that dremes been to drede.<sup>7</sup>  
 "And certes, in the same book I rede—  
 245 Right in the nexte chapitre after this—  
 I gabbe° nat, so have I joye or blis— *lie*  
 Two men that wolde han passed over see  
 For certain cause into a fer contree,  
 If that the wind ne hadde been contrarye  
 250 That made hem in a citee for to tarye,  
 That stood ful merye upon an haven° side— *harbor's*  
 But on a day again° the even tide *toward*  
 The wind gan change, and blewe right as hem leste:<sup>8</sup>  
 Jolif° and glad they wenten unto reste, *merry*  
 255 And casten hem<sup>9</sup> ful erly for to saile.  
 "But to that oo man fil° a greet mervaille; *befell*  
 That oon of hem, in sleeping as he lay,  
 Him mette<sup>1</sup> a wonder drem again the day:  
 Him thoughte a man stood by his beddes side,  
 260 And him comanded that he sholde abide,  
 And saide him thus, 'If thou tomorwe wende,  
 Thou shalt be dreint:° my tale is at an ende.'  
*drowned*  
 "He wook and tolde his felawe what he mette,  
 And prayed him his viage° to lette;° *voyage / delay*  
 265 As for that day he prayed him to bide.  
 "His felawe that lay by his beddes side  
 Gan for to laughe, and scorned him ful faste.° *hard*  
 'No drem,' quod he, 'may so myn herte agaste° *terrify*  
 That I wol lette° for to do my thinges.° *delay / business*  
 270 I sette nat a straw by thy dreminges,<sup>2</sup>  
 For swevenes been but vanitees and japes:<sup>3</sup>  
 Men dreme alday° of owles or of apes,<sup>4</sup> *constantly*  
 And of many a maze° therwithal— *delusion*  
 Men dreme of thing that nevere was ne shal.<sup>5</sup>  
 275 But sith I see that thou wolt here abide,  
 And thus forsleuthen° wilfully thy tide,° *waste / time*  
 Good woot, it rewcth me;<sup>6</sup> and have good day.'  
 And thus he took his leve and wente his way.  
 But er that he hadde half his cours ysailed—  
 280 Noot I nat why ne what meschaunce it ailed—  
 But casuelly the shippes botme rente,<sup>7</sup>

6. Tortured.

7. Worthy of being feared.

8. Just as they wished.

9. Determined.

1. He dreamed.

2. I don't care a straw for your dreamings.

3. Dreams are but illusions and frauds.

4. I.e., of absurdities.

5. I.e., shall be.

6. I'm sorry.

7. I don't know why nor what was the trouble with it—but accidentally the ship's bottom split.

- And ship and man under the water wente,  
 In sighte of othere shippes it biside,  
 That with hem sailed at the same tide.
- 285 And therefore, faire Pertelote so dere,  
 By swiche ensamples olde maistou lere°  
 That no man sholde been too recchelees°  
 Of dremes, for I saye thee doutelees  
 That many a dreem ful sore is for to drede.
- 290 "Lo, in the lif of Saint Kenelm<sup>8</sup> I rede—  
 That was Kenulphus sone, the noble king  
 Of Mercenrike°—how Kenelm mette° a thing *dreamed Mercia*  
 A lite° er he was mordred on a day. *little*  
 His mordre in his avision° he sey°. *dream / saw*  
 295 His norice° him expounded everydeel° *nurse / entirely*  
 His swevene, and bad him for to keepe him<sup>9</sup> weel  
 For traision, but he nas but seven yeer old,  
 And therefore litel tale hath he told  
 Of any dreem,<sup>1</sup> so holy was his herte.
- 300 By God, I hadde levere than my sherte<sup>2</sup>  
 That ye hadde rad° his legende as have I. *read*  
 "Dame Pertelote, I saye you trewely,  
 Macrobeus,<sup>3</sup> that writ the *Avisioun*  
 In Affrike of the worthy Scipioun,  
 305 Affermeth° dremes, and saith that they been *confirms*  
 Warning of things that men after seen.  
 "And ferthermore, I praye you looketh wel  
 In the Olde Testament of Daniel,  
 If he heeld° dreines any vanitee.<sup>4</sup> *considered*
- 310 "Rede eek of Joseph<sup>5</sup> and ther shul ye see  
 Wher° dremes be somtime—I saye nat alle— *whether*  
 Warning of things that shul after falle.  
 "Looke of Egypte the king daun Pharao,  
 His bakere and his botelere° also, *butler*
- 315 Wher they ne felte noon effect in dremes.<sup>6</sup>  
 Whoso wol seeke actes of sondry remes° *realms*  
 May rede of dremes many a wonder thing.  
 "Lo Cresus, which that was of Lyde° king, *Lydia*  
 Mette° he nat that he sat upon a tree, *dreamed*  
 320 Which signified he sholde anhangen° be? *hanged*  
 "Lo here Andromacha, Ectores° wif, *Hector's*  
 That day that Ector sholde lese° his lif, *lose*  
 She dremed on the same night biforn  
 How that the lif of Ector sholde be lorn,° *lost*
- 325 If thilke° day he wente into bataile; *that same*

8. Kenelm succeeded his father as king of Mercia at the age of 7, but was slain by his aunt (in 821).

9. Guard himself.

1. Therefore he has set little store by any dream.

2. I.e., I'd give my shirt.

3. Macrobius wrote a famous com-

mentary on Cicero's account in *De Republica* of the dream of Scipio Africanus Minor; the commentary came to be regarded as a standard authority on dream lore.

4. See Daniel vii.

5. See Genesis xxxvii.

6. See Genesis xxxix-xli.

She warned him, but it mighte nat availe:° do any good  
 He wente for to fighte nathelees.  
 But he was slain anoon° of Achilles. right away  
 But thilke tale is al too long to telle,  
 And eek it is neigh day, I may nat dwelle.  
 330 Shortly I saye, as for conclusioun,  
 That I shal han of this avisioun<sup>r</sup>  
 Adversitee, and I saye ferthermoor—  
 That I ne telle of<sup>s</sup> laxatives no stoor,  
 335 For they been venimes,° I woot it weel: poisons  
 I hem defye, I love hem neveradecl.° not a bit  
 “Now lat us speke of mirthe and stinte° al this. stop  
 Madame Pertelote, so have I blis,  
 Of oo thing God hath sente me large grace:  
 340 For whan I see the beautee of youre face—  
 Ye been so scarlet reed° aboute youre yen— red  
 It maketh al my drede for to dien.  
 For also siker° as In principio,<sup>9</sup> certain  
Mulier est hominis confusio.<sup>1</sup>  
 345 Madame, the sentence° of this Latin is, meaning  
 ‘Womman is mannes joye and al his blis.’  
 For whan I feele anight youre softe side—  
 Al be it that I may nat on you ride,  
 For that oure perche is maad so narwe, allas—  
 350 I am so ful of joye and of solas° delight  
That I defye bothe swevene and dreem.<sup>7</sup>  
 And with that word he fleigh° down fro the beam, flew  
 For it was day, and eek his hennes alle,  
 And with a “chuk” he gan hem for to calle,  
 355 For he hadde founde a corn lay in the yeerd.  
 Real° he was, he was namore aferd:° regal / afraid  
 He fethered<sup>2</sup> Pertelote twenty time,  
 And trad<sup>3</sup> hire as ofte er it was prime.  
 He looketh as it were a grim leoun,  
 360 And on his toes he rometh up and down:  
 Him deined<sup>4</sup> nat to sette his foot to grounde.  
 He chukketh whan he hath a corn yfounde,  
 And to him rennen° thanne his wives alle. run  
 Thus royal, as a prince is in his halle,  
 365 Leve I this Chauntecleer in his pasture,  
 And after wol I telle his aventure.  
 Whan that the month in which the world bigan,  
 That highte March,<sup>\*</sup> whan God first makend man,  
 Was compleet, and passed were also,

7. Divinely inspired dream (as opposed to the more ordinary “swevene” or “dreem”).

8. Set by.

9. A tag from the Gospel of St. John which gives the essential premises of Christianity: “In the beginning was the

Word.”

1. Woman is man's ruin.

2. I.e., embraced.

3. Trod, copulated with; “prime”: 9 A.M.

4. He deigned.

\* March was then the 1st month of the year.

- 370 Sin March bigan, thritty days and two,<sup>5</sup>  
 Bifel that Chauntecleer in al his pride,  
 His sevene wives walking him biside,  
 Caste up his v̄en to the brighte sonne,  
 That in the signe of Taurus hadde yronne
- 375 Twenty degres and oon and somewhat more,  
 And knew by kinde,<sup>6</sup> and by noon other lore; *nature*  
 That it was prime, and crew with blisful stevene.<sup>6</sup> *voice*  
 "The sonne," he saide, "is clomben<sup>6</sup> up on hevene  
 Fourty degres and oon and more, ywis.
- 380 Madame Pertelote, my worldes blis,  
 Herkneþ this blisful briddes<sup>6</sup> how they singe, *birds*  
 And see the fresshe flowres how they springe:  
 Ful is myn herte of revel and solas."  
 But sodeinly him fil<sup>6</sup> a sorweful cas,<sup>6</sup> *befell / chance*
- 385 For evere the latter ende of joye is wo—  
 God woot that worldly joye is soone ago,  
 And if a rethor<sup>6</sup> coude faire endite, *retorician*  
 He in a cronicle sauffy<sup>6</sup> mighte it write, *safely*  
 As for a sovereign notabilitee.<sup>7</sup>
- 390 Now every wis man lat him herkne me:  
 This storve is also<sup>6</sup> trewe, I undertake, *as*  
 As is the book of *Launcelot de Lake*,<sup>8</sup>  
 That wommen holde in ful greet reverence.  
 Now wol I turne again to my sentence.<sup>6</sup> *main point*
- 395 A colfox<sup>9</sup> ful of sly iniquitee,  
 That in the grove hadde woned<sup>6</sup> yeres thre, *dwelled*  
 By heigh imaginacion forncast,<sup>1</sup>  
 The same night thurghout the hegges<sup>6</sup> brast<sup>6</sup> *hedges / burst*  
 Into the yeerd ther Chauntecleer the faire
- 400 Was wont, and cek his wives, to repaire;  
 And in a bed of wortes<sup>6</sup> stille he lay *cabbages*  
 Til it was passed undren<sup>6</sup> of the day, *midmorning*  
 Waiting his time on Chauntecleer to falle,  
 As gladly doon these homicides alle;
- 405 That in await ligen to mordre<sup>2</sup> men.  
 O false mordroure, lurking in thy den!  
 O newe Scariot!<sup>3</sup> Newe Geniloun!  
 False dissimilour!<sup>6</sup> O Greck Sinoun,<sup>4</sup> *dissembler*  
 That broughtest Troye al outrelly<sup>6</sup> to sorwe!  
 410 O Chauntecleer, accused be that morwe<sup>6</sup> *utterly morning*

5. The rhetorical time-telling is perhaps burlesque; it can be read as yielding the date April 3, though May 3 seems intended from lines 374–75: on May 3 the sun would have passed some twenty degrees through Taurus (the Bull), the second sign of the zodiac; the sun would be forty degrees from the horizon at 9 o'clock in the morning.

6. Has climbed.

7. Indisputable fact.

8. Romances of the courteous knight Lancelot of the Lake were very pop-

ular.

9. Fox with black markings.

1. Predestined by divine planning.

2. That lie in ambush to murder.

3. Judas Iscariot. "Geniloun" is Genealon, who betrayed Roland to the Saracens (in the medieval French epic *The Song of Roland*).

4. Sinon, who persuaded the Trojans to take the Greeks' wooden horse into their city—with, of course, the result that the city was destroyed.

That thou into the yerd flaugh<sup>8</sup> fro the bemesi  
 Thou were ful wel ywarned by thy dremes  
 That thilke day was perilous to thee;  
 But that that God forwoot<sup>9</sup> moot<sup>10</sup> needes be, foreknew<sup>11</sup> / must  
 After<sup>12</sup> the opinion of certain clerkes:  
 Witnessse on him that any parth<sup>13</sup> clerk is  
 That in scole is greet altercacioun  
 In this matere, and greet disputoun,  
 And hath been of an hundred thousand men.  
 But I ne can nat bulte<sup>14</sup> it to the bren.  
 As can the holy doctour Augustin,  
 Or Boece, or the bisshop Bradwardin<sup>15</sup>—  
 Whether that Goddes worthy forwiting<sup>16</sup>  
 Straineth me nedely<sup>17</sup> for to doon a thing  
 ("Nedely" clepe I simple necessitee),  
 Or elles if free chois be graunted me  
 To do that same thing or do it nouht,  
 Though God forwoot<sup>18</sup> it er that I was wrouht;  
 Or if his witing<sup>19</sup> straineth neveradcl,  
 But by necessitee condicionel<sup>20</sup>—  
 I wol nat han to do of swich matere:  
 My tale is of a cok, as ye may here,  
 That took his conseil of his wif with sorwe,  
 To walken in the yerd upon that morwe  
 That he hadde met<sup>21</sup> the drem that I you tolde.  
 435  
 Wommenes conseil<sup>22</sup> been ful ofte colde,  
 And made Adam fro Paradis to go,  
 Ther as he was ful merye and wel at ese.  
 But for I moot<sup>23</sup> to whom it mighte displese  
 If I conseil of women wolde blame,  
 Passe over, for I saide it in my game<sup>24</sup>—  
 Rede auctours where they trete of swich matere,  
 And what they sayn of women ye may here—  
 These been the cokkes wordes and nat mine:  
 I can noon harm of no womman divine.  
 Faire in the sond<sup>25</sup> to bathe hire meryly  
 Lith<sup>26</sup> Pertelote, and alle hir sustres by,  
 Again<sup>27</sup> the sonne, and Chauntecleer so free<sup>28</sup>  
 Soong<sup>29</sup> merier than the mermaide in the see—  
 For Physiologus<sup>30</sup> saith sikerly  
 How that they singen wel and meryly.  
 And so bifel that as he caste his ye  
 Among the wortes on a boterflye,  
 butterfly

5. St. Augustine, Boethius (6th-century Roman philosopher, whose *Consolation of Philosophy* was translated by Chaucer), and Thomas Bradwardine (Archbishop of Canterbury, d. 1349) were all concerned with the interrelationship between man's free will and God's foreknowledge.  
 6. Constrains me necessarily.  
 7. Boethius, "conditional necessity" permitted a large measure of free will.  
 8. I.e., baneful.  
 9. Supposed author of a bestiarium, a book of moralized zoology describing both natural and supernatural animals (including mermaids).

455 He was war of this fox that lay ful lowe.  
 No thing ne liste him<sup>1</sup> thamne for to crowe,  
 But cride anon "Cok cok!" and up he sterte,<sup>2</sup>  
 As man that<sup>2</sup> was affrayed in his herte—  
 460 For naturally a best desireth flee  
 Fro his contrarye<sup>3</sup>; if he may it see,  
 Though he never erst<sup>4</sup> hadde seen it with his ye.  
 This Chauntecler, whan he gan him espye,  
 He wolde han fled, but that the fox anon  
 Saide, "Gentil sire, allas, wher wol ye goon?  
 Be ye afraid of me that am youre frend?  
 465 Now certes, I were worse than a fend  
 If I to you wolde<sup>5</sup> harm or vilainye.  
 I am nat come youre conseil<sup>6</sup> for t'espye,  
 But trewely the cause of my cominge  
 470 Was only for to herkne how that ye singe:  
 For trewely, ye han as merye a stevene<sup>7</sup>  
 As any angel hath that is in hevene.  
 Therwith ye han in musik more feelinge  
 475 Than hadde Boece,<sup>8</sup> or any that can singe.  
 My lord your fader—God his soule blesse!  
 And eek youre moder, of hir gentillesse,<sup>9</sup>  
 Han in myn hous ybden, to my grete ese.  
 480 And certes sire, ful fain<sup>10</sup> wolde I you please.  
 "But for men speke of singing, I wol saye,  
 So mote I brouke<sup>11</sup> wel mine yen twaye,  
 Save ye, I herde nevere man so singe  
 As dide youre fader in the morweninge.  
 485 Certes, it was of herte<sup>12</sup> al that he soong.  
 And for to make his vois the more strong,  
 He wolde so paine him<sup>13</sup> that with bothe his yen  
 And stonden on his tiptoon therwithal,  
 And strecehe forth his nekke long and smal,  
 490 And eek he was of swich discrecion  
 That ther nas no man in no region  
 That him in song or wisdom mighte passe.  
 I have wel rad<sup>14</sup> in *Dauun Burnel the Asses*  
 Among his vers how that ther was a cok,  
 495 For a prestes sone yat him a knok<sup>15</sup>  
 Upon his leg whil he was yong and nice,<sup>16</sup>  
 He made him for to lese<sup>17</sup> his benethe.<sup>18</sup>

started  
before  
meant  
secrets  
voice  
gentility  
gladly  
sang  
foolish  
lose

1. He wished.  
 2. Like one who.  
 3. I.e., his natural enemy.  
 4. Boethius also wrote a treatise on music.  
 5. So might I enjoy the use of.  
 6. Heartfelt.  
 7. Take pains.  
 8. He had to shut his eyes.  
 9. Master Brunellus, a discontented donkey, was the hero of a 12th-century satirical poem by Nigel Wiker.  
 10. Because a priest's son gave him a knock.  
 11. The offended cock neglected to crow so that his master, now grown to man-hood, overslept, missing his ordination and losing his benethe.

But certain, ther nis no comparison  
 Bitwixe the wisdom and discrecion  
 Of youre fader and of his subtiltee.

500 Now singeth, sire, for sainte<sup>3</sup> chariteel  
 Lat see, conne<sup>3</sup> ye youre fader countritec<sup>3</sup>?

This Chauntecleer his winges gan to bctc,  
 As man that coude his treason nat espye,

505 So was he ravished with his hateryc.  
 Allas, ye lordes, many a fals flatour<sup>3</sup>

Is in youre court, and many a losengeour,  
 That plescn you wel more, by my faith,

510 Than he that soothfashnesse<sup>3</sup> unto you saith!  
 Redeth Ecclesiaste<sup>3</sup> of hateryc.

515 Beeth war, ye lordes, of hir trecheryc.  
 This Chauntecleer stood hye upon his toos,

Streccching his nekke, and heeld his yen cloos,  
 And gan to crowse loudc for the nones<sup>3</sup>;

520 And daun Russel the fox sterce<sup>3</sup> up atones,  
 And by the gargar<sup>3</sup> hente<sup>3</sup> Chauntecleer,

525 And on his bak toward the wode him ber,  
 For yit ne was ther no man that him sued.

O destinee that maist nat been eschued!  
 Allas that Chauntecleer fleigh<sup>3</sup> fro the beneste!

530 Allas his wif ne roughte nat of dreme!  
 And on a Friday fl<sup>3</sup> al this meschaunce!

O Venus that art goddesse of plesauce,  
 Sin that thy servant was this Chauntecleer,

535 More for delit than world<sup>5</sup> to multiplye—  
 Why woldestou suffre him on thy day<sup>6</sup> to die?

O Gautred,<sup>7</sup> dere maister sovereign,  
 That, whan thy worthy king Richard was slain

540 With shot,<sup>8</sup> complainedest his deeth so sore,  
 Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy lore,<sup>9</sup>

The Friday for to chide as diden ye?  
 For on a Friday soothly slain was he.

545 Thanne woude I shewe you how that I coude plainc  
 For Chauntecleeres drede and for his paine.

550 Certes, swich cry ne lamentacioun  
 Was neverc of ladies maad whan Ilion<sup>3</sup>

Was wonne, and Pyrrus<sup>2</sup> with his strate sword,  
 Whan he hadde hent<sup>3</sup> King Priam by the beard

555 And slain him, as saith us *Eneidos*,<sup>3</sup>  
 3. The Book of Ecclesiasticus, in the

Apocrypha.  
 4. Didn't care for.  
 5. I.e., population.  
 6. Friday is Venus' day.  
 7. Geoffrey of Vinsauf, a famous medieval rhetorician, who wrote a lament on the death of Richard I in which he scolded Friday, the day on which the king died.  
 8. I.e., a missile.  
 9. Thy wisdom and thy learning.  
 1. Lament.  
 2. Pyrrhus was the Greek who slew Priam, king of Troy. "Strate": rigor-ous, unsparing.  
 3. As the *Aeneid* tells us.

Ilion, Troy seized

occasion jumped throat / seized bore followed eschewed flew  
 befell

Interpret to Priest  
 Flatterer  
 deceiver  
 truth  
 can / imitate  
 holy

- As maden alle the hennes in the cloos,  
 540 Whan they hadde scen of Chauntecleer the sighte.  
 But soverainly<sup>4</sup> Dame Pertelote shrighte.  
 Ful louder than dide Hasdrubales<sup>5</sup> wif  
 545 Whan that hir housbonde hadde lost his lif,  
 And that the Romains hadden brened<sup>6</sup> Cartage:  
 She was so ful of torment and of rage.  
 That wiffuly unto the fir she sterte,  
 And brende hirselven with a stedfast herte.  
 O woful hennes, right so criden ye.  
 550 As, whan that Nero brende the citee  
 Of Rome, criden senatours wives  
 For that hir housbondes losten alle hir lives:  
 Withouten gilt this Nero hath hem slain.  
 Now wol I turne to my tale again.  
 555 The selv<sup>7</sup> widwe and eek hir doughtres two  
 Herden thise hennes crye and maken wo,  
 And out at dore sterten<sup>8</sup> they anon,  
 And sien<sup>9</sup> the fox toward the grove goon,  
 And bar upon his bak the cok away,  
 560 And criden, "Out, harrow, and wailaway,  
 Ha, ha, the fox," and after him they ran.  
 And eek with staves many another man:  
 Ran Colicoure dogge, and Talbot and Gerland,<sup>2</sup>  
 And Malkin with a distaf in hir hand,  
 565 Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,  
 Sore afeid<sup>3</sup> for berking of the dogges  
 And shouting of the men and women eke.  
 They ronned<sup>4</sup> so hem thoughte hir herte breke;<sup>5</sup>  
 They yelleden as fennes doon in helle;  
 570 The dokes<sup>6</sup> criden as men wolde hem quelle;  
 The gces for fere-flouen<sup>7</sup> over the trees,  
 Out of the hive cam the swarm of bees;  
 So hidous was the noise, a, benedicite,  
 575 Certes, he Jakke Straw<sup>8</sup> and his mince<sup>9</sup>  
 Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille  
 Whan that they wolden any Fleming kille,  
 As thilke day was maad upon the fox:  
 Of bras they broughten beemes<sup>10</sup> and of box,<sup>11</sup> trumpets / boxwood  
 Of horn, of boon,<sup>12</sup> in which the they blew and pouped,<sup>13</sup> bone  
 580 And therwithal they skiked<sup>14</sup> and they houped—  
 It seemed as that hevene sholde falle.  
 Now goode men, I praye you herkneþ alle:  
 Lo, how Fortune turneth<sup>15</sup> sodenly  
 reverses, overturns
4. Splendidly.  
 5. Hasdrubal was king of Carthage  
 6. According to the legend, Nero not  
 7. When it was destroyed by the Romans.  
 8. Only set fire to Rome (in A.D. 64) but  
 9. One of the leaders of the Peasant's  
 10. Revolt in 1381, which was partially di-  
 11. rected against the Flemings living in  
 12. London.  
 13. I. Tooted.  
 14. 2. Shrieked; "houped": whooped.



585 The hope and pride eck of hir enemy.  
 This cok that lay upon the foxes bak,  
 In al his drede unto the fox he spak,  
 And saide, "Sire, if that I were as ye,  
 Yit sholde I sayn, as wis' God helpe me,  
 "Turneth ayain, ye proude cherles alle!  
 A verray pestilence upon you falle!  
 590 Now am I come unto this wodes side,  
 Maugree your heed,<sup>3</sup> the cok shal here abide.  
 I wol him etc, in faith, and that anon."  
 "The fox answered, "In faith, it shal be doon."  
 595 And as he spak that word, al sodenly  
 The cok brak from his mouth deliverly,  
 And hve upon a tree he fleigh<sup>4</sup> anon.  
 And whan the fox sawgh that he was agoon,  
 "Allas," quod he, "O Chantecleer, allas!  
 600 I have to you," quod he, "ydoon trespas,  
 In as muche as I made you afeid  
 Whan I you hent<sup>5</sup> and broughte out of the yerd.  
 But sire, I did it in no wikke<sup>6</sup> entente:  
 605 I shal saye sooth to you, God help me so."  
 "Nay thanne," quod he, "I shrewe<sup>7</sup> us bothe two:  
 But first I shrewe myself, bothe blood and bones,  
 If thou bigile me offer than ones;  
 610 Thou shalt namore thurgh thy haterye  
 Do me to singe and winken with myn ye.  
 For he that winketh whan he sholde see,  
 Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee."  
 "Nay," quod the fox, "but God give him meschaunce  
 615 That is so undiscreit of governaunce<sup>8</sup>  
 That jangleth<sup>9</sup> whan he sholde holde his pees."  
 Lo, swich it is for to be reccheles<sup>10</sup>  
 And negligent and truste on haterye.  
 But ye that holden this tale a folye  
 620 As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,  
 Taketh the moralitec, goode men.  
 For Saint Paul saith that al that writen is  
 To oure doctrine it is writ, ywis:<sup>11</sup>  
 Taketh the fruit, and lat the chat be stille.  
 625 Now goode God, if that it be thy wille,  
 As saith my lord, so make us alle goode men,  
 And bringe us to his hve blisse. Amen.

*careless*

*chatters*

*self-control*

*thrive*

*cause*

*curse*

*seized*

*wicked*

*flew*

*nimbly*

*surely*

3. Despite your head—i.e., despite any-  
 4. See Romans xv.4.  
 thing you can do.

From The Parson's Tale<sup>1</sup>

The Introduction

By that the Manciple hadde his tale al ended,  
The some fro the south lime<sup>2</sup> was decended

So lowe, that he nas nat to my sighte

Degrees nine and twenty as in sighte.

Four of the clokke it was, so as I gesse,

For elvene foot, or litel more or lesse,

My shadwe was at thilke time as there,

Of swich feet as<sup>3</sup> my lengthe parted<sup>4</sup> were

In six feet equal of porporcion.<sup>4</sup>

Therwith the moones exaltacioun<sup>5</sup>—

I mene Libra—alway gan ascende,

As we were entring at a thropes<sup>6</sup> ende.

For whichoure Host, as he was wont to gite<sup>7</sup>

As in this caasoure joly compatignye,

Saide in this wise, "Lordinges everichoon,

Now lakkeþ us no tales mo than oon:

Fulfil is my sentence<sup>8</sup> and my decre;

I trowe<sup>9</sup> that we han herd of ech degree;

Almost fulfilid is al myn ordinaunce.

I praye to God, so yve him right good chaunce

purpose

village's lead

as if / divided

1. Among the moral writers of the later Middle Ages the pilgrimage was so commonly treated as an allegory of man's life that Chaucer's audience must have been surprised to find the *Canterbury Tales* so little allegorical. At the end of his life, however, and at the end of his work, Chaucer seems to have been caught up in the venerable allegory. Some ten months before his death he rented a house in the garden of Westminster Abbey, and it is possible that during these months—perhaps when he felt his death approaching—he fell under the influence of the monks of Westmister. In any case, in the Parson's Tale, and in its short Introduction and Retraction that follows it, Chaucer seems to be making an end for two pilgrimages that had become one, that of his fiction and that of his life. In the Introduction to the tale we find the 29 pilgrims moving through a nameless little village as the sun sinks to within 29 degrees of the horizon. The atmosphere contains something of both the chill and the urgency of a late autumn afternoon, and we are surprised to find that the pilgrimage is almost over, that there is need for haste in order to make that "good end" that every medieval Christian hoped for. This delicately suggestive passage, rich with allegorical overtones, introduces an extremely long sermon on penitence and the seven deadly sins, probably translated by Chaucer from French or Latin some years earlier, before he had begun the *Canterbury Tales*.

The sermon is at times not without animation, but in general Chaucer provides no exception to the statement that Middle English prose is inferior to Middle English verse. But then the intent of the sermon is didactic, not artistic, and according to the more rigorous theologians of the time, didactic intent is infinitely more important than artistic expression.

It is to this doctrine that Chaucer yielded at the end of his life. The Retraction which follows and concludes the Parson's Tale offers Chaucer's apology for having written all the works on which his reputation as a great poet depends, not only such stories as the Miller's Tale, but also his loveliest and seemingly most harmless poems. Yet a readiness to deny his own reality before the reality of his God is implicit in many of Chaucer's works, and the placement of the Retraction within the artistic structure of the *Canterbury Tales* suggests, that while Chaucer denied his art, he seems to have recognized that he and it were inseparable. By the time that

2. I.e., the line that runs some 28 degrees to the south of the celestial equator and parallel to it.

3. I.e., the shadows are lengthening.

4. This detailed analysis merely says that the celestial equator and parallel to it.

5. I.e., the astrological sign in which the moon's influence was dominant.

6. Libra: the constellation of the Scales.

7. I.e., before he had begun the *Canterbury Tales*.

- That telleth this tale to us lustily.  
 Sire preest," quod he, "artou a vicary,<sup>o</sup> *vicar*  
 Or arte a Person? Say sooth, by thy fay.<sup>o</sup> *faith*  
 Be what thou be, ne breek<sup>o</sup> thou nat oure play, *break*  
 25 For every man save thou hath told his tale.  
 Unbokele and shew us what is in thy male!<sup>o</sup>  
 For trewely, me thinketh by thy cheere<sup>o</sup> *bag*  
 Thou sholdest knitte up wel a greet matere. *expression*  
 Tel us a fable anoon, for cokkes bones!"  
 30 This Person answerde al atones,<sup>o</sup>  
 "Thou getest fable noon ytold for me,  
 For Paul, that writeth unto Timothee,  
 Repreveth<sup>o</sup> hem that waiven soothfastnesse,<sup>7</sup> *reproves*  
 And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse.  
 35 Why sholde I sowen draf<sup>o</sup> out of my fest,<sup>o</sup> *chaff / fist*  
 Whan I may sowen whete if that me lest?<sup>8</sup>  
 For which I saye that if you list to heere  
 Moralitee and vertuouus matere,  
 And thanne that ye wol yive me audience,  
 40 I wol ful fain,<sup>o</sup> at Cristes reverence, *gladly*  
 Do you plesance leweful<sup>o</sup> as I can. *lawful*  
 But trusteth wel, I am a southren man:  
 I can nat geeste Rum-Ram-Ruf by lettre<sup>9</sup>—  
 Ne, God woot, rym holde<sup>o</sup> I but litel better. *consider*  
 45 And therefore, if you list, I wol nat glose;<sup>1</sup>  
 I wol you telle a merye tale in prose,  
 To knitte up al this feeste and make an ende.  
 And Jesu for his grace wit me sende  
 To shewe you the way in this viage<sup>o</sup> *journey*  
 50 Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage  
 That highte Jerusalem celestial.  
 And if ye vouche sauf, anoon I shal  
 Biginne upon my tale, for which I praye  
 Telle youre avis:<sup>o</sup> I can no better saye. *opinion*  
 55 But nathelees, this meditacioun  
 I putte it ay under correccioun  
 Of clerkes, for I am nat textuel:<sup>2</sup>  
 I take but the sentence,<sup>o</sup> trusteth wel.  
 Therefore I make protestacioun<sup>o</sup> *meaning*  
 60 That I wol stonde to correccioun." *public acknowledgment*  
 Upon this word we han assented soone,  
 For, as it seemed, it was for to doone  
 To enden in som vertuouus sentence,<sup>o</sup> *doctrine*  
 And for to yive him space and audience;  
 65 And bede<sup>3</sup> oure Host he sholde to him saye  
 That alle we to telle his tale him praye.

6. Immediately.

7. Depart from truth. See I Timothy i.4.

8. It pleases me.

9. I.e., I cannot tell stories in the alliterative measure (without rhyme):

this form of poetry was not common in southeastern England.

1. I.e., speak in order to please.

2. Literal, faithful to the letter.

3. I.e., we bade.

Oure Hoste hadde the wordes for us alle:  
 "Sire preest," quod he, "now faire you bifalle:  
 Telleth," quod he, "youre meditacioun.

70 But hasteth you; the sonne wol adown..

Beeth fructuous,<sup>o</sup> and that in litel space,<sup>o</sup>

fruitful / time

And to do wel God sende you his grace.

Saye what you list, and we wol gladly heere."

And with that word he saide in this manere.

### Chaucer's Retraction

Now praye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretis<sup>8</sup> or rede, that if ther be any thing in it that liketh<sup>9</sup> hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit<sup>1</sup> and al goodnesse. And if ther be any thing that displese him, I praye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unconning,<sup>2</sup> and nat to my wil, that wolde ful fain have said bettre if I hadde had conning. For oure book saith, "Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,"<sup>3</sup> and that is myn entente. Wherefore I biseeke<sup>4</sup> you mekely, for the mercy of God, that ye praye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryive me my giltes, and namely<sup>5</sup> of my translacions and enditinges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracions: as is the *Book of Troilus*; the Book also of *Fame*; the *Book of the Five and Twenty Ladies*;<sup>6</sup> the *Book of the Duchesse*; the *Book of Saint Valentines Day of the Parlement of Briddes*; the *Tales of Canterbury*, thilke that sounen into<sup>7</sup> sinne; the *Book of the Leon*;<sup>8</sup> and many another book, if they were in my remembrance, and many a song and many a lecherous lay: that Crist for his grcte mercy foryive me the sinne. But of the translacion of Boece<sup>9</sup> *De Consolacione*, and othere bookes of legendes of saintes, and omelies,<sup>1</sup> and moralitee, and devocion, that thanke I oure Lord Jesu Crist and his blisful Moder and alle the saintes of hevене, biseeking hem that they from hennes<sup>2</sup> forth unto my lives ende sende me grace to biwail my giltes and to studye to the salvacion of my soule, and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confession, and satisfaccion to doon in this present lif, thurgh the benigne grace of him that is king of kinges and preest over alle preestes, that boughte<sup>3</sup> us with the precious blood of his herte, so that I may been oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved. *Qui cum patre et Spiritu Sancto vivis et regnas Deus per omnia saecula.*<sup>4</sup>  
 Amen. 1386-1400

8. Hear this little treatise.

9. Pleases.

1. Understanding.

2. Ascribe it to the defect of my lack of skill.

3. Romans xv.4.

4. Beseech.

5. Especially. "Enditinges": compositions.

6. I.e., the *Legend of Good Women*.

7. Those that tend toward.

8. The *Book of the Lion* has not been preserved.

9. Boethius.

1. Homilies.

2. Hence.

3. Redeemed.

4. Who with the Father and the Holy Spirit livest and reignest God forever.

LYRICS AND OCCASIONAL VERSE<sup>1</sup>To Rosamond<sup>2</sup>

Madame, ye been of alle beautee shrine  
 As fer as cercled is the mapemounde:<sup>3</sup>  
 For as the crystal glorious ye shine,  
 And like ruby been youre cheekes rounde.  
 5 Therwith ye been so merye and so jocounde  
 That at a revel whan that I see you daunce  
 It is an oinement unto my wounde,  
 Though ye to me ne do no daliaunce.<sup>4</sup>

For though I weepe of teres ful a tine,<sup>o</sup> *tub*  
 10 Yit may that wo myn herte nat confounde;  
 Youre semy<sup>o</sup> vois, that ye so smale outtwine,<sup>5</sup> *small*  
 Maketh my thought in joye and blis habounde:<sup>o</sup> *abound*  
 So curteisly I go with love bounde  
 That to myself I saye in my penaunce,<sup>6</sup>  
 15 "Suffiseth me to love you, Rosemounde,  
 Though ye to me ne do no daliaunce."

Was nevere pik walwed in galauntine<sup>7</sup>  
 As I in love am walwed and vwounde,  
 For which ful ofte I of myself divine  
 20 That I am trewe Tristam<sup>8</sup> the secounde;  
 My love may not refreide nor affounde;<sup>9</sup>  
 I brenne<sup>o</sup> ay in amorous plesaunce: *burn*  
 Do what you list, I wol youre thral<sup>o</sup> be founde, *slave*  
 Though ye to me ne do no daliaunce.

1. As a man of accomplishments who was often at court, Chaucer must, like other courtiers, have been called upon to write both occasional verses and lyrics. Of the handful of these shorter poems that have survived, several of the best are included here: they reveal the ways in which Chaucer handled some of the poetic modes and attitudes of his time. These modes—particularly the lyric strain, which seeks expression in a brief form—seem to have been uncongenial to his temperament. Some, in fact, might well be termed "anti-lyrics"; these are the poems where the extreme conventions of the courtly-love lyric become a framework in which Chaucer's irony and indirection may be brought into immediate play. Chaucer's best work, however, is in his longer poems, for irony and indirection are qualities which can be given proper development

only if the poet has ample room to work in.

2. This lyric extends the extravagant images of the stylized courtly-love lyric to outrageous lengths: a lover might well weep a flood of tears but would hardly measure them by the tubful (line 9), and he might be overwhelmed with love—but not like a fish buried in sauce (line 17). The general imperturbability of tone contrasts ironically with the grotesque metaphors.

3. I.e., to the farthest circumference of the map of the world.

4. I.e., show me no encouragement.

5. That you so delicately spin out.

6. I.e., pangs of unrequited love.

7. Pike rolled in galantine sauce.

8. The famous lover of Isolt (Iseult, Isolde) in medieval legend, renowned for his constancy.

9. Cool nor chill.

To His Scribe Adam<sup>1</sup>

Adam scrivain, <sup>o</sup> if evere it thee bifalle	<i>scribe</i>
Boece <sup>2</sup> or <i>Troilus</i> for to writen newe,	
Under thy longe lokkes thou moste <sup>3</sup> have the scalle, <sup>o</sup>	<i>scurf</i>
But after my making thou write more trewe, <sup>4</sup>	
5 So ofte a day I moot <sup>o</sup> thy werk renewe,	<i>must</i>
It to correcte, and eek to rubbe and scrape:	
And al is thurgh thy necligence and rape. <sup>o</sup>	<i>haste</i>

Complaint to His Purse<sup>5</sup>

To you. my purs, and to noon other wight,	
Complaine I, for ye be my lady dere.	
I am so sory, now that ye be light,	
For certes, but if <sup>6</sup> ye make me hevye cheere,	
5 Me were as lief <sup>7</sup> be laid upon my beere; <sup>o</sup>	<i>bier</i>
For which unto youre mercy thus I crye:	
Beeth hevye again, or elles moot <sup>o</sup> I die.	<i>must</i>
Now voucheth sauf this day er it be night	
That I of you the blisful soun may heere,	
10 Or sec youre colour, lik the sonne bright,	
That of yelownesse hadde nevere peere.	
Ye be my life, ye be myn hertes stcere, <sup>o</sup>	<i>rudder, guide</i>
Queene of confort and of good compaignye:	
Beeth hevye again, or elles moot I die.	
15 Ye purs, that been to me my lives light	
And saviour, as in this world down here,	
Out of this tonne <sup>8</sup> helpe me thurgh your might,	
Sith that ye wol nat be my tresorerer; <sup>o</sup>	<i>disburser</i>
For I am shave as neigh <sup>o</sup> as any frere. <sup>o</sup>	<i>close / friar</i>
20 But yit I praye unto youre curteisye:	
Beeth hevye again, or elles moot I die.	

1. This *jeu d'esprit*, called forth by the inefficiency of his amanuensis, is written in the verse form of Chaucer's great poem *Troilus and Criseide*.

2. I.e., Chaucer's translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione*. "*Troilus*"; *Troilus and Criseide*.

3. I.e., may you.

4. Unless you write more accurately what I've composed.

5. In this variation on the courtly-love lyric the conventional language of love is both used and misused to express love of cash. Ladies, like coins, should be golden, and like purses they should not

be "light" (i.e., fickle). On the other hand, they should not be heavy, as purses should be. The poem is in the characteristic three-stanza *ballade* form, with the usual "envoy" addressed to a noble patron. In this case the patron apparently heard the complaint, for, three days after his accession (in 1399), King Henry IV renewed and increased the pension Chaucer had received from Richard II.

6. Unless.

7. I'd just as soon.

8. Tun, meaning "predicament."

## Envoy to Henry IV

O conquerour of Brutus Albioun,<sup>9</sup>  
 Which that by line and free eleccioun  
 Been verrey king, this song to you I sende:  
 25 And ye, that mowen<sup>o</sup> alle ourc harmes amende, *may*  
 Have minde upon my supplicacioun.

Merciless Beauty<sup>1</sup>

1

Youre yēn two wol slee<sup>o</sup> me sodeinly: *slay*  
 I may the beautee of hem nat sustene,<sup>o</sup> *withstand*  
 So woundeth it thurghout myn herte keene.<sup>o</sup> *keenly*

And but<sup>o</sup> youre word wol helen hastily *unless*  
 5 Myn hertes wounde, whil that it is greene,<sup>2</sup>

Youre yēn two wol slee me sodeinly:  
 I may the beautee of hem nat sustene.

Upon my trouthe, I saye you faithfully  
 That ye been of my lif and deeth the queene,  
 10 For with my deeth the trouthe shal be scene.  
 Yourē yēn two wol slee me sodeinly:  
 I may the beautee of hem nat sustene,  
 So woundeth it thurghout myn herte keene.

2

So hath youre beautee fro youre herte chaced  
 15 Pitee, that me ne availeth nought to plaine:<sup>o</sup> *complain*  
 For Daunger halt<sup>3</sup> youre mercy in his chaine.

Gilteles my deeth thus han ye me purchaced;<sup>o</sup> *procured*  
 I saye you sooth, me needeth nought to feine:<sup>o</sup> *dissemble*  
 So hath youre beautee fro youre herte chaced  
 20 Pitee, that me ne availeth nought to plaine.

Allas, that nature hath in you compaced<sup>o</sup> *enclosed*  
 So greet beautee that no man may attaine  
 To mercy, though he sterve<sup>o</sup> for the paine. *die*  
 So hath youre beautee fro youre herte chaced

9. Britain (Albion) was supposed to have been founded by Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas, the founder of Rome.

1. The first two sections of this poem employ the typical imagery and extravagant emotion of courtly-love lyrics—the power of the lady's eyes to slay the

lover, for instance, and the struggle between her native pity and her "daunger" (haughtiness). But it ends where a real lyric could never end: the poet's self-congratulation, at the failure of his affair, on his unimpaired health.

2. I.e., fresh.

3. Haughtiness holds.

25 Pitee, that me ne availleth nought to plaine:  
For Daunger halt youre mercy in his chainc.

Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,  
I nevere thenke<sup>3</sup> to been in his prison lene: *intend*  
Sin I am free, I counte him nat a bene.<sup>4</sup>

30 He may answeere and saye right this and. that;  
I do no fors,<sup>5</sup> I speke right as I mene:  
Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,  
I nevere thenke to been in his prison lene.

Love hath my name ystrike<sup>6</sup> out of his sclat,<sup>6</sup> *struck / slate*  
35 And he is strike out of my bookes clene  
For everemo; ther is noon other mene.<sup>6</sup> *solution*  
Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,  
I nevere thenke to been in his prison lene:  
Sin I am free, I counte him nat a bene:

### Gentilesse<sup>6</sup>

The firste fader and findere<sup>6</sup> of gentilesse, *founder*  
What<sup>6</sup> man desireth gentil for to be *whatever*  
Moste folwe his traas,<sup>6</sup> and alle his wittes dresse<sup>7</sup> *path*  
Vertu to sue,<sup>6</sup> and vices for to flee: *follow*  
5 For unto vertu longeth<sup>6</sup> dignitee, *belongs*  
And nought the revers, sauffy<sup>6</sup> dar I deeme, *safely*  
Al were he<sup>8</sup> mitre, crowne, or diademe.

This firste stok was ground of rightwisnesse,<sup>6</sup> *righteousness*  
Trewе of his word, sobre, pietous,<sup>9</sup> and free,  
10 Clene of his gost,<sup>6</sup> and loved bisnesse *spirit*  
Against the vice of slouth,<sup>6</sup> in honestee; *sloth*  
And but his heir love vertu as dide he;  
He is nat gentil, though he riche<sup>6</sup> seeme, *noble*  
Al were he mitre, crowne, or diademe.

15 Vice may wel be heir to old richesse,  
But ther may no man, as ye may wel see,  
Biquethe his heir his vertuous noblesse:  
That is approped<sup>6</sup> unto no degree *exclusively assigned*

4. I don't consider him worth a bean.

5. I don't care.

6. The virtue of "gentilesse" combined a courtesy of manner with a courtesy of mind. That it is not the inevitable adjunct of aristocratic birth (though most appropriate to it) was a medieval commonplace, to which Chaucer here gives succinct—if conventional—expression. It is important to observe, however,

that the moral democracy implied by this doctrine was never transferred by the Middle Ages to the political or even the social realm.

7. I.e., must follow his (the first-father's) path and dispose all his (own) wits.

8. Even if he wear.

9. Merciful; "free": generous.



But to the firste fader in majestee,  
 20 That maketh his heir him that wol him queme,<sup>o</sup> *please*  
 Al were he mitre, crowne, or diademe.

Truth<sup>1</sup>

Flee fro the prees<sup>o</sup> and dwelle with soothfastnesse; *crowd*  
 Suffise unto<sup>o</sup> thy thing, though it be smal; *be content with*  
 For hoord hath<sup>2</sup> hate, and climbing tikelnesse:<sup>o</sup> *insecurity*  
 Prees hath envye, and wele<sup>o</sup> blent<sup>o</sup> overal. *prosperity / blinds*  
 5 Savoure<sup>o</sup> no more than thee bihoove shal; *relish*  
 Rule wel thyself that other folk canst rede:<sup>o</sup> *advise*  
 And Trouthe shal delivere,<sup>3</sup> it is no drede.<sup>o</sup> *doubt*

Tempest thee nought al crooked to redresse<sup>4</sup>  
 In trust of hire<sup>5</sup> that turneth as a bal;  
 10 Muche wele stant in litel businesse;<sup>6</sup>  
 Be war therfore to spurne ayains an al.<sup>7</sup>  
 Strive nat as dooth the crokke<sup>o</sup> with the wal. *pot*  
 Daunte<sup>o</sup> thyself that dauntest others deede: *master*  
 And Trouthe shal delivere, it is no drede.

15 That thee is sent, receive in buxomnesse:<sup>o</sup> *obedience*  
 The wrastling for the world axeth<sup>o</sup> a fal; *asks for*  
 Here is noon hoom, here nis but wilderness:  
 Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beest, out of thy stall!  
 Know thy countree, looke up, thank God of al.  
 20 Hold the heigh way and lat thy gost<sup>o</sup> thee lede: *spirit*  
 And Trouthe shal delivere, it is no drede.

Therefore, thou Vache,<sup>8</sup> leve thyn olde wrecchednesse  
 Unto the world; leve<sup>9</sup> now to be thral.  
 Crye him mercy that of his heigh goodnesse  
 25 Made thee of nought, and in especial  
 Draw unto him, and pray in general,  
 For thee and eek for othere, hevenelich meede:<sup>o</sup> *reward*  
 And Trouthe shal delivere, it is no drede.

1. Taking as his theme Christ's words to his disciples (in John viii.32), "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," Chaucer plays upon the triple meaning that the Middle English word "trouthe" seems to have had for him: the religious truth of Christianity, the moral virtue of integrity, and the philosophical idea of reality. By maintaining one's faith and one's integrity, one rises superior to the vicissitudes of this world and comes eventually to know reality—which is not, however, of this world.

2. Hoarding causes.

3. I.e., truth shall make you free.

4. Do not disturb yourself to straighten all that's crooked.

5. Fortune, who turns like a ball in that she is always presenting a different aspect to men.

6. Peace of mind stands in little anxiety.

7. I.e. to kick against the pricks.

8. Probably Sir Philip de la Vache, with a pun on the French for "cow."

9. I.e. cease.

## SIR ORFEO

(ca. 1300)

*Sir Orfeo* is a reworking of the classical myth of the great musician Orpheus and his wife Eurydice. According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Eurydice died of a snake-bite at her wedding and went to Hades, the place of the dead. Orpheus undertook to follow her there, and having come before Pluto and Proserpina, the king and queen of Hades, he so pleased them with his music that they granted Eurydice's release—on the condition, however, that she should follow behind Orpheus as they left Hades and that he should not look back at her. But Orpheus did look back, and Eurydice disappeared into Hades. Ovid's stories were told and retold during the Middle Ages, and frequently the teller altered the plot to suit his own purposes—in her tale the *Wife of Bath* (lines 958ff.) substitutes Midas' wife for his barber as the discoverer of his asses' ears. The poet of *Sir Orfeo* has given the story a happy ending and has replaced its alien classical elements with familiar elements of medieval folklore. Hades has become the land of *Fairy*, the medieval otherworld, inhabited by supernatural creatures who seem human in most respects but who exist under laws incomprehensible to ordinary human beings. There is no rational explanation of why the king of Fairy should seize Dame Heurodis (Eurydice), except that by going to sleep under an *impe-tree* (a grafted fruit-tree), she unwittingly violated a taboo and put herself in his power. In folklore trees are, of course, often given sinister properties: in lines 885 ff. of her tale the *Wife of Bath* comments that incubi once resided under trees, and in *The Faerie Queene* I.ii.30 the Redcross Knight has a frightening experience with a tree he is sitting under. In the Otherworld Dame Heurodis continues to sleep under a tree—apparently a replica of the one in her own garden.

That the poem was the product of a minstrel seems certain because of the emphasis laid upon the value of music. Orfeo is an excellent harper who welcomes all good harpers to his court. When he becomes a hermit, he keeps his harp near him and plays on it to solace himself. The animals and birds crowd around him in delight—as they did with Orpheus—and like the original Orpheus he frees his wife by his music. When he returns to his own kingdom it is by his harp and his harping that he is identified. Even Orfeo's steward appreciates music: in most medieval romances stewards are pictured as wicked, for they were the court officers responsible for offering or withholding hospitality for minstrels, and apparently they often withheld it. With unusual tact, the poet depicts a good steward who, partly because of his courtesy to harpers, becomes king after Orfeo's death.

The poem was probably translated from a French romance of the kind called a Breton lay. As the name implies, this genre of romance had its origin in Brittany, a place noted for its minstrelsy. Other surviving lays share with *Sir Orfeo* a plot involving the supernatural, wedded or romantic love, and a rash promise; they also share the poem's stylistic simplicity, brevity, and a generally optimistic spirit. Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* imitates the form, and it is probable that his model was *Sir Orfeo*, whose opening lines the *Franklin* seems to be echoing in his own story. The English trans-

lation was probably made before 1300, but it has survived in only three manuscripts of later date. Some scholars believe that the best of these, the Auchinleck manuscript, may once have been read by Chaucer. Only the Auchinleck manuscript makes the interesting identification of *Traciens* (Thrace) with Winchester: some English minstrel poet obviously adapted the poem to a performance at Winchester, which had, indeed, in Old English times been the seat of a kingdom. (It was probably the same poet who, fractionally learned, names King Pluto and King Juno among Orfeo's ancestors.)

The text presented here is based on the Auchinleck manuscript, though the spelling has been normalized and readings from the other manuscripts adopted where they seem better than Auchinleck's. In view of the large amount of evident corruption in all three manuscripts, the editor has made a number of conjectural emendations. The original metrical form was probably octosyllabic couplets with alternating stress, but what has come down to us are loose four-stressed couplets. As in Chaucer, there are many "headless" lines, where the stress falls on the first syllable of the line, even though the syllable is not a rhetorically important one; and also as in Chaucer, while final *e* is frequently used to achieve an unstressed syllable, it is equally often ignored.

### Sir Orfeo

	We reden ofte and finden ywrite—	
	As this clerkes doon° us wite°—	<i>cause / to learn</i>
	The layes that been of harping <sup>1</sup> ;	
	Been yfounde° of freely° thing:	<i>composed / pleasant</i>
5	Some been of werre° and some of wo,	<i>war</i>
	And some of joye and mirthe also,	
	And some of trecherye and of gile;	
	And some of happes° that fellen° while,°	<i>events / occurred / once</i>
	And some of bourdes° and ribaudye,°	<i>jokes / ribaldry</i>
10	And manye been of fairye. <sup>2</sup>	
	Of alle thing that men may see,	
	Most of love forsoothe they be.	
	In Britain° these layes been wrought,	<i>Brittany</i>
	First yfounde° and forth ybrought.	<i>composed</i>
15	Of aventures that felle° by dayes <sup>3</sup>	<i>occurred</i>
	The Britons° therof maden layes:	<i>Bretons</i>
	Whan they mighte owher° yheere°	<i>anywhere / hear</i>
	Of any merveiles that ther were,	
	They tooken hem hir harpes with game,°	<i>pleasure</i>
20	Maden layes and yaf° hem name.	<i>gave</i>
	Of aventures that han bifalle	
	I can some telle, but nought alle.	
	Herkneth, lordinges° that been trewe,	<i>gentlemen</i>
	I wol you telle of Sir Orfewe.	
25	Orfeo was a riche° king,	<i>noble</i>

1. I.e., composed to be sung to the harp.

2. Fairyland, and, more commonly, the other-world and its supernatural inhabitants.

3. Once.

	In Engelond an heigh lording, A stalworth° man and hardy bo°, Large° and curteis° he was also. His fader was come of King Pluto,	<i>valiant / both generous / courteous</i>
30	And his moder of King Juno, That somtime were as goddes yholde° For aventures that they dide and tolde. This king sojourned in Traciens°	<i>considered</i>
	That is a citee of noble defens° 35 (For Winchester was cleped° tho° Traciens withouten no°).	<i>Thrace fortification called / then denial</i>
	Orfeo most of any thing Loved the glee° of harping: Siker° was every good harpour	<i>music certain</i>
40	Of him to have muche honour. Himself he lerned for to harpe, And laide° theron his wittes sharpe;° He lerned so ther nothing was	<i>applied / keenly</i>
	A better harpour in no plas.°	<i>place</i>
45	In al the world was no man bore° That ones° Orfeo sat bifore, And° he mighte of his harping heere, But he sholde thinke that he were	<i>born once if</i>
	In oon of the joyes of Paradis, 50 Swich melodye in his harping is. Orfeo hadde a queene of pris°	<i>excellence named</i>
	That was ycleped° Dame Heurodis, The fairest lady for the° nones° That mighte goon° on body and bones,	<i>that / matter walk</i>
55	Ful of love and of goodnesse— But no man may telle hir fairnesse. Bifel so, the comsing° of May, When merye and hot is the day,	<i>beginning</i>
	And away been winter showres, 60 And every feeld is ful of flowres, And blosme breme° on every bough Overal° wexeth° merye ynough, This eeche° queene Dame Heurodis	<i>glorious everywhere / grows same</i>
	Took with hire two maides of pris° 65 And wente in the undertide° To playe in an orchard-side, To see the flowres sprede° and springe And to heere the fowles singe.	<i>excellence forenoon</i>
	They setten hem down alle three 70 Faire° under an impe-tree;° And wel soone this faire queene Fel on sleepe upon the greene. The maidens durste hire not awake, But lete hire lie and reste take.	<i>fairly / grafted fruit tree</i>
75	So she slepte til afternoon That undertide was al ydoon.°	<i>passed</i>

- But as soone as she gan wake  
 She cried and loothly bere° gan make: *outcry*  
 She frotte° hir hondes and hir feet *tore at*  
 80 And cracched° hir visage—it bledde weet;° *scratched / wet*  
 Hir riche robe she al torit,° *tears apart*  
 And was ravisid° out of her wit. *ravished*  
 The two maidenes hire biside  
 Ne durste with hire no leng° abide, *longer*  
 85 But runne to the palais right  
 And tolde bothe squier and knight  
 That hir queene awede° wolde, *go mad*  
 And bad hem go and hire atholde.° *restrain*  
 Knightes runne and ladies also,  
 90 Damiseles sixty and mo,° *more*  
 In th' orchard to the queene they come,  
 And hire up in armes nome,° *took*  
 And broughte hire to bed at laste,  
 And heelde hire there fine° faste.  
 95 But evere she heeld° in oo° cry, *very*  
 And wolde uppe° and awy.° *continued / one*  
     Whan the king herde that tiding  
 Nevere him nas worse for no thing:  
 Orfeo cam with knightes tene° *ten*  
 100 To chambre right bifore the queene,  
 And looked and saide with greet° pitee,  
 "O leve° lif, what aileth thee?—  
 That evere yit hast been so stille,  
 And now thou gredest° wonder shille.° *cry out / shrilly*  
 105 Thy body that was so whit ycore° *excellent*  
 With thine nailes is all totore.° *torn*  
 Allas, thy rode° that was so reed° *complexion / red*  
 Is as wan as thou were deed.° *dead*  
 And also thy fingers smale  
 110 Been al bloody and al pale.  
 Allas, thy lovesome yën two  
 Looketh so° man dooth on his fo.  
 A, dame, ich° biseeche mercy—  
 Lete been al this reweful° cry,  
 115 And tel me what° thee is and how, *as*  
 And what thing may thee helpe now." *I*  
     Tho° lay she stille at the laste, *pitiful*  
 And gan to weepe swithe° faste,° *what the matter with*  
 And saide thus the king unto: *then*  
 120 "Allas, my lord Sir Orfeo, *very / hard*  
 Sitthen° we first togider were *since*  
 Ones wrothe° nevere we nere, *angry*  
 But evere ich have yloved thee  
 As my lif, and so thou me.  
 125 But now we mote° deele° atwo— *must / separate*  
 Do thy best, for I moot° go." *must*  
     "Allas," quath he, "forlorn ich am!

	Whider wilt thou go and to whom?°	<i>whom</i>
	Whider thou goost ich wil with thee,	
130	And whider I go thou shalt with me.”	
	“Nay, nay, sire, that nought nis. <sup>4</sup>	
	Ich wil thee telle al how it is:	
	As ich lay this undertide°	<i>forenoon</i>
	And slepte under oure orchard-side,	
135	Ther come to me two faire knightes,	
	Wel y-armed al to rightes,	
	And bad me comen on hying°	<i>in haste</i>
	And speke with hir lord the king;	
	And ich answerede at° wordes bolde	<i>in</i>
140	That I ne durste nought ne I nolde.°	<i>would not</i>
	They prikked again as they mighte drive. <sup>5</sup>	
	Tho° cam hir king also blive°	<i>then / straightway</i>
	With an hundred knightes and mo,	
	And damiseles an hundred also,	
145	Alle on snow-white steedes;	
	As white as milk were hir weedes:°	<i>clothes</i>
	I ne seigh° nevere yit bifore	<i>saw</i>
	So faire creatures ycore.°	<i>splendid</i>
	The king hadde a crown on his heed:°	<i>head</i>
150	It nas of silver n’of gold reed,°	<i>red</i>
	But it was of a precious stoon;	
	As brighte as the sonne it shoon.	
	And as soone as he to me cam,	
	Wolde ich, nolde ich, he me nam°	<i>took</i>
155	And made me with him to ride	
	Upon a palfrey him biside,	
	And broughte me to his palais	
	Wel attired° in eech a ways,°	<i>equipped / way</i>
	And shewed me castels and towrs,	
160	Riveres, forestes, frith° with flowres,	<i>meadow</i>
	And his riche steedes eechoon,	
	And sitthen° broughte me again hoom	<i>afterwards</i>
	Into oure owene orche-yard,°	<i>orchard</i>
	And saide to me thus afterward,	
165	‘Looke tomorwe that thou be	
	Right here under this impe-tree,	
	And thanne thou shalt with us go,	
	And live with us everemo.°	<i>evermore</i>
	And if thou makest us ylet,°	<i>resistance</i>
170	Where° thou be, thou worst° yfet.°	<i>wherever / shall be / fetched</i>
	And al totore° thy limes al	<i>torn apart</i>
	That no thing thee helpe shal.	
	And though thou beest so totorn,	
	Yit thou worst° with us yborn.’”°	<i>shall be / carried off</i>

4. I.e., that’s no use.

5. I.e., they rode as fast as they could.

- 175 When king Orfeo herde this cas,<sup>o</sup> *circumstance*  
 "O, wee!"<sup>o</sup> quath he, "allas, allas!  
 Lever me were to lete<sup>o</sup> my lif *woe*  
 Than thus to lese<sup>o</sup> the queene my wif."  
 He asked conseil at<sup>o</sup> eech a man, *leave*  
 But no man him helpe can. *lose*  
 180 Amorwe<sup>o</sup> the undertide is come, *from*  
 And Orfeo hath his armes ynome,<sup>o</sup> *next day*  
 And wel ten hundred knightes with him, *taken*  
 Eech y-armed, stout and grim.  
 185 And with the queene wenten he<sup>o</sup> *they*  
 Right unto that impe-tree.  
 They made sheltrom<sup>o</sup> in eech a side, *military formation*  
 And saide they wolde ther abide  
 And die there everichoon,  
 190 Er the queene sholde from hem goon.  
 And yit amiddes hem ful right  
 The queene was away ytwight,<sup>o</sup> *snatched*  
 With<sup>o</sup> fairye forth ynome:<sup>o</sup> *by / taken*  
 Men wiste nevere wher she was bicom.<sup>o</sup>  
 195 Tho<sup>o</sup> was ther crying, weep and wo; *then*  
 The king into his chambre is go  
 And ofte swooned upon the stoon,<sup>o</sup> *floor*  
 And made swich dool and swich moon<sup>7</sup>  
 That nye<sup>o</sup> his lif was yspent<sup>o</sup>— *nearly / finished*  
 200 Ther was noon amendement.<sup>o</sup> *remedy*  
 He clepte<sup>o</sup> togider his barouns,  
 Eerles, lordes of renouns,<sup>o</sup> *called*  
 And whan they alle ycomen were,  
 "Lordinges," he saide, "bifor you here  
 205 Ich ordaine myn heigh steward  
 To wite<sup>o</sup> my kingdom afterward;  
 In my stede been he shal  
 To keepe my londes overal.<sup>o</sup> *keep*  
 For now I have my queene ylore,<sup>o</sup> *everywhere*  
 210 The faireste lady that evere was bore,<sup>o</sup> *lost*  
 Nevere eft<sup>o</sup> I nil<sup>o</sup> no womman see;  
 In wilderness now wil ich tee<sup>o</sup> *born*  
 And live ther for everemore,  
 With wilde beestes in holtes<sup>o</sup> hore.<sup>o</sup> *again / will not*  
 215 And whan ye wite<sup>o</sup> that I be spent,<sup>o</sup> *go*  
 Make you than a parlement  
 And chese<sup>o</sup> you<sup>o</sup> a newe king;  
 Now dooth youre best with al my thing."  
 Tho<sup>o</sup> was ther weeping in the halle, *woods / gray*  
 220 And greet<sup>o</sup> cry among hem alle; *learn / dead*  
 Unnethe<sup>o</sup> mighte olde or yong *choose / for yourselves*

6. No one knew what had become of her.

7. And made such lamentation and such complaint.

- For weeping speke a word with tonge.  
 They kneeled alle adown in fere° *together*  
 And prayede him if his wille were,  
 225 That he ne sholde from hem go.  
 "Do way," quath he, "it shal be so."  
 Al his kingdom he forsook;  
 But° a sclavin° on him he took: *only / pilgrim's cloak*  
 He hadde no kirtel° ne noon hood, *short coat*  
 230 Shert ne yit noon other good.  
 But his harp he took algate°, *at any rate*  
 And dide him barefoot out at yate:° *gate*  
 No man moste° with him go. *must*  
 O way,° what° ther was weep and wo, *alas / how*  
 235 Whan he that hadde been king with crown  
 Wente so poorelich out of town.  
 Through the wode° and over heeth *wood*  
 Into the wildernesse he geeth.° *goes*  
 Nothing he fint° that him is aise,° *finds / easy*  
 240 But evere he liveth in gret malaise.  
 He that hadde wered° the fowe and gris,<sup>8</sup> *worn*  
 And on bed the purper° bis,° *purple / linen*  
 Now on harde heeth he lith,° *lies*  
 With leves and grasse he him writh.° *covers*  
 245 He that hadde had castels and towres,  
 Rivere, foreest, frith° with flowres, *meadow*  
 Now though it ginne snowe and freese,  
 This king moot° make his bed in meese.° *must / moss*  
 He that hadde had knightes of pris,° *renown*  
 250 Bifore him kneeling and ladis,  
 Now seeth he nothing that him liketh,° *pleases*  
 But wilde wormes° by him striketh.° *snakes / glide*  
 He that hadde yhad plentee  
 Of mete and drinke, of eech daintee,  
 255 Now may he alday° digge and wrote° *constantly / scrounge*  
 Er he finde his fille of roote.  
 In somer he liveth by wilde fruit  
 And berien° but goode lite;<sup>9</sup> *berries*  
 In winter may he nothing finde  
 260 But roote, grasses, and the rinde.° *bark*  
 Al his body away was dwined° *wasted*  
 For misaise, and al toched.° *scarred*  
 Lord, who may telle of the sore  
 This king suffered ten yeer and more?  
 265 His heer of his beerd, blak and rowe,° *rugged*  
 To his girdel-stede° was growe. *waist*  
 His harp wheron was al his glee  
 He hidde in an holwe tree,  
 And whan the weder was cleer and bright,

8. White and gray fur; i.e., royal ermine. 9. Little good.



- 270 He took his harp to him wel right,  
 And harped at his owene wille:°  
 In al the woode the soun gan shille,°  
 That wilde beestes that ther beeth  
 For joy abouten him they teeth;°  
 275 And alle the fowles that ther were  
 Come and sete on eech a brere°  
 To here his harping afine,°  
 So muche melodye was therine:  
 When he his harping lete° wolde,  
 280 No beest by him abide nolde.  
 Ofte he mighte see him bisides  
 In the hote undertides°  
 The king of fairy with his route°  
 Come to hunte him al aboute  
 285 With dinne, cry, and with blowing,  
 And houndes also with him berking.  
 But no beeste they ne nome°  
 Ne nevere he niste wher they bicomel<sup>1</sup>  
 And otherwhile he mighte see,  
 290 As a greet oost° by him tee,°  
 Wel atourned° ten hundred knightes,  
 Eech y-armed to his rightes,°  
 Of countenance stout and fiers,°  
 With manye displayed° baners,  
 295 And eech his swerd ydrawe holde,  
 But nevere he niste° wher they wolde,  
 And somwhile he seigh° other thing:  
 Knightes and ladies come dauncing,  
 In quainte° atir, degisely,°  
 300 Quainte pas° and softely.  
 Tabours° and trumpes yede° him by,  
 And al manere minstracy.°  
 And on a day he seigh° biside  
 Sixty ladies on horse ride,  
 305 Gentil and jolif° as brid° on ris°—  
 Nought oo man amonges hem nis.  
 And eech a faucon on hond beer,°  
 And riden on hawking by river.  
 Of game they founde wel good haunt,°  
 310 Maulardes,° hairoun,° and corneraunt.  
 The fowles of° the water ariseth;  
 The faucons hem wel deviseth:°  
 Eech faucon his preye slough.°  
 That seigh° Orfeo and lough:°  
 315 “Parfay!”° quath he, “ther is fair game!  
 Thider ich wil,° by Goddes name.  
 Ich was ywon° swich° werk to see.”

*pleasure  
resound*

*draw*

*briar  
to the end*

*leave off*

*mornings  
company*

*took*

*host / passed  
equipped  
fittingly  
fierce  
unfurled*

*knew not  
saw*

*elegant / wonderfully  
step*

*drums / went  
minstrely  
saw*

*pretty / bird / bough*

*hore*

*plenty  
mallards / herons*

*from  
descry  
slew*

*saw / laughed  
by faith*

*will go  
accustomed / such*

1. Nor did he ever learn what happened to them.

	He aroos and thider gan tee. <sup>o</sup>	<i>draw</i>
	To a lady he was ycome,	
320	Biheeld, and hath wel undernome, <sup>o</sup>	<i>understood</i>
	And seeth by al thing that it is	
	His owene queene Dame Heurodis,	
	Yerne <sup>o</sup> biheeld hire and she him eke, <sup>o</sup>	<i>eagerly / also</i>
	But neither to other a word ne speke.	
325	For misaise that she on him seigh <sup>o</sup>	<i>saw</i>
	That hadde been so riche and heigh,	
	The teres felle out of hir yē.	
	The othere ladies this ysye <sup>o</sup>	<i>saw</i>
	And maked hire away to ride:	
330	She moste <sup>o</sup> with him no lenger <sup>o</sup> abide.	<i>must / longer</i>
	“Allas,” quath he, “now me is wo.	
	Why nil <sup>o</sup> deeth now me nought slo? <sup>o</sup>	<i>will not / slay</i>
	Allas, wrecche, <sup>o</sup> that I ne mighte	<i>wretched one</i>
	Die now after this sighte.	
335	Allas, too longe last <sup>o</sup> my lif	<i>lasts</i>
	Whan I ne dar nought to my wif—	
	Ne she to me—oo word ne speke.	
	Allas, why nil myn herte breke?	
	Parfay,” <sup>o</sup> quath he, “tide what bitide,	<i>by faith</i>
340	Whider so thise ladies ride	
	The selve <sup>o</sup> waye ich wil strecche: <sup>o</sup>	<i>same / go</i>
	Of lif ne deeth me nothing recche.” <sup>o</sup>	<i>care</i>
	His sclavin <sup>o</sup> he dide on also spak <sup>o</sup>	<i>cloak / at once</i>
	And heeng <sup>o</sup> his harp upon his bak,	<i>hung</i>
345	And hadde wel good wil to goon:	
	He ne spared neither stub ne stoon. <sup>2</sup>	
	In at a roche <sup>o</sup> the ladies rideth	<i>rock, cave</i>
	And he after and nought abideth.	
	Whan he was in the roche ago	
350	Wel three mile other <sup>o</sup> mo,	<i>or</i>
	He cam into a fair cuntrye,	
	As bright so <sup>o</sup> sonne on somers day,	<i>as</i>
	Smoothe and plain <sup>o</sup> and alle greene:	<i>flat</i>
	Hil ne dale nas ther noon seene.	
355	Amidde the lond a castel he seigh, <sup>o</sup>	<i>saw</i>
	Riche and real <sup>o</sup> and wonder heigh.	<i>royal</i>
	Al the utemoste <sup>o</sup> wal	<i>outmost</i>
	Was cleer <sup>o</sup> and shined as crystal.	<i>bright</i>
	An hundred towres ther were aboute,	
360	Degiseliche, <sup>o</sup> and batailed <sup>3</sup> stoute.	<i>wonderful</i>
	The butres <sup>o</sup> cam out of the diche	<i>buttress</i>
	Of reed gold y-arched riche. <sup>4</sup>	
	The vousour <sup>o</sup> was anourned <sup>o</sup> al	<i>vaulting / adorned</i>

2. I.e., neither stump nor stone prevented him.

3. I.e., furnished with battlements.

4. I.e., made of red gold that arched splendidly: gold was commonly described as red in Middle English.

- Of cech manere divers aumal.<sup>o</sup> *enamel*  
 365 Within ther were wide wones,<sup>o</sup> *halls*  
 And alle were fulle of precious stones.  
 The worste pilar on to biholde  
 Al it was of burnist golde.  
 Al that lond was evere light,  
 370 For when it sholde be ther<sup>o</sup> and night *dark*  
 The riche stones lighte gonne<sup>5</sup>  
 As brighte as dooth at noon the sonne.  
 No man may telle ne thinke in thought  
 The riche werk that ther was wrought.  
 375 By alle thing him thinkth it is  
 The proude court of Paradis.  
 In this castel the ladies alighte:  
 He wolde in after, if he mighte.  
 Orfeo knokketh at the yate:<sup>o</sup> *gate*  
 380 The porter was redy therate  
 And asked what he wolde have ydo.<sup>o</sup> *done*  
 "Parfay,<sup>o</sup> ich am a minstrel, lo, *by faith*  
 To solace<sup>o</sup> thy lord with my glee *delight*  
 If<sup>6</sup> his sweete wille be."  
 385 The porter undide the gate anoon  
 And lete him into the castel goon.  
 Than he gan looke aboute al  
 And seigh,<sup>o</sup> lying within the wal, *saw*  
 Of folk that ther were thider ybrought,  
 390 And thoughte<sup>o</sup> dede,<sup>o</sup> and nere nought:<sup>7</sup> *seemed / dead*  
 Some stooode withouten hade,<sup>o</sup> *head*  
 And some none armes hade,  
 And some thurgh the body hadde wounde,  
 And some laye woode<sup>o</sup> ybounde; *mad*  
 395 And some armed on horse sete,  
 And some astrangled as they ete,  
 And some were in watre adreint,<sup>o</sup> *drowned*  
 And some with fire al forshreint,<sup>o</sup> *shriveled*  
 Wives ther laye on child-bedde,  
 400 Some dede and some awedde.<sup>o</sup> *driven mad*  
 And wonder fele<sup>o</sup> ther laye bisides *many*  
 Right as they slepte hir undertides.<sup>o</sup> *forenoons*  
 Each was thus in this world ynome,<sup>o</sup> *taken*  
 With<sup>o</sup> fairye thider ycome. *by force of*  
 405 Ther he seigh his owene wif,  
 Dame Heurodis, his leve<sup>o</sup> lif, *dear*  
 Sleepe under an impe-tree:  
 By hir clothes he knew it was she.  
 Whan he hadde seen thise mervailles alle  
 410 He wente into the kinges halle.

5. Did light it.

6. If it.

7. Were not.

8. I.e., an alcove.

- Than seigh he ther a seemly sighte:  
 A tabernacle<sup>8</sup> wel ydight<sup>o</sup>— *arrayed*  
 Hir maister king therinne sete,  
 And hir queene fair and sweete.  
 415 Hir crownes, hir clothes shoon so brighte  
 That unnethe<sup>o</sup> he biholde hem mighte. *with difficulty*  
 Whan he hadde seen al this thing,  
 He kneeled adoun bifor the king:  
 "O lord," he saide, "if thy wil were,  
 420 My minstracye thou sholdest yheere."<sup>o</sup> *hear*  
 The king answerede, "What man art thou  
 That art hider ycomen now?  
 Ich, ne noon that is with me,  
 Ne sente never after thee.  
 425 Sith<sup>o</sup> that ich here regne<sup>o</sup> gan *since / reign*  
 I ne foond<sup>o</sup> nevere so hardy man *found*  
 That hider to us durste wende  
 But<sup>o</sup> that ich him wolde ofsende."<sup>o</sup> *unless / send for*  
 "Lord," quath he, "ye trowe<sup>o</sup> wel *may believe*  
 430 I nam but a poore minstrel,  
 And, sire, it is the maner of us  
 To seeche many a lordes hous.  
 And theigh<sup>o</sup> we not welcome be,  
 Yit we mote<sup>o</sup> profere forth oure glee."<sup>o</sup> *though*  
 435 Bifor the king he sat adown *must / music*  
 And took his harp so merye of soun,  
 And tempreth<sup>o</sup> it as he wel can. *tunes*  
 And blisful notes he ther gan  
 That alle that in the palais were  
 440 Come to him for to heere,  
 And lieth adown to his feete,  
 Hem thinkth his melodye so sweete.  
 The king herkneth and sit<sup>o</sup> ful stille: *sits*  
 To heere his glee he hath good wille.  
 445 Good bourde<sup>o</sup> he hadde of his glee: *entertainment*  
 The riche queene also hadde she. *ceased*  
 Whan he hadde stint<sup>o</sup> of his harping,  
 Then saide to him the riche king,  
 "Minstrel, me liketh wel thy glee.  
 450 Now aske of me what it may be— *generously*  
 Largeliche<sup>o</sup> ich wil thee paye.  
 Now speke and thou might it assaye."<sup>o</sup>  
 "Sire,"<sup>9</sup> he saide, "ich praye thee  
 That thou woldest yive me  
 455 The eeche<sup>o</sup> lady, bright on blee,<sup>o</sup> *very / of hue*  
 That sleepeth under the impe-tree."<sup>o</sup>  
 "Nay," quath the king, "that nought nere:<sup>9</sup>  
 A sory couple of you it were;

9. I.e., that wouldn't do.

8. I.e., an alcove.

- For thou art lene,° rowe,° and blak,  
 460 And she is lovesom; withoute lak.°  
 A loothly thing it were forthy°  
 To seen hire in thy compaigny.”  
 “O sire,” he saide, “gentil king,  
 Yit were it a wel fouler thing  
 465 To heere a lesing° of thy mouthe.  
 So, sire, as ye saide nouthe°  
 What ich wolde aske, have I wolde,  
 A kinges word moot° needes be holde.”  
 “Thou sayest sooth,” the king saide than,  
 470 “And sith° I am a trewe man,  
 I wol wel that it be so:  
 Taak hire by the hond and go.  
 Of hire ich wol that thou be blithe.”  
 He kneeled adown and thanked him swithe;°  
 475 His wif he took by the hond  
 And dide him swithe out of that lond,  
 And wente° him out of that thede:°  
 Right as he cam the way he yede.°  
 So longe he hath the way ynome°  
 480 To Winchester he is ycome,  
 That somtime was his owene citee,  
 But no man knew that it was he.  
 No forther than the townes ende.  
 For knoweleche<sup>1</sup> he durste wende.  
 485 But in a beggeres bild° ful narwe°  
 Ther he hath take his herbarwe°  
 (To him and to his owene wife),  
 As a minstrel of poore lif,  
 And asked tidinges of that lond,  
 490 And who the kingdom heeld in hond.  
 The poore begger in his cote°  
 Tolde him everich° a grote°—  
 How hir queene was stole awy,  
 Ten yeer goon, with° fairy.  
 495 And how hir king in exile yede°  
 But no man wiste° in which thede:°  
 And how the steward the lond gan holde,  
 And othere many thinges him tolde.  
 Amorwe ayain the noon-tide<sup>2</sup>  
 500 He maked his wif ther abide,  
 And beggeres clothes he borwed anoon,  
 And heeng° his harp his rigge° upon,  
 And wente him into that citee,  
 That men mighte him biholde and see.  
 505 Bothe eerles and barouns bolde,  
 Burgeis° and ladies him gan biholde:

lean / rough  
blemish  
therefore

lie  
now

must

since

quickly

turned / country  
went  
taken

house / small  
lodging

hovel  
every / bit  
away

by  
went  
knew / country

straightaway  
hung / back

burgesses

1. I.e., for fear of being recognized.

2. In the morning towards noontime.

- "Lord," they saide, "swich° a man!  
 How longe the heer° him hangeth upon!  
 Lo, how his beard hangeth to his knee!  
 510 He is yclungen° also° a tree!" *such hair*  
 And as he yede° in the streete,  
 With his steward he gan meete.  
 And loude he sette him on a cry,  
 "Sir steward," he saide, "grant mercy!  
 515 Ich am an harpoure of hethenesse:° *heathen country*  
 Help me now in this distresse."  
 The steward saide, "Com with me, com:  
 Of that I have thou shalt have som.  
 Eech harpoure is welcome me to  
 520 For my lordes love, Sir Orfeo."  
 Anoon they wente into the halle,  
 The steward and the lordes alle.  
 The steward wessh° and wente to mete, *washed*  
 And manye lordes by him sete.  
 525 Ther were trumpours° and tabourers,° *trumpeters / drummers*  
 Harpours fele,° and crouders:° *many / fiddlers*  
 Muche melodye they makend alle.  
 And Orfeo sat stille in halle.  
 And herkneþ; whan they been al stille,  
 530 He took his harp and tempered° shille°— *played / loudly*  
 The blisfullest notes he harped there  
 That evere man yherde with ere.  
 Eech man liked wel his glee.  
 The steward looked and gan ysee,  
 535 And the harp knew also blive.° *right away*  
 "Minstrel," he saide, "so mote° thou thrive,  
 Where haddest thou this harp and how?  
 I praye that thou me telle now."  
 "Lord," quath he, "in uncouth° thede,° *strange / country*  
 540 Thurgh a foreest as I yede,° *walked*  
 I foond° lying in a dale *found*  
 A man with° lions totorn° smale,  
 And wolves him frette° with teeth so sharp. *by / torn to bits*  
 By him I foond this eeche° harp *bit*  
 545 Wel ten yer it is ago." *very*  
 "O," quath the steward, "now me is wo!  
 That was my lord Sir Orfeo.  
 Allas, wrecche, what shal I do  
 That have swich° a lord ylore?° *such / lost*  
 550 A, way,° that evere ich was ybore° *woe / born*  
 That him was so harde grace y-yarked,° *ordained*  
 And so vile deeth ymarked."° *appointed*  
 Adown he fel aswoone to grounde.  
 His barouns him tooke up that stounde° *time*  
 555 And telleth him how that it geeth:° *goes*

yet exasperatingly reasonable, it suddenly seems to become slightly unreal, as if, the Green Knight insultingly implies, its reputation were founded more on fiction than on fact—as if the poets that celebrated it had been working harder to enhance its glory than the knights themselves. In any case, the court is to receive a testing, which is naturally entrusted to the most courteous and valiant knight of the Round Table (in this most English of Arthurian romances Gawain has not been replaced as the best of knights by the continental-born Lancelot).

Once Gawain has set out to keep his promise to the Green Knight, his humiliation—and by inference that of the court—begins: in describing Gawain's adventures the poet, for all his epic enhancement and overt praise for the hero, actually tells a tale of his increasing helplessness. First of all Gawain's courtesy fails him—not, to be sure, in the sense that he relinquishes it, but in the sense that it involves him in a profoundly embarrassing and dangerous situation with the lady: it results in trouble instead of the serenity that courtesy, as the diplomat's virtue, is supposed to procure. Then the second of his great virtues, his martial prowess, is denied to him by the promise he has made not to defend himself against the Green Knight's return stroke. Thus betrayed by or cut off from the two qualities that he supposes to have made him the splendid knight people think him to be, he also, with very human lack of logic, momentarily cuts himself off from the power that has actually permitted those qualities to flourish in him. For when the pressures increase, St. Mary's knight, no longer able to rely on himself, relies not on St. Mary but on a belt of supposed magical powers, which he must accept from the lady with ignominy and hide from her lord with dishonesty. When the Green Knight spares his life there is revealed to Gawain his own real impoverishment, the complete incapacity of the greatest of Arthur's knights to help himself. He has found that without God's grace the virtues which he has made particularly his own are of no use to him—that, indeed, he no longer possesses them. The poem ends happily; but the baldric that the courtiers wear in honor of Gawain's adventure is a reminder that what God asks of men is not primarily courtly or martial prowess, but a humble and a contrite heart.

This didactic point is made with a most Chaucer-like indirection, a fine irony that strips Gawain of his pretensions but leaves him his charm and shows him sympathy for the really quite unfair nature of his predicament—and which also enjoys, and makes the reader enjoy, the embarrassment the hero is made to suffer. *Sir Gawain* is one of the latest and certainly the best of the Middle English romances; yet its greatness lies in the fact that, without ever ceasing to be a romance, a fiction full of the most exquisite comic touches, it is something much larger, one of the really significant literary achievements of the Middle Ages.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight<sup>1</sup>

## Part I

Since the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy,  
 The walls breached and burnt down to brands and ashes,  
 The knight that had knotted the nets of deceit  
 Was impeached for his perfidy, proven most true,<sup>2</sup>  
 It was high-born Aeneas and his haughty race  
 That since prevailed over provinces, and proudly reigned  
 Over well-nigh all the wealth of the West Isles.<sup>3</sup>  
 Great Romulus<sup>4</sup> to Rome repairs in haste;  
 With boast and with bravery builds he that city  
 And names it with his own name, that it now bears.  
 Ticius<sup>5</sup> to Tuscany, and towers raises,  
 Langobard in Lombardy lays out homes,  
 And far over the French Sea, Felix Brutus<sup>6</sup>  
 On many broad hills and high Britain he sets,  
 most fair.

Where war and wrack and wonder  
 By shifts have sojourned there,  
 And bliss by turns with blunder  
 In that land's lot had share.

And since this Britain was built by this baron great,  
 Bold boys bred there, in broils delighting,  
 That did in their day many a deed most dire.  
 More marvels have happened in this merry land  
 Than in any other I know, since that olden time,  
 But of those that here built, of British kings,  
 King Arthur was counted most courteous of all,  
 Wherefore an adventure I aim to unfold,  
 That a marvel of might some men think it,  
 And one unmatched among Arthur's wonders.  
 If you will listen to my lay but a little while,  
 As I heard it in hall, I shall hasten to tell

anew.

As it was fashioned featly  
 In tale of derring-do,  
 And linked in measures meetly  
 By letters tried and true.

1. The Modern English translation is by Marie Borroff (1967), who has reproduced the alliterative meter of the original as well as the "bob and wheel," the five-line rhyming group that concludes each of the long irregular stanzas.  
 2. The treacherous knight is either Aeneas himself or Antenor, both of whom were, according to medieval tradition, traitors to their city Troy; but Aeneas was actually tried ("impeached")

by the Greeks for his refusal to hand over to them his sister Polyxena.

3. Perhaps western Europe.

4. The legendary founder of Rome is here given Trojan ancestry, like Aeneas.

5. Not otherwise known. "Langobard" was the reputed founder of Lombardy.

6. Great-grandson of Aeneas and legendary founder of Britain; not elsewhere given the name Felix (Latin "happy").



This king lay at Camelot <sup>7</sup> at Christmastide;  
Many good knights and gay his guests were there,  
Arrayed of the Round Table <sup>8</sup> rightful brothers,  
With feasting and fellowship and carefree mirth. 40  
There true men contended in tournaments many,  
Joined there in jousting these gentle knights,  
Then came to the court for carol-dancing,  
For the feast was in force full fifteen days,  
With all the meat and the mirth that men could devise, 45  
Such gaiety and glee, glorious to hear,  
Brave din by day, dancing by night.  
High were their hearts in halls and chambers,  
These lords and these ladies, for life was sweet.  
In peerless pleasures passed they their days, 50  
The most noble knights known under Christ,  
And the loveliest ladies that lived on earth ever,  
And he the comeliest king, that that court holds,  
For all this fair folk in their first age  
were still. 55

Happiest of mortal kind,  
King noblest famed of will;  
You would now go far to find  
So hardy a host on hill.

While the New Year was new, but yesternight come, 60  
This fair folk at feast two-fold was served,  
When the king and his company were come in together,  
The chanting in chapel achieved and ended.  
Clerics and all the court acclaimed the glad season,  
Cried Noel anew, good news to men; 65  
Then gallants gather gaily, hand-gifts to make,  
Called them out clearly, claimed them by hand,  
Bickered long and busily about those gifts.  
Ladies laughed aloud, though losers they were,  
And he that won was not angered, as well you will know.<sup>9</sup> 70  
All this mirth they made until meat was served;  
When they had washed them worthily, they went to their seats,  
The best seated above, as best it beseemed,  
Guenevere the goodly queen gay in the midst  
On a dais well-decked and duly arrayed 75  
With costly silk curtains, a canopy over,  
Of Toulouse and Turkestan tapestries rich,  
All broidered and bordered with the best gems  
Ever brought into Britain, with bright pennies  
to pay. 80

7. Capital of Arthur's kingdom, presumably located in southwest England or southern Wales.

8. According to legend, Merlin made the Round Table after a dispute broke

out among Arthur's knights about precedence: it seated 100 knights. The table described in the poem is not round.

9. The dispensing of New Year's gifts seems to have involved kissing.

Fair queen, without a flaw,  
 She glanced with eyes of grey.  
 A seemlier that once he saw,  
 In truth, no man could say.

But Arthur would not eat till all were served; 85  
 So light was his lordly heart, and a little boyish;  
 His life he liked lively—the less he cared  
 To be lying for long, or long to sit,  
 So busy his young blood, his brain so wild.  
 And also a point of pride pricked him in heart, 90  
 For he nobly had willed, he would never eat  
 On so high a holiday, till he had heard first  
 Of some fair feat or fray some far-borne tale,  
 Of some marvel of might, that he might trust,  
 By champions of chivalry achieved in arms, 95  
 Or some suppliant came seeking some single knight  
 To join with him in jousting, in jeopardy each  
 To lay life for life, and leave it to fortune  
 To afford him on field fair hap or other.  
 Such is the king's custom, when his court he holds 100  
 At each far-famed feast amid his fair host  
 so dear.

The stout king stands in state  
 Till a wonder shall appear;  
 He leads, with heart elate, 105  
 High mirth in the New Year.

So he stands there in state, the stout young king,  
 Talking before the high table<sup>1</sup> of trifles fair.  
 There Gawain the good knight by Guenevere sits,  
 With Agravain à la dure main on her other side, 110  
 Both knights of renown, and nephews of the king.  
 Bishop Baldwin above begins the table,  
 And Yvain, son of Urien, ate with him there.  
 These few with the fair queen were fittingly served;  
 At the side-tables sat many stalwart knights. 115  
 Then the first course comes, with clamor of trumpets  
 That were bravely bedecked with bannerets bright,  
 With noise of new drums and the noble pipes.  
 Wild were the warbles that wakened that day  
 In strains that stirred many strong men's hearts. 120  
 There dainties were dealt out, dishes rare,  
 Choice fare to choose, on chargers so many  
 That scarce was there space to set before the people  
 The service of silver, with sundry meats,  
 on cloth. 125

Each fair guest freely there  
 Partakes, and nothing loth;

1. The high table is on a dais; the side tables (line 115) are on the main floor and run along the walls at a right angle with the high table.

Twelve dishes before each pair;  
Good beer and bright wine both.

Of the service itself I need say no more, 130  
For well you will know no tittle was wanting.  
Another noise and a new was well-nigh at hand,  
That the lord might have leave his life to nourish;  
For scarce were the sweet strains still in the hall,  
And the first course come to that company fair, 135  
There hurtles in at the hall-door an unknown rider,  
Onc the greatest on ground in growth of his frame:  
From broad neck to buttocks so bulky and thick,  
And his loins and his legs so long and so great,  
Half a giant on earth I hold him to be, 140  
But believe him no less than the largest of men,  
And that the seemliest in his stature to see, as he rides,  
For in back and in breast though his body was grim,  
His waist in its width was worthily small,  
And formed with every feature in fair accord 145  
was he.

Great wonder grew in hall  
At his huc most strange to see,  
For man and gear and all  
Were green as green could be. 150

And in guise all of green, the gear and the man:  
A coat cut close, that clung to his sides,  
And a mantle to match, made with a lining  
Of furs cut and fitted—the fabric was noble,  
Embellished all with ermine, and his hood beside, 155  
That was loosed from his locks, and laid on his shoulders.  
With trim hose and tight, the same tint of green,  
His great calves were girt, and gold spurs under  
He bore on silk bands that embellished his heels,  
And footgear well-fashioned, for riding most fit. 160  
And all his vesture verily was verdant green;  
Both the bosses on his belt and other bright gems  
That were richly ranged on his raiment noble  
About himself and his saddle, set upon silk,  
That to tell half the trifles would tax my wits, 165  
The butterflies and birds embroidered thereon  
In green of the gapest, with many a gold thread.  
The pendants of the breast-band, the princely crupper,  
And the bars of the bit were brightly enameled;  
The stout stirrups were green, that steadied his feet, 170  
And the bows of the saddle and the side-panels both,  
That gleamed all and glinted with green gems about.  
The steed he bestrides of that same green  
so bright.

A green horse great and thick; 175  
A headstrong steed of might;

In broidered bridle quick,  
Mount matched man aright.

Gay was this goodly man in guise all of green,  
And the hair of his head to his horse suited; 180  
Fair flowing tresses enfold his shoulders;  
A beard big as a bush on his breast hangs,  
That with his heavy hair, that from his head falls,  
Was evened all about above both his elbows,  
That half his arms thereunder were hid in the fashion 185  
Of a king's cap-à-dos,<sup>2</sup> that covers his throat.  
The mane of that mighty horse much to it like,  
Well curled and becombed, and cunningly knotted  
With filaments of fine gold amid the fair green,  
Here a strand of the hair, here one of gold; 190  
His tail and his foretop twin in their hue,  
And bound both with a band of a bright green  
That was decked adown the dock with dazzling stones  
And tied tight at the top with a triple knot  
Where many bells well burnished rang bright and clear. 195  
Such a mount in his might, nor man on him riding,  
None had seen, I dare swear, with sight in that hall  
so grand.

As lightning quick and light  
He looked to all at hand; 200  
It seemed that no man might  
His deadly dints withstand.

Yet had he no helm, nor hauberk neither,  
Nor plate, nor appurtenance appending to arms,  
Nor shaft pointed sharp, nor shield for defense, 205  
But in his one hand he had a holly bob  
That is goodliest in green when groves are bare,  
And an ax in his other, a huge and immense,  
A wicked piece of work in words to expound:  
The head on its haft was an ell long; 210  
The spike of green steel, resplendent with gold;  
The blade burnished bright, with a broad edge,  
As well shaped to shear as a sharp razor;  
Stout was the stave in the strong man's gripe,  
That was wound all with iron to the weapon's end, 215  
With engravings in green of goodliest work.  
A lace lightly about, that led to a knot,  
Was looped in by lengths along the fair haft,  
And tassels thereto attached in a row,  
With buttons of bright green, brave to behold. 220  
This horseman hurtles in, and the hall enters;

2. The word *capados* occurs in this form in Middle English only in *Gawain*, here and in line 572. The translator has interpreted it, as the poet apparently did

also, as *cap-à-dos*—i.e., a garment covering its wearer "from head to back," on the model of *cap-à-pie*, "from head to foot," referring to armor.

Riding to the high dais, recked he no danger;  
Not a greeting he gave as the guests he o'erlooked,  
Nor wasted his words, but "Where is," he said,  
"The captain of this crowd? Keenly I wish  
To see that sire with sight, and to himself say  
my say." 225

He swaggered all about  
To scan the host so gay;  
He halted, as if in doubt 230  
Who in that hall held sway.

There were stares on all sides as the stranger spoke,  
For much did they marvel what it might mean  
That a horseman and a horse should have such a hue,  
Grow green as the grass, and greener, it seemed, 235  
Than green fused on gold more glorious by far.  
All the onlookers eyed him, and edged nearer,  
And awaited in wonder what he would do,  
For many sights had they seen, but such a one never,  
So that phantom and faerie the folk there deemed it, 240  
Therefore chary of answer was many a champion bold,  
And stunned at his strong words stone-still they sat  
In a swooning silence in the stately hall.  
As all were slipped into sleep, so slackened their speech  
apace. 245

Not all, I think, for dread,  
But some of courteous grace  
Let him who was their head  
Be spokesman in that place.

Then Arthur before the high dais that entrance beholds, 250  
And hailed him, as behooved, for he had no fear,  
And said "Fellow, in faith you have found fair welcome;  
The head of this hostelry Arthur am I;  
Leap lightly down, and linger, I pray,  
And the tale of your intent you shall tell us after." 255  
"Nay, so help me," said the other, "He that on high sits,  
To tarry here any time, 'twas not mine errand;  
But as the praise of you, prince, is puffed up so high,  
And your court and your company are counted the best,  
Stoutest under steel-gear on steeds to ride, 260  
Worthiest of their works the wide world over,  
And peerless to prove in passages of arms,  
And courtesy here is carried to its height,  
And so at this season I have sought you out.  
You may be certain by the branch that I bear in hand 265  
That I pass here in peace, and would part friends,  
For had I come to this court on combat bent,  
I have a hauberk at home, and a helm beside,  
A shield and a sharp spear, shining bright,

And other weapons to wield, I ween well, to boot, 270  
 But as I willed no war, I wore no metal.  
 But if you be so bold as all men believe,  
 You will graciously grant the game that I ask  
 by right."

Arthur answer gave 275  
 And said, "Sir courteous knight,  
 If contest here you crave,  
 You shall not fail to fight."

"Nay, to fight, in good faith, is far from my thought;  
 There are about on these benches but beardless children, 280  
 Were I here in full arms on a haughty steed,  
 For measured against mine, their might is puny.  
 And so I call in this court for a Christmas game,  
 For 'tis Yule and New Year, and many young bloods about;  
 If any in this house such hardihood claims, 285  
 Be so bold in his blood, his brain so wild,  
 As stoutly to strike one stroke for another,  
 I shall give him as my gift this gisarme noble,  
 This ax, that is heavy enough, to handle as he likes,  
 And I shall bide the first blow, as bare as I sit. 290  
 If there be one so wilful my words to assay,  
 Let him leap hither lightly, lay hold of this weapon;  
 I quitclaim it forever, keep it as his own,  
 And I shall stand him a stroke, steady on this floor,  
 So you grant me the guerdon to give him another, 295  
 sans blame.

In a twelvemonth and a day  
 He shall have of me the same;  
 Now be it seen straightway  
 Who dares take up the game." 300

If he astonished them at first, stiller were then  
 All that household in hall, the high and the low;  
 The stranger on his green steed stirred in the saddle,  
 And roisterously his red eyes he rolled all about,  
 Bent his bristling brows, that were bright green, 305  
 Wagged his beard as he watched who would arise.  
 When the court kept its counsel he coughed aloud,  
 And cleared his throat coolly, the clearer to speak:  
 "What, is this Arthur's house," said that horseman then,  
 "Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide? 310  
 Where is now your arrogance and your awesome deeds,  
 Your valor and your victories and your vaunting words?  
 Now are the revel and renown of the Round Table  
 Overwhelmed with a word of one man's speech,  
 For all cower and quake, and no cut felt!" 315  
 With this he laughs so loud that the lord grieved;  
 The blood for sheer shame shot to his face,  
 and pride.

With rage his face flushed red,  
And so did all beside. 320  
Then the king as bold man bred  
Toward the stranger took a stride.

And said "Sir, now we see you will say but folly,  
Which whoso has sought, it suits that he find.  
No guest here is aghast of your great words. 325  
Give to me your gisarme, in God's own name,  
And the boon you have begged shall straight be granted."  
He leaps to him lightly, lays hold of his weapon;  
The green fellow on foot fiercely alights.  
Now has Arthur his ax, and the haft grips, 330  
And sternly stirs it about, on striking bent.  
The stranger before him stood there erect,  
Higher than any in the house by a head and more;  
With stern look as he stood, he stroked his beard,  
And with undaunted countenance drew down his coat, 335  
No more moved nor dismayed for his mighty dints  
Than any bold man on bench had brought him a drink  
of wine.

Gawain by Guenevere  
Toward the king doth now incline: 340  
"I beseech, before all here,  
That this melee may be mine."

"Would you grant me the grace," said Gawain to the king,  
"To be gone from this bench and stand by you there,  
If I without discourtesy might quit this board, 345  
And if my liege lady misliked it not,  
I would come to your counsel before your court noble.  
For I find it not fit, as in faith it is known,  
When such a boon is begged before all these knights,  
Though you be tempted thereto, to take it on yourself 350  
While so bold men about upon benches sit,  
That no host under heaven is hardier of will,  
Nor better brothers-in-arms where battle is joined;  
I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest;  
And the loss of my life would be least of any; 355  
That I have you for uncle is my only praise;  
My body, but for your blood, is barren of worth;  
And for that this folly befits not a king,  
And 'tis I that have asked it, it ought to be mine,  
And if my claim be not comely let all this court judge, 360  
in sight."

The court assays the claim,  
And in counsel all unite  
To give Gawain the game  
And release the king outright. 365

Then the king called the knight to come to his side,

And he rose up readily, and reached him with speed,  
 Bows low to his lord, lays hold of the weapon,  
 And he releases it lightly, and lifts up his hand,  
 And gives him God's blessing, and graciously prays 370  
 That his heart and his hand may be hardy both.

"Keep, cousin," said the king, "what you cut with this day,  
 And if you rule it aright, then readily, I know,  
 You shall stand the stroke it will strike after."

Gawain goes to the guest with gisarme in hand, 375  
 And boldly he bides there, abashed not a whit.

Then hails he Sir Gawain, the horseman in green:  
 "Recount we our contract, ere you come further.

First I ask and adjure you, how you are called  
 That you tell me true, so that trust it I may." 380

"In good faith," said the good knight, "Gawain am I  
 Whose buffet befalls you, whate'er betide after,  
 And at this time twelvemonth take from you another  
 With what weapon you will, and with no man else  
 alive." 385

The other nods assent:

"Sir Gawain, as I may thrive,  
 I am wondrous well content  
 That you this dint shall drive."

"Sir Gawain," said the Green Knight, "By God, I rejoice 390  
 That your fist shall fetch this favor I seek,

And you have readily rehearsed, and in right terms,  
 Each clause of my covenant with the king your lord,  
 Save that you shall assure me, sir, upon oath,

That you shall seek me yourself, wheresoever you deem 395  
 My lodgings may lie, and look for such wages

As you have offered me here before all this host."

"What is the way there?" said Gawain, "Where do you dwell?  
 I heard never of your house, by Him that made me,

Nor I know you not, knight, your name nor your court. 400  
 But tell me truly thereof, and teach me your name,

And I shall fare forth to find you, so far as I may,  
 And this I say in good certain, and swear upon oath."

"That is enough in New Year, you need say no more,"  
 Said the knight in the green to Gawain the noble, 405

"If I tell you true, when I have taken your knock,  
 And if you handily have hit, you shall hear straightway

Of my house and my home and my own name;  
 Then follow in my footsteps by faithful accord.

And if I spend no speech, you shall speed the better: 410  
 You can feast with your friends, nor further trace

my tracks.

Now hold your grim tool steady  
 And show us how it hacks."

"Gladly, sir; all ready," 415  
 Says Gawain; he strokes the ax.



The Green Knight upon ground girds him with care:  
Bows a bit with his head, and bares his flesh:  
His long lovely locks he laid over his crown,  
Let the naked nape for the need be shown. 420  
Gawain grips to his ax and gathers it aloft—  
The left foot on the floor before him he set—  
Brought it down deftly upon the bare neck,  
That the shock of the sharp blow shivered the bones  
And cut the flesh cleanly and clove it in twain, 425  
That the blade of bright steel bit into the ground.  
The head was hewn off and fell to the floor;  
Many found it at their feet, as forth it rolled;  
The blood gushed from the body, bright on the green,  
Yet fell not the fellow, nor faltered a whit, 430  
But stoutly he starts forth upon stiff shanks,  
And as all stood staring he stretched forth his hand,  
Laid hold of his head and heaved it aloft,  
Then goes to the green steed, grasps the bridle,  
Steps into the stirrup, bestrides his mount, 435  
And his head by the hair in his hand holds,  
And as steady he sits in the stately saddle  
As he had met with no mishap, nor missing were  
his head.

His bulk about he haled, 440  
That fearsome body that bled;  
There were many in the court that quailed  
Before all his say was said.

For the head in his hand he holds right up;  
Toward the first on the dais directs he the face, 445  
And it lifted up its lids, and looked with wide eyes,  
And said as much with its mouth as now you may hear:  
“Sir Gawain, forget not to go as agreed,  
And cease not to seek till me, sir, you find,  
As you promised in the presence of these proud knights. 450  
To the Green Chapel come, I charge you, to take  
Such a dint as you have dealt—you have well deserved  
That your neck should have a knock on New Year’s morn.  
The Knight of the Green Chapel I am well-known to many,  
Wherefore you cannot fail to find me at last; 455  
Therefore come, or be counted a recreant knight.”  
With a roisterous rush he flings round the reins,  
Hurtles out at the hall-door, his head in his hand,  
That the flint-fire flew from the flashing hooves.  
Which way he went, not one of them knew 460  
Nor whence he was come in the wide world  
so fair.

The king and Gawain gay  
Make game of the Green Knight there,  
Yet all who saw it say 465  
’Twas a wonder past compare.



Bloom rich and rife in throng;  
Then every grove so gay  
Of the greenwood rings with song. 515

And then the season of summer with the soft winds,  
When Zephyr sighs low over seeds and shoots;  
Glad is the green plant growing abroad,  
When the dew at dawn drops from the leaves,  
To get a gracious glance from the golden sun. 520

But harvest with harsher winds follows hard after,  
Warns him to ripen well ere winter comes;  
Drives forth the dust in the droughty season,  
From the face of the fields to fly high in air.

Wroth winds in the welkin wrestle with the sun, 525  
The leaves launch from the linden and light on the ground,  
And the grass turns to gray, that once grew green.  
Then all ripens and rots that rose up at first,  
And so the year moves on in yesterdays many,  
And winter once more, by the world's law, 530

draws nigh.

At Michaelmas<sup>3</sup> the moon  
Hangs wintry pale in sky;  
Sir Gawain girds him soon  
For travails yet to try. 535

Till All-Hallows' Day<sup>4</sup> with Arthur he dwells,  
And he held a high feast to honor that knight  
With great revels and rich, of the Round Table.  
Then ladies lovely and lords debonair

With sorrow for Sir Gawain were sore at heart; 540  
Yet they covered their care with countenance glad:  
Many a mournful man made mirth for his sake.

So after supper soberly he speaks to his uncle  
Of the hard hour at hand, and openly says,  
"Now, liege lord of my life, my leave I take; 545  
The terms of this task too well you know—

To count the cost over concerns me nothing,  
But I am bound forth betimes to bear a stroke  
From the grim man in green, as God may direct."  
Then the first and foremost came forth in throng: 550

Yvain and Eric and others of note,  
Sir Dodinal le Sauvage, the Duke of Clarence,  
Lionel and Lancelot and Lucan the good,  
Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere, big men both,  
And many manly knights more, with Mador de la Porte. 555

All this courtly company comes to the king  
To counsel their comrade, with care in their hearts;  
There was much secret sorrow suffered that day  
That one so good as Gawain must go in such wise

3. September 29.

4. All Saints' Day, November 1.

To bear a bitter blow, and his bright sword  
   lay by. 560  
 He said, "Why should I tarry?"  
 And smiled with tranquil eye;  
 "In destinies sad or merry,  
 True men can but try." 565

He dwelt there all that day, and dressed in the morning;  
 Asked early for his arms, and all were brought.  
 First a carpet of rare cost was cast on the floor  
 Where much goodly gear gleamed golden bright;  
 He takes his place promptly and picks up the steel, 570  
 Attired in a tight coat of Turkestan silk  
 And a kingly cap-à-dos, closed at the throat,  
 That was lavishly lined with a lustrous fur.  
 Then they set the steel shoes on his sturdy feet  
 And clad his calves about with comely greaves, 575  
 And plate well-polished protected his knees,  
 Affixed with fastenings of the finest gold.  
 Fair cuisses enclosed, that were cunningly wrought,  
 His thick-thewed thighs, with thongs bound fast,  
 And massy chain-mail of many a steel ring 580  
 He bore on his body, above the best cloth,  
 With brace burnished bright upon both his arms,  
 Good couters and gay, and gloves of plate,  
 And all the goodly gear to grace him well  
   that tide. 585

His surcoat blazoned bold;  
 Sharp spurs to prick with pride;  
 And a brave silk band to hold  
 The broadsword at his side.

When he had on his arms, his harness was rich, 590  
 The least latchet or loop laden with gold;  
 So armored as he was, he heard a mass,  
 Honored God humbly at the high altar.  
 Then he comes to the king and his comrades-in-arms,  
 Takes his leave at last of lords and ladies, 595  
 And they clasped and kissed him, commending him to Christ.  
 By then Gringolet was girt with a great saddle  
 That was gaily agleam with fine gilt fringe,  
 New-furbished for the need with nail-heads bright;  
 The bridle and the bars bedecked all with gold; 600  
 The breast-plate, the saddlebow, the side-panels both,  
 The caparison and the crupper accorded in hue,  
 And all ranged on the red the resplendent studs  
 That glittered and glowed like the glorious sun.  
 His helm now he holds up and hastily kisses, 605  
 Well-closed with iron clinches, and cushioned within;

It was high on his head, with a hasp behind,  
 And a covering of cloth to encase the visor,  
 All bound and embroidered with the best gems  
 On broad bands of silk, and bordered with birds, 610  
 Parrots and popinjays preening their wings,  
 Lovebirds and love-knots as lavishly wrought  
 As many women had worked seven winters thereon,  
 entire.

The diadem costlier yet 615  
 That crowned that comely sire,  
 With diamonds richly set,  
 That flashed as if on fire.

Then they showed forth the shield, that shone all red,  
 With the pentangle <sup>5</sup> portrayed in purest gold. 620  
 About his broad neck by the baldric he casts it,  
 That was meet for the man, and matched him well.  
 And why the pentangle is proper to that peerless prince  
 I intend now to tell, though detain me it must.

It is a sign by Solomon sagely devised 625  
 To be a token of truth, by its title of old,  
 For it is a figure formed of five points,  
 And each line is linked and locked with the next  
 For ever and ever, and hence it is called  
 In all England, as I hear, the endless knot. 630  
 And well may he wear it on his worthy arms,  
 For ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion  
 Was Gawain in good works, as gold unalloyed,  
 Devoid of all villainy, with virtues adorned  
 in sight. 635

On shield and coat in view  
 He bore that emblem bright,  
 As to his word most true  
 And in speech most courteous knight.

And first, he was faultless in his five senses, 640  
 Nor found ever to fail in his five fingers,  
 And all his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds  
 That Christ got on the cross, as the creed tells;  
 And wherever this man in melee took part,  
 His one thought was of this, past all things else, 645  
 That all his force was founded on the five joys <sup>6</sup>  
 That the high Queen of heaven had in her child.  
 And therefore, as I find, he fittingly had  
 On the inner part of his shield her image portrayed,  
 That when his look on it lighted, he never lost heart. 650  
 The fifth of the five fives followed by this knight

5. A five-pointed star, formed by five lines which are drawn without lifting the pencil from the paper, supposed to have mystical significance; as Solomon's

sign (line 625) it was enclosed in a circle.

6. The Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption.

Were beneficence boundless and brotherly love  
 And pure mind and manners, that none might impeach,  
 And compassion most precious—these peerless five  
 Were forged and made fast in him, foremost of men. 655  
 Now all these five fives were confirmed in this knight,  
 And each linked in other, that end there was none,  
 And fixed to five points, whose force never failed,  
 Nor assembled all on a side, nor asunder either,  
 Nor anywhere at an end, but whole and entire 660  
 However the pattern proceeded or played out its course.  
 And so on his shining shield shaped was the knot  
 Royally in red gold against red gules,  
 That is the peerless pentangle, prized of old  
 in lore. 665

Now armed is Gawain gay,  
 And bears his lance before,  
 And soberly said good day,  
 He thought forevermore.

He struck his steed with the spurs and sped on his way  
 So fast that the flint-fire flashed from the stones. 670  
 When they saw him set forth they were sore aggrieved,  
 And all sighed softly, and said to each other,  
 Fearing for their fellow, "Ill fortune it is  
 That you, man, must be marred, that most are worthy!  
 His equal on this earth can hardly be found; 675  
 To have dealt more discreetly had done less harm,  
 And have dubbed him a duke, with all due honor.  
 A great leader of lords he was like to become,  
 And better so to have been than battered to bits, 680  
 Beheaded by an elf-man,<sup>7</sup> for empty pride!  
 Who would credit that a king could be counseled so,  
 And caught in a cavil in a Christmas game?"  
 Many were the warm tears they wept from their eyes  
 When goodly Sir Gawain was gone from the court 685  
 that day.  
 No longer he abode,  
 But speedily went his way  
 Over many a wandering road,  
 As I heard my author say. 690

Now he rides in his array through the realm of Logres,<sup>8</sup>  
 Sir Gawain, God knows, though it gave him small joy!  
 All alone must he lodge through many a long night  
 Where the food that he fancied was far from his plate;  
 He had no mate but his mount, over mountain and plain, 695  
 Nor man to say his mind to but almighty God,  
 Till he had wandered well-nigh into North Wales.  
 All the islands of Anglesey he holds on his left,

7. Supernatural being.

8. One of the names for Arthur's kingdom.

And follows, as he fares, the fords by the coast,  
 Comes over at Holy Head, and enters next  
 The Wilderness of Wirral<sup>9</sup>—few were within 700  
 That had great good will toward God or man.  
 And earnestly he asked of each mortal he met  
 If he had ever heard aught of a knight all green,  
 Or of a Green Chapel, on ground thereabouts, 705  
 And all said the same, and solemnly swore  
 They saw no such knight all solely green  
 in hue.

Over country wild and strange  
 The knight sets off anew; 710  
 Often his course must change  
 Ere the Chapel comes in view.

Many a cliff must he climb in country wild;  
 Far off from all his friends, forlorn must he ride;  
 At each strand or stream where the stalwart passed 715  
 'Twere a marvel if he met not some monstrous foe,  
 And that so fierce and forbidding that fight he must.  
 So many were the wonders he wandered among  
 That to tell but the tenth part would tax my wits.  
 Now with serpents he wars, now with savage wolves, 720  
 Now with wild men of the woods, that watched from the rocks,  
 Both with bulls and with bears, and with boars besides,  
 And giants that came gibbering from the jagged steep.  
 Had he not borne himself bravely, and been on God's side,  
 He had met with many mishaps and mortal harms. 725  
 And if the wars were unwelcome, the winter was worse,  
 When the cold clear rains rushed from the clouds  
 And froze before they could fall to the frosty earth.  
 Near slain by the sleet he sleeps in his irons  
 More nights than enough, among naked rocks, 730  
 Where clattering from the crest the cold stream ran  
 And hung in hard icicles high overhead.  
 Thus in peril and pain and predicaments dire  
 He rides across country till Christmas Eve,  
 our knight. 735

And at that holy tide  
 He prays with all his might  
 That Mary may be his guide  
 Till a dwelling comes in sight.

By a mountain next morning he makes his way 740  
 Into a forest fastness, fearsome and wild;  
 High hills on either hand, with hoar woods below,  
 Oaks old and huge by the hundred together.  
 The hazel and the hawthorn were all intertwined

9. Gawain went from Camelot north to the northern coast of Wales, opposite the islands of Anglesey; there he turned

east across the Dee to the forest of Wirral in Cheshire.

With rough raveled moss, that raggedly hung, 745  
 With many birds unblithe upon bare twigs  
 That peeped most piteously for pain of the cold.  
 The good knight on Gringolet glides thereunder  
 Through many a marsh and mire, a man all alone;  
 He feared for his default, should he fail to see 750  
 The service of that Sire that on that same night  
 Was born of a bright maid, to bring us His peace.  
 And therefore sighing he said, "I beseech of Thee, Lord,  
 And Mary, thou mildest mother so dear,  
 Some harborage where haply I might hear mass 755  
 And Thy matins tomorrow—meekly I ask it,  
 And thereto proffer and pray my pater and ave  
 and creed."

He said his prayer with sighs,  
 Lamenting his misdeed; 760  
 He crosses himself, and cries  
 On Christ in his great need.

No sooner had Sir Gawain signed himself thrice  
 Than he was ware, in the wood, of a wondrous dwelling,  
 Within a moat, on a mound, bright amid boughs 765  
 Of many a tree great of girth that grew by the water—  
 A castle as comely as a knight could own,  
 On grounds fair and green, in a goodly park  
 With a palisade of palings planted about  
 For two miles and more, round many a fair tree. 770  
 The stout knight stared at that stronghold great  
 As it shimmered and shone amid shining leaves,  
 Then with helmet in hand he offers his thanks  
 To Jesus and Saint Julian,<sup>1</sup> that are gentle both,  
 That in courteous accord had inclined to his prayer; 775  
 "Now fair harbor," said he, "I humbly beseech!"  
 Then he pricks his proud steed with the plated spurs,  
 And by chance he has chosen the chief path  
 That brought the bold knight to the bridge's end  
 in haste. 780

The bridge hung high in air;  
 The gates were bolted fast;  
 The walls well-framed to bear  
 The fury of the blast.

The man on his mount remained on the bank 785  
 Of the deep double moat that defended the place.  
 The wall went in the water wondrous deep,  
 And a long way aloft it loomed overhead.  
 It was built of stone blocks to the battlements' height,  
 With corbels under cornices in comeliest style; 790  
 Watch-towers trusty protected the gate,

1. Patron saint of hospitality.



With many a lean loophole, to look from within:  
A better-made barbican the knight beheld never.  
And behind it there hove a great hall and fair:  
Turrets rising in tiers, with tines <sup>2</sup> at their tops, 795  
Spires set beside them, splendidly long,  
With finials <sup>3</sup> well-fashioned, as filigree fine.  
Chalk-white chimneys over chambers high  
Gleamed in gay array upon gables and roofs;  
The pinnacles in panoply, pointing in air, 800  
So vied there for his view that verily it seemed  
A castle cut of paper for a king's feast.  
The good knight on Gringolet thought it great luck  
If he could but contrive to come there within  
To keep the Christmas feast in that castle fair 805  
and bright.

There answered to his call  
A porter most polite;  
From his station on the wall  
He greets the errant knight. 810

"Good sir," said Gawain, "Wouldst go to inquire  
If your lord would allow me to lodge here a space?"  
"Peter!" said the porter, "For my part, I think  
So noble a knight will not want for a welcome!"  
Then he bustles off briskly, and comes back straight, 815  
And many servants beside, to receive him the better.  
They let down the drawbridge and duly went forth  
And kneeled down on their knees on the naked earth  
To welcome this warrior as best they were able.  
They proffered him passage—the portals stood wide— 820  
And he beckoned them to rise, and rode over the bridge.  
Men steadied his saddle as he stepped to the ground,  
And there stabled his steed many stalwart folk.  
Now come the knights and the noble squires  
To bring him with bliss into the bright hall. 825  
When his high helm was off, there hied forth a throng  
Of attendants to take it, and see to its care;  
They bore away his brand and his blazoned shield;  
Then graciously he greeted those gallants each one,  
And many a noble drew near, to do the knight honor. 830  
All in his armor into hall he was led,  
Where fire on a fair hearth fiercely blazed.  
And soon the lord himself descends from his chamber  
To meet with good manners the man on his floor.  
He said, "To this house you are heartily welcome:  
What is here is wholly yours, to have in your power 835  
and sway."

"Many thanks," said Sir Gawain;  
"May Christ your pains repay!"

2. Spikes.

3. Gable ornaments.

The two embrace amain  
As men well met that day. 840

Gawain gazed on the host that greeted him there,  
And a lusty fellow he looked, the lord of that place:  
A man of massive mold, and of middle age;  
Broad, bright was his beard, of a beaver's hue, 845  
Strong, steady his stance, upon stalwart shanks,  
His face fierce as fire, fair-spoken withal,  
And well-suited he seemed in Sir Gawain's sight  
To be a master of men in a mighty keep.

They pass into a parlor, where promptly the host  
Has a servant assigned him to see to his needs, 850  
And there came upon his call many courteous folk  
That brought him to a bower where bedding was noble,  
With heavy silk hangings hemmed all in gold,  
Coverlets and counterpanes curiously wrought, 855  
A canopy over the couch, clad all with fur,  
Curtains running on cords, caught to gold rings,  
Woven rugs on the walls of eastern work,  
And the floor, under foot, well-furnished with the same.

With light talk and laughter they loosed from him then 860  
His war-dress of weight and his worthy clothes.

Robes richly wrought they brought him right soon,  
To change there in chamber and choose what he would.  
When he had found one he fancied, and flung it about, 865  
Well-fashioned for his frame, with flowing skirts,

His face fair and fresh as the flowers of spring,  
All the good folk agreed, that gazed on him then,  
His limbs arrayed royally in radiant hues,  
That so comely a mortal never Christ made 870  
as he.

Whatever his place of birth,  
It seemed he well might be  
Without a peer on earth  
In martial rivalry.

A couch before the fire, where fresh coals burned, 875  
They spread for Sir Gawain splendidly now  
With quilts quaintly stitched, and cushions beside,  
And then a costly cloak they cast on his shoulders  
Of bright silk, embroidered on borders and hems,  
With furs of the finest well-furnished within, 880

And bound about with ermine, both mantle and hood;  
And he sat at that fireside in sumptuous estate  
And warmed himself well, and soon he waxed merry.  
Then attendants set a table upon trestles broad,  
And lustrous white linen they laid thereupon, 885  
A saltcellar of silver, spoons of the same.

He washed himself well and went to his place,  
Men set his fare before him in fashion most fit.

There were soups of all sorts, seasoned with skill,  
 Double-sized servings, and sundry fish, 890  
 Some baked, some breaded, some broiled on the coals,  
 Some simmered, some in stews, steaming with spice,  
 And with sauces to sup that suited his taste.  
 He confesses it a feast with free words and fair;  
 They requite him as kindly with courteous jests,  
 well-sped. 895

“Tonight you fast <sup>4</sup> and pray;  
 Tomorrow we’ll see you fed.”  
 The knight grows wondrous gay  
 As the wine goes to his head. 900

Then at times and by turns, as at table he sat,  
 They questioned him quietly, with queries discreet,  
 And he courteously confessed that he comes from the court,  
 And owns him of the brotherhood of high-famed Arthur,  
 The right royal ruler of the Round Table, 905  
 And the guest by their fireside is Gawain himself,  
 Who has happened on their house at that holy feast.  
 When the name of the knight was made known to the lord,  
 Then loudly he laughed, so elated he was,  
 And the men in that household made haste with joy 910  
 To appear in his presence promptly that day,  
 That of courage ever-constant, and customs pure,  
 Is pattern and paragon, and praised without end:  
 Of all knights on earth most honored is he.  
 Each said solemnly aside to his brother, 915  
 “Now displays of deportment shall dazzle our eyes  
 And the polished pearls of impeccable speech;  
 The high art of eloquence is ours to pursue  
 Since the father of fine manners is found in our midst.  
 Great is God’s grace, and goodly indeed, 920  
 That a guest such as Gawain he guides to us here  
 When men sit and sing of their Savior’s birth  
 in view.

With command of manners pure  
 He shall each heart imbue; 925  
 Who shares his converse, sure,  
 Shall learn love’s language true.”

When the knight had done dining and duly arose,  
 The dark was drawing on; the day nigh ended.  
 Chaplains in chapels and churches about 930  
 Rang the bells aright, reminding all men  
 Of the holy evensong of the high feast.  
 The lord attends alone; his fair lady sits  
 In a comely closet, secluded from sight.  
 Gawain in gay attire goes thither soon; 935

4. Gawain is said to be “fasting” because the meal, though elaborate, consisted only of fish dishes, appropriate to a fasting day.

The lord catches his coat, and calls him by name,  
 And has him sit beside him, and says in good faith  
 No guest on God's earth would he gladlier greet.  
 For that Gawain thanked him; the two then embraced  
 And sat together soberly the service through. 940  
 Then the lady, that longed to look on the knight,  
 Came forth from her closet with her comely maids.  
 The fair hues of her flesh, her face and her hair  
 And her body and her bearing were beyond praise,  
 And excelled the queen herself, as Sir Gawain thought. 945  
 He goes forth to greet her with gracious intent;  
 Another lady led her by the left hand  
 That was older than she—an ancient, it seemed,  
 And held in high honor by all men about.  
 But unlike to look upon, those ladies were, 950  
 For if the one was fresh, the other was faded:  
 Bedecked in bright red was the body of one;  
 Flesh hung in folds on the face of the other;  
 On one a high headdress, hung all with pearls;  
 Her bright throat and bosom fair to behold, 955  
 Fresh as the first snow fallen upon hills;  
 A wimple the other one wore round her throat;  
 Her swart chin well swaddled, swathed all in white;  
 Her forehead enfolded in founces of silk  
 That framed a fair fillet, of fashion ornate, 960  
 And nothing bare beneath save the black brows,  
 The two eyes and the nose, the naked lips,  
 And they unsightly to see, and sorrily bleared.  
 A beldame, by God, she may well be deemed,  
 of pride! 965  
 She was short and thick of waist,  
 Her buttocks round and wide;  
 More toothsome, to his taste,  
 Was the beauty by her side.

When Gawain had gazed on that gay lady, 970  
 With leave of her lord, he politely approached;  
 To the elder in homage he humbly bows;  
 The lovelier he salutes with a light embrace.  
 He claims a comely kiss, and courteously he speaks;  
 They welcome him warmly, and straightway he asks 975  
 To be received as their servant, if they so desire.  
 They take him between them; with talking they bring him  
 Beside a bright fire: bade then that spices  
 Be freely fetched forth, to refresh them the better,  
 And the good wine therewith, to warm their hearts. 980  
 The lord leaps about in light-hearted mood;  
 Contrives entertainments and timely sports;  
 Takes his hood from his head and hangs it on a spear,  
 And offers him openly the honor thereof  
 Who should promote the most mirth at that Christmas feast; 985

“And I shall try for it, trust me—contend with the best,  
 Ere I go without my headgear by grace of my friends!”  
 Thus with light talk and laughter the lord makes merry  
 To gladden the guest he had greeted in hall  
 that day.

990

At the last he called for light  
 The company to convey;  
 Gawain says goodnight  
 And retires to bed straightway.

On the morn when each man is mindful in heart  
 That God's son was sent down to suffer our death,  
 No household but is blithe for His blessed sake;  
 So was it there on that day, with many delights.  
 Both at larger meals and less they were lavishly served  
 By doughty lads on dais, with delicate fare;  
 The old ancient lady, highest she sits;  
 The lord at her left hand leaned, as I hear;  
 Sir Gawain in the center, beside the gay lady,  
 Where the food was brought first to that festive board,  
 And thence throughout the hall, as they held most fit,  
 To each man was offered in order of rank.

995

1000

1005

There was meat, there was mirth, there was much joy,  
 That to tell all the tale would tax my wits,  
 Though I pained me, perchance, to paint it with care;  
 But yet I know that our knight and the noble lady  
 Were accorded so closely in company there,  
 With the seemly solace of their secret words,  
 With speeches well-spiced, spotless and pure,  
 That each prince's pastime their pleasures far  
 outshone.

1015

Sweet pipes beguile their cares,  
 And the trumpet of martial tone;  
 Each tends his affairs  
 And those two tend their own.

That day and all the next, their disport was noble,  
 And the third day, I think, pleased them no less;  
 The joys of St. John's Day<sup>5</sup> were justly praised,  
 And werc the last of their like for those lords and ladies;  
 Then guests were to go in the gray morning,  
 Wherefore they whiled the night away with wine and  
 with mirth,

1020

1025

Moved to the measures of many a blithe carol;  
 At last, when it was late, took leave of each other,  
 Each one of those worthies, to wend his way.  
 Gawain bids goodbye to his goodly host  
 Who brings him to his chamber, the chimney beside,  
 And detains him in talk, and tenders his thanks  
 And holds it an honor to him and his people

1030

That he has harbored in his house at that holy time  
 And embellished his abode with his inborn grace.  
 "As long as I may live, my luck is the better" 1035  
 That Gawain was my guest at God's own feast!"  
 "Noble sir," said the knight, "I cannot but think  
 All the honor is your own—may heaven requite it!  
 And your man to command I account myself here  
 As I am bound and beholden, and shall be, come 1040  
 what may."

The lord with all his might  
 Entreats his guest to stay;  
 Brief answer makes the knight:  
 Next morning he must away. 1045

Then the lord of that land politely inquired  
 What dire affair had forced him, at that festive time,  
 So far from the king's court to fare forth alone  
 Ere the holidays wholly had ended in hall.  
 "In good faith," said Gawain, "you have guessed the truth: 1050  
 On a high errand and urgent I hastened away,  
 For I am summoned by myself to seek for a place—  
 I would I knew whither, or where it might be!  
 Far rather would I find it before the New Year  
 Than own the land of Logres, so help me our Lord! 1055  
 Wherefore, sir, in friendship this favor I ask,  
 That you say in sober earnest, if something you know  
 Of the Green Chapel, on ground far or near,  
 Or the lone knight that lives there, of like hue of green.  
 A certain day was set by assent of us both 1060  
 To meet at that landmark, if I might last,  
 And from now to the New Year is nothing too long,  
 And I would greet the Green Knight there, would God but allow,  
 More gladly, by God's Son, than gain the world's wealth!  
 And I must set forth to search, as soon as I may; 1065  
 To be about the business I have but three days  
 And would as soon sink down dead as desist from my errand."  
 Then smiling said the lord, "Your search, sir, is done,  
 For we shall see you to that site by the set time.  
 Let Gawain grieve no more over the Green Chapel; 1070  
 You shall be in your own bed, in blissful ease,  
 All the forenoon, and fare forth the first of the year,  
 And make the goal by midmorn, to mind your affairs,  
 no fear!

Tarry till the fourth day  
 And ride on the first of the year. 1075  
 We shall set you on your way;  
 It is not two miles from here."

Then Gawain was glad, and gleefully he laughed:

"Now I thank you for this, past all things else! 1080

Now my goal is here at hand! With a glad heart I shall  
Both tarry, and undertake any task you devise."

Then the host seized his arm and seated him there;  
Let the ladies be brought, to delight them the better,  
And in fellowship fair by the fireside they sit; 1085

So gay waxed the good host, so giddy his words,  
All waited in wonder what next he would say.  
Then he stares on the stout knight, and sternly he speaks:

"You have bound yourself boldly my bidding to do—  
Will you stand by that boast, and obey me this once?" 1090

"I shall do so indeed," said the doughty knight;

"While I lie in your lodging, your laws will I follow."

"As you have had," said the host, "many hardships abroad  
And little sleep of late, you are lacking, I judge,  
Both in nourishment needful and nightly rest; 1095

You shall lie abed late in your lofty chamber  
Tomorrow until mass, and meet then to dine  
When you will, with my wife, who will sit by your side  
And talk with you at table, the better to cheer

our guest. 1100

A-hunting I will go

While you lie late and rest."

The knight, inclining low,

Assents to each behest.

"And Gawain," said the good host, "agree now to this: 1105

Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve,

And all you have earned you must offer to me;

Swear now, sweet friend, to swap as I say,  
Whether hands, in the end, be empty or better."

"By God," said Sir Gawain, "I grant it forthwith! 1110

If you find the game good, I shall gladly take part."

"Let the bright wine be brought, and our bargain is done,"

Said the lord of that land—the two laughed together.

Then they drank and they dallied and doffed all constraint,  
These lords and these ladies, as late as they chose, 1115

And then with gaiety and gallantries and graceful adieux

They talked in low tones, and tarried at parting.

With compliments comely they kiss at the last;

There were brisk lads about with blazing torches  
To see them safe to bed, for soft repose 1120

long due.

Their covenants, yet awhile,

They repeat, and pledge anew;

That lord could well beguile

Men's hearts, with mirth in view. 1125

*Part III*

Long before daylight they left their beds;  
 Guests that wished to go gave word to their grooms,  
 And they set about briskly to bind on saddles,  
 Tend to their tackle, tie up trunks.  
 The proud lords appear, appareled to ride, 1130  
 Leap lightly astride, lay hold of their bridles,  
 Each one on his way to his worthy house.  
 The liege lord of the land was not the last  
 Arrayed there to ride, with retainers many;  
 He had a bite to eat when he had heard mass; 1135  
 With horn to the hills he hastens amain.  
 By the dawn of that day over the dim earth,  
 Master and men were mounted and ready.  
 Then they harnessed in couples the keen-scented hounds,  
 Cast wide the kennel-door and called them forth, 1140  
 Blew upon their bugles bold blasts three;  
 The dogs began to bay with a deafening din,  
 And they quieted them quickly and called them to heel,  
 A hundred brave huntsmen, as I have heard tell,  
 together. 1145  
     Men at stations meet;  
     From the hounds they slip the tether;  
     The echoing horns repeat,  
     Clear in the merry weather.

At the clamor of the quest, the quarry trembled; 1150  
 Deer dashed through the dale, dazed with dread;  
 Hastened to the high ground, only to be  
 Turned back by the beaters, who boldly shouted.  
 They harmed not the harts, with their high heads,  
 Let the bucks go by, with their broad antlers, 1155  
 For it was counted a crime, in the close season,  
 If a man of that demesne should molest the male deer.  
 The hinds were headed up, with "Hey!" and "Ware!"  
 The does with great din were driven to the valleys.  
 Then you were ware, as they went, of the whistling of arrows; 1160  
 At each bend under boughs the bright shafts flew  
 That tore the tawny hide with their tapered heads.  
 Ah! they bray and they bleed, on banks they die,  
 And ever the pack pell-mell comes panting behind;  
 Hunters with shrill horns hot on their heels— 1165  
 Like the cracking of cliffs their cries resounded.  
 What game got away from the gallant archers  
 Was promptly picked off at the posts below  
 When they were harried on the heights and herded to the streams:  
 The watchers were so wary at the waiting-stations, 1170  
 And the greyhounds so huge, that eagerly snatched,  
 And finished them off as fast as folk could see  
     with sight.

The lord, now here, now there,



Spurs forth in sheer delight. 1175  
And drives, with pleasures rare,  
The day to the dark night.

So the lord in the linden-wood leads the hunt  
And Gawain the good knight in gay bed lies,  
Lingered late alone, till daylight gleamed, 1180  
Under coverlet costly, curtained about.

And as he slips into slumber, slyly there comes  
A little din at his door, and the latch lifted,  
And he holds up his heavy head out of the clothes;  
A corner of the curtain he caught back a little 1185  
And waited there warily, to see what befell.

Lo! it was the lady, loveliest to behold,  
That drew the door behind her deftly and still  
And was bound for his bed—abashed was the knight,  
And laid his head low again in likeness of sleep; 1190  
And she stepped stealthily, and stole to his bed,

Cast aside the curtain and came within,  
And set herself softly on the bedside there,  
And lingered at her leisure, to look on his waking.

The fair knight lay feigning for a long while, 1195  
Conning in his conscience what his case might  
Mean or amount to—a marvel he thought it.

But yet he said within himself, "More seemly it were  
To try her intent by talking a little."  
So he started and stretched, as startled from sleep, 1200  
Lifts wide his lids in likeness of wonder,

And signs himself swiftly, as safer to be,  
with art.

Sweetly does she speak  
And kindling glances dart, 1205  
Blent white and red on cheek  
And laughing lips apart.

"Good morning, Sir Gawain," said that gay lady,  
"A slack sleeper you are, to let one slip in!  
Now you are taken in a trice—a truce we must make, 1210  
Or I shall bind you in your bed, of that be assured."  
Thus laughing lightly that lady jested.

"Good morning, good lady," said Gawain the blithe,  
"Be it with me as you will; I am well content!  
For I surrender myself, and sue for your grace, 1215  
And that is best, I believe, and behooves me now."  
Thus jested in answer that gentle knight.

"But if, lovely lady, you misliked it not,  
And were pleased to permit your prisoner to rise,  
I should quit this couch and accoutre me better, 1220  
And be clad in more comfort for converse here."

"Nay, not so, sweet sir," said the smiling lady;  
"You shall not rise from your bed: I direct you better:  
I shall hem and hold you on either hand,

And keep company awhile with my captive knight. 1225  
 For as certain as I sit here, Sir Gawain you are,  
 Whom all the world worships, whereso you ride;  
 Your honor, your courtesy are highest acclaimed  
 By lords and by ladies, by all living men;  
 And lo! we are alone here, and left to ourselves: 1230  
 My lord and his liegemen are long departed,  
 The household asleep, my handmaids too,  
 The door drawn, and held by a well-driven bolt,  
 And since I have in this house him whom all love,  
 I shall while the time away with mirthful speech 1235

at will.  
 My body is here at hand,  
 Your each wish to fulfill;  
 Your servant to command  
 I am, and shall be still." 1240

"In good faith," said Gawain, "my gain is the greater,  
 Though I am not he of whom you have heard;  
 To arrive at such reverence as you recount here  
 I am one all unworthy, and well do I know it. 1245  
 By heaven, I would hold me the happiest of men  
 If by word or by work I once might aspire  
 To the prize of your praise—'twere a pure joy!"  
 "In good faith, Sir Gawain," said that gay lady,  
 "The well-proven prowess that pleases all others, 1250  
 Did I scant or scout it, 'twere scarce becoming.  
 But there are ladies, believe me, that had liefer far  
 Have thee here in their hold, as I have today,  
 To pass an hour in pastime with pleasant words,  
 Assuage all their sorrows and solace their hearts,  
 Than much of the goodly gems and gold they possess. 1255  
 But laud be to the Lord of the lofty skies,  
 For here in my hands all hearts' desire  
 doth lie."

Great welcome got he there  
 From the lady who sat him by; 1260  
 With fitting speech and fair  
 The good knight makes reply.

"Madame," said the merry man, "Mary reward you!  
 For in good faith, I find your beneficence noble.  
 And the fame of fair deeds runs far and wide, 1265  
 But the praise you report pertains not to me,  
 But comes of your courtesy and kindness of heart."  
 "By the high Queen of heaven" (said she) "I count it not so,  
 For were I worth all the women in this world alive,  
 And all wealth and all worship were in my hands, 1270  
 And I should hunt high and low, a husband to take,  
 For the nurture I have noted in thee, knight, here,  
 The comeliness and courtesies and courtly mirth—  
 And so I had ever heard, and now hold it true—

No other on this earth should have me for wife." 1275  
"You are bound to a better man," the bold knight said,  
"Yet I prize the praise you have proffered me here,  
And soberly your servant, my sovereign I hold you,  
And acknowledge me your knight, in the name of Christ."  
So they talked of this and that until 'twas nigh noon, 1280  
And ever the lady languishing in likeness of love.  
With feat words and fair he framed his defense,  
For were she never so winsome, the warrior had  
The less will to woo, for the wound that his bane  
must be. 1285

He must bear the blinding blow,  
For such is fate's decree;  
The lady asks leave to go;  
He grants it full and free.

Then she gaily said goodbye, and glanced at him, laughing, 1290  
And as she stood, she astonished him with a stern speech:  
"Now may the Giver of all good words these glad hours repay!  
But our guest is not Gawain—forgot is that thought."  
"How so?" said the other, and asks in some haste,  
For he feared he had been at fault in the forms of his speech. 1295  
But she held up her hand, and made answer thus:  
"So good a knight as Gawain is given out to be,  
And the model of fair demeanor and manners pure,  
Had he lain so long at a lady's side,  
Would have claimed a kiss, by his courtesy, 1300  
Through some touch or trick of phrase at some tale's end."  
Said Gawain, "Good lady, I grant it at once!  
I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight,  
And more, lest you mislike, so let be, I pray."  
With that she turns toward him, takes him in her arms, 1305  
Leans down her lovely head, and lo! he is kissed.  
They commend each other to Christ with comely words,  
He sees her forth safely, in silence they part,  
And then he lies no later in his lofty bed,  
But calls to his chamberlain, chooses his clothes, 1310  
Goes in those garments gladly to mass,  
Then takes his way to table, where attendants wait,  
And made merry all day, till the moon rose  
in view

Was never knight beset 1315  
"Twixt worthier ladies two:  
The crone and the coquette;  
Fair pastimes they pursue.

And the lord of the land rides late and long,  
Hunting the barren hind over the broad heath. 1320  
He had slain such a sum, when the sun sank low,  
Of docs and other deer, as would dizzy one's wits.  
Then they trooped in together in triumph at last,  
And the count of the quarry quickly they take.

The lords lent a hand with their liegemen many, 1325  
 Picked out the plumpest and put them together  
 And duly dressed the deer, as the deed requires.  
 Some were assigned the assay of the fat:  
 Two fingers'-width fully they found on the leanest.  
 Then they slit the slot open and searched out the paunch, 1330  
 Trimmed it with trencher-knives and tied it up tight.  
 They flaycd the fair hide from the legs and trunk,  
 Then broke open the belly and laid bare the bowels,  
 Deftly detaching and drawing them forth.  
 And next at the neck they neatly parted 1335  
 The weasand <sup>6</sup> from the windpipe, and cast away the guts.  
 At the shoulders with sharp blades they showed their skill,  
 Boning them from bencath, lest the sides be marred;  
 They breached the broad breast and broke it in twain,  
 And again at the gullet they begin with their knives, 1340  
 Cleave down the carcass clear to the breach;  
 Two tender morsels they take from the throat,  
 Then round the inner ribs they rid off a layer  
 And carve out the kidney-fat, close to the spine,  
 Hewing down to the haunch, that all hung together, 1345  
 And held it up whole, and hacked it free,  
 And this they named the numbles,<sup>7</sup> that knew such terms  
 of art.

They divide the crotch in two,  
 And straightway then they start 1350  
 To cut the backbone through  
 And cleave the trunk apart.

With hard strokes they hewed off the head and the neck,  
 Then swiftly from the sides they severed the chine,  
 And the corbie's bone <sup>8</sup> they cast on a branch. 1355  
 Then they pierced the plump sides, impaled either one  
 With the hock of the hind foot, and hung it aloft,  
 To each person his portion most proper and fit.  
 On a hide of a hind the hounds they fed  
 With the liver and the lights,<sup>9</sup> the leathery paunches, 1360  
 And bread soaked in blood well blended therewith.  
 High horns and shrill set hounds a-baying,  
 Then merrily with their meat they make their way home,  
 Blowing on their bugles many a brave blast.  
 Ere dark had descended, that doughty band 1365  
 Was come within the walls where Gawain waits  
 at leisure.

Bliss and hearth-fire bright  
 Await the master's pleasure;  
 When the two men met that night, 1370  
 Joy surpassed all measure.

6. Esophagus.

7. The other internal organs.

8. A bit of gristle assigned to the ravens

("corbies").

9. Lungs.

Then the host in the hall his household assembles,  
 With the dames of high degree and their damsels fair.  
 In the presence of the people, a party he sends  
 To convey him his venison in view of the knight. 1375

And in high good-humor he hails him then,  
 Counts over the kill, the cuts on the tallies,  
 Holds high the hewn ribs, heavy with fat.  
 "What think you, sir, of this? Have I thriven well?  
 Have I won with my woodcraft a worthy prize?" 1380

"In good earnest," said Gawain, "this game is the finest  
 I have seen in seven years in the season of winter."

"And I give it to you, Gawain," said the goodly host,  
 "For according to our covenant, you claim it as your own."  
 "That is so," said Sir Gawain, "the same say I: 1385

What I worthily have won within these fair walls,  
 Herewith I as willingly award it to you."

He embraces his broad neck with both his arms,  
 And confers on him a kiss in the comeliest style.  
 "Have here my profit, it proved no better; 1390  
 Ungrudging do I grant it, were it greater far."

"Such a gift," said the good host, "I gladly accept—  
 Yet it might be all the better, would you but say  
 Where you won this same award, by your wits alone."

"That was no part of the pact; press me no further, 1395  
 For you have had what behooves; all other claims  
 forbear."

With jest and compliment  
 They conversed, and cast off care;  
 To the table soon they went; 1400  
 Fresh dainties wait them there.

And then by the chimney-side they chat at their ease;  
 The best wine was brought them, and bounteously served;  
 And after in their jesting they jointly accord  
 To do on the second day the deeds of the first: 1405

That the two men should trade, betide as it may,  
 What each had taken in, at eve when they met.

They seal the pact solemnly in sight of the court;  
 Their cups were filled afresh to confirm the jest;

Then at last they took their leave, for late was the hour, 1410  
 Each to his own bed hastening away.

Before the barnyard cock had crowed but thrice  
 The lord had leapt from his rest, his liegemen as well.

Both of mass and their meal they made short work:  
 By the dim light of dawn they were deep in the woods 1415

away.  
 With huntsmen and with horns  
 Over plains they pass that day;  
 They release, amid the thorns,  
 Swift hounds that run and bay. 1420

Soon some were on a scent by the side of a marsh;  
 When the hounds opened cry, the head of the hunt  
 Rallied them with rough words, raised a great noise.  
 The hounds that had heard it came hurrying straight  
 And followed along with their fellows, forty together. 1425  
 Then such a clamor and cry of coursing hounds  
 Arose, that the rocks resounded again.

Hunters exhorted them with horn and with voice;  
 Then all in a body bore off together  
 Between a mere in the marsh and a menacing crag, 1430  
 To a rise where the rock stood rugged and steep,  
 And boulders lay about, that blocked their approach.

Then the company in consort closed on their prey:  
 They surrounded the rise and the rocks both,  
 For well they were aware that it waited within, 1435  
 The beast that the bloodhounds boldly proclaimed.

Then they beat on the bushes and bade him appear,  
 And he made a murderous rush in the midst of them all;  
 The best of all boars broke from his cover,  
 That had ranged long unrivaled, a renegade old, 1440  
 For of tough-brawned boars he was biggest far,

Most grim when he grunted—then grieved were many,  
 For three at the first thrust he threw to the earth,  
 And dashed away at once without more damage.  
 With "Hi!" "Hi!" and "Hey!" "Hey!" the others followed, 1445  
 Had horns at their lips, blew high and clear.

Merry was the music of men and of hounds  
 That were bound after this boar, his bloodthirsty heart  
 to quell.

Often he stands at bay,  
 Then scatters the pack pell-mell;  
 He hurts the hounds, and they  
 Most dolefully yowl and yell. 1450

Men then with mighty bows moved in to shoot,  
 Aimed at him with their arrows and often hit, 1455  
 But the points had no power to pierce through his hide,  
 And the barbs were brushed aside by his bristly brow;  
 Though the shank of the shaft shivered in pieces,  
 The head hopped away, wheresoever it struck.

But when their stubborn strokes had stung him at last, 1460  
 Then, foaming in his frenzy, fiercely he charges,  
 Hies at them headlong that hindered his flight,  
 And many feared for their lives, and fell back a little.

But the lord on a lively horse leads the chase;  
 As a high-mettled huntsman his horn he blows; 1465  
 He sounds the assembly and sweeps through the brush,  
 Pursuing this wild swine till the sunlight slanted.  
 All day with this deed they drive forth the time  
 While our lone knight so lovesome lies in his bed,

Sir Gawain safe at home, in silken bower  
 so gay. 1470  
 The lady, with guile in heart,  
 Came carly where he lay;  
 She was at him with all her art  
 To turn his mind her way. 1475

She comes to the curtain and coyly peeps in;  
 Gawain thought it good to greet her at once,  
 And she richly repays him with her ready words,  
 Settles softly at his side, and suddenly she laughs,  
 And with a gracious glance, she begins on him thus: 1480  
 "Sir, if you be Gawain, it seems a great wonder—  
 A man so well-meaning, and manncrly disposed,  
 And cannot act in company as courtesy bids,  
 And if onc takes the trouble to teach him, 'tis all in vain.  
 That lesson learned lately is lightly forgot, 1485  
 Though I painted it as plain as my poor wit allowed."  
 "What lesson, dear lady?" he asked all alarmed;  
 "I have been much to blame, if your story be true."  
 "Yet my counsel was of kissing," came her answer then,  
 "Where favor has been found, freely to claim 1490  
 As accords with the conduct of courteous knights."  
 "My dear," said the doughty man, "dismiss that thought;  
 Such freedom, I fear, might offend you much;  
 It were rude to request if the right were denied."  
 "But none can deny you," said the noble dame, 1495  
 "You are stout enough to constrain with strength, if you choose,  
 Were any so ungracious as to grudge you aught."  
 "By heaven," said he, "you have answered well,  
 But threats never throve among those of my land,  
 Nor any gift not freely given, good though it be. 1500  
 I am yours to command, to kiss when you please;  
 You may lay on as you like, and leave off at will."

With this,  
 The lady lightly bends  
 And graciously gives him a kiss;  
 The two converse as friends 1505  
 Of true love's trials and bliss.

"I should like, by your leave," said the lovely lady,  
 "If it did not annoy you, to know for what cause  
 So brisk and so bold a young blood as you, 1510  
 And acclaimed for all courtesies becoming a knight—  
 And name what knight you will, they are noblest esteemed  
 For loyal faith in love, in life as in story;  
 For to tell the tribulations of these true hearts,  
 Why, 'tis the very title and text of their deeds, 1515  
 How bold knights for beauty have braved many a foe,  
 Suffered heavy sorrows out of secret love,  
 And then valorously avenged them on villainous churls

And made happy ever after the hearts of their ladies.  
 And you are the noblest knight known in your time; 1520  
 No household under heaven but has heard of your fame,  
 And here by your side I have sat for two days  
 Yet never has a fair phrase fallen from your lips  
 Of the language of love, not one little word!  
 And you, that with sweet vows sway women's hearts, 1525  
 Should show your winsome ways, and woo a young thing,  
 And teach by some tokens the craft of true love.  
 How! are you artless, whom all men praise?  
 Or do you deem me so dull, or deaf to such words?

Fie! Fie! 1530

In hope of pastimes new  
 I have come where none can spy;  
 Instruct me a little, do,  
 While my husband is not nearby."

"God love you, gracious lady!" said Gawain then; 1535  
 "It is a pleasure surpassing, and a peerless joy,  
 That one so worthy as you would willingly come  
 And take the time and trouble to talk with your knight  
 And content you with his company—it comforts my heart.  
 But to take to myself the task of telling of love, 1540  
 And touch upon its texts, and treat of its themes  
 To one that, I know well, wields more power  
 In that art, by a half, than a hundred such  
 As I am where I live, or am like to become,  
 It were folly, fair dame, in the first degree! 1545  
 In all that I am able, my aim is to please,  
 As in honor behooves me, and am evermore  
 Your servant heart and soul, so save me our Lord!"  
 Thus she tested his temper and tried many a time,  
 Whatever her true intent, to entice him to sin, 1550  
 But so fair was his defense that no fault appeared,  
 Nor evil on either hand, but only bliss  
 they knew.

They linger and laugh awhile;  
 She kisses the knight so true, 1555  
 Takes leave in comeliest style  
 And departs without more ado.

Then he rose from his rest and made ready for mass,  
 And then a meal was set and served, in sumptuous style;  
 He dallied at home all day with the dear ladies, 1560  
 But the lord lingered late at his lusty sport;  
 Pursued his sorry swine, that swerved as he fled,  
 And bit asunder the backs of the best of his hounds  
 When they brought him to bay, till the bowmen appeared  
 And soon forced him forth, though he fought for dear life, 1565  
 So sharp were the shafts they shot at him there.  
 But yet the boldest drew back from his battering head,



Till at last he was so tired he could travel no more,  
But in as much haste as he might, he makes his retreat  
To a rise on rocky ground, by a rushing stream. 1570  
With the bank at his back he scrapes the bare earth,  
The froth foams at his jaws, frightful to see.  
He whets his white tusks—then weary were all  
Those hunters so hardy that hoved round about  
Of aiming from afar, but ever they mistrust 1575  
his mood.

He had hurt so many by then  
That none had hardihood  
To be torn by his tusks again,  
That was brainsick, and out for blood. 1580

Till the lord came at last on his lofty steed,  
Beheld him there at bay before all his folk;  
Lightly he leaps down, leaves his courser,  
Bares his bright sword, and boldly advances;  
Straight into the stream he strides towards his foe. 1585  
The wild thing was wary of weapon and man;  
His hackles rose high; so hotly he snorts  
That many watched with alarm, lest the worst befall.  
The boar makes for the man with a mighty bound  
So that he and his hunter came headlong together 1590  
Where the water ran wildest—the worse for the beast,  
For the man, when they first met, marked him with care,  
Sights well the slot, slips in the blade,  
Shoves it home to the hilt, and the heart shattered,  
And he falls in his fury and floats down the water, 1595  
ill-sped.

Hounds hasten by the score  
To maul him, hide and head;  
Men drag him in to shore  
And dogs pronounce him dead. 1600

With many a brave blast they boast of their prize,  
All halloosed in high glee, that had their wind;  
The hounds bayed their best, as the bold men bade  
That were charged with chief rank in that chase of renown.  
Then one wise in woodcraft, and worthily skilled, 1605  
Began to dress the boar in becoming style:  
He severs the savage head and sets it aloft,  
Then rends the body roughly right down the spine;  
Takes the bowels from the belly, broils them on coals,  
Blends them well with bread to bestow on the hounds. 1610  
Then he breaks out the brawn in fair broad fitches,  
And the innards to be eaten in order he takes.  
The two sides, attached to each other all whole,  
He suspended from a spar that was springy and tough;  
And so with this swine they set out for home; 1615  
The boar's head was borne before the same man

That had stabbed him in the stream with his strong arm,  
right through.

He thought it long indeed  
Till he had the knight in view; 1620  
At his call, he comes with speed  
To claim his payment due.

The lord laughed aloud, with many a light word,  
When he greeted Sir Gawain—with good cheer he speaks.

They fetch the fair dames and the folk of the house; 1625  
He brings forth the brawn, and begins the tale  
Of the great length and girth, the grim rage as well,  
Of the battle of the boar they beset in the wood.

The other man meetly commended his deeds  
And praised well the prize of his princely sport, 1630  
For the brawn of that boar, the bold knight said,  
And the sides of that swine surpassed all others.

Then they handled the huge head; he owns it a wonder,  
And eyes it with abhorrence; to heighten his praise.

"Now, Gawain," said the good man, "this game becomes yours 1635  
By those fair terms we fixed, as you know full well."

"That is true," returned the knight, "and trust me, fair friend,  
All my gains, as agreed, I shall give you forthwith."

He clasps him and kisses him in courteous style,  
Then serves him with the same fare a second time. 1640  
"Now we are even," said he, "at this evening feast,  
And clear is every claim incurred here to date,  
and debt."

"By Saint Giles!" the host replies,  
"You're the best I ever met! 1645  
If your profits are all this size,  
We'll see you wealthy yet!"

Then attendants set tables on trestles about,  
And laid them with linen; light shone forth,

Wakened along the walls in waxen torches. 1650

The service was set and the supper brought;

Royal were the revels that rose then in hall

At that feast by the fire, with many fair sports:

Amid the meal and after, melody sweet,

Carol-dances comely and Christmas songs, 1655

With all the mannerly mirth my tongue may describe.

And ever our gallant knight beside the gay lady;

So uncommonly kind and complaisant was she,

With sweet stolen glances, that stirred his stout heart,

That he was at his wits' end, and wondrous vexed; 1660

But he could not in conscience her courtship repay,

Yet took pains to please her, though the plan might

go wrong.

When they to heart's delight

Had reveled there in throng, 1665

To his chamber he calls the knight,  
And thither they go along.

And there they dallied and drank, and deemed it good sport  
To enact their play anew on New Year's Eve,  
But Gawain asked again to go on the morrow, 1670  
For the time until his tryst was not two days.  
The host hindered that, and urged him to stay,  
And said, "On my honor, my oath here I take  
That you shall get to the Green Chapel to begin your chores  
By dawn on New Year's Day, if you so desire. 1675  
Wherefore lie at your leisure in your lofty bed,  
And I shall hunt hereabouts, and hold to our terms,  
And we shall trade winnings when once more we meet,  
For I have tested you twice, and true have I found you;  
Now think this tomorrow: the third pays for all; 1680  
Be we merry while we may, and mindful of joy,  
For heaviness of heart can be had for the asking."  
This is gravely agreed on and Gawain will stay.  
They drink a last draught and with torches depart  
to rest. 1685

To bed Sir Gawain went;  
His sleep was of the best;  
The lord, on his craft intent,  
Was early up and dressed.

After mass, with his men, a morsel he takes; 1690  
Clear and crisp the morning; he calls for his mount;  
The folk that were to follow him afield that day  
Were high astride their horses before the hall gates.  
Wondrous fair were the fields, for the frost was light;  
The sun rises red amid radiant clouds, 1695  
Sails into the sky, and sends forth his beams.  
They let loose the hounds by a leafy wood;  
The rocks all around re-echo to their horns;  
Soon some have set off in pursuit of the fox,  
Cast about with craft for a clearer scent; 1700  
A young dog vaps, and is yelled at in turn;  
His fellows fall to sniffing, and follow his lead,  
Running in a rabble on the right track,  
And he scampers all before; they discover him soon,  
And when they see him with sight they pursue him the faster, 1705  
Railing at him rudely with a wrathful din.  
Often he reverses over rough terrain,  
Or loops back to listen in the lee of a hedge;  
At last, by a little ditch, he leaps over the brush,  
Comes into a clearing at a cautious pace, 1710  
Then he thought through his wiles to have thrown off the hounds  
Till he was ware, as he went, of a waiting-station  
Where three athwart his path threatened him at once,  
all gray.

Quick as a flash he wheels 1715  
 And darts off in dismay;  
 With hard luck at his heels  
 He is off to the wood away.

Then it was heaven on earth to hark to the hounds  
 When they had come on their quarry, coursing together! 1720  
 Such harsh cries and howls they hurled at his head  
 As all the cliffs with a crash had come down at once.  
 Here he was hailed, when huntsmen met him;  
 Yonder they yelled at him, yapping and snarling;  
 There they cried "Thief!" and threatened his life, 1725  
 And ever the harriers at his heels, that he had no rest.  
 Often he was menaced when he made for the open,  
 And often rushed in again, for Reynard was wily;  
 And so he leads them a merry chase, the lord and his men,  
 In this manner on the mountains, till midday or near, 1740  
 While our hero lies at home in wholesome sleep  
 Within the comely curtains on the cold morning.  
 But the lady, as love would allow her no rest,  
 And pursuing ever the purpose that pricked her heart,  
 Was awake with the dawn, and went to his chamber 1735  
 In a fair flowing mantle that fell to the earth,  
 All edged and embellished with ermines fine;  
 No hood on her head, but heavy with gems  
 Were her fillet and the fret <sup>1</sup> that confined her tresses;  
 Her face and her fair throat freely displayed; 1730  
 Her bosom all but bare, and her back as well.  
 She comes in at the chamber-door, and closes it with care,  
 Throws wide a window—then waits no longer,  
 But hails him thus airily with her artful words,  
 with cheer: 1745  
 "Ah, man, how can you sleep?  
 The morning is so clear!"  
 Though dreams have drowned him deep,  
 He cannot choose but hear.

Deep in his dreams he darkly mutters 1750  
 As a man may that mourns, with many grim thoughts  
 Of that day when destiny shall deal him his doom  
 When he greets his grim host at the Green Chapel  
 And must bow to his buffet, bating all strife.  
 But when he sees her at his side he summons his wits, 1755  
 Breaks from the black dreams, and blithely answers.  
 That lovely lady comes laughing sweet,  
 Sinks down at his side, and salutes him with a kiss.  
 He accords her fair welcome in courtliest style;  
 He sees her so glorious, so gaily attired, 1760  
 So faultless her features, so fair and so bright,

1. Ornamental net.

His heart swelled swiftly with surging joys.  
They melt into mirth with many a fond smile,  
And there was bliss beyond telling between those two,  
  at height.

Good were their words of greeting;                 1765  
Each joyed in other's sight;  
Great peril attends that meeting  
Should Mary forget her knight.

For that high-born beauty so hemmed him about,                 1770  
Made so plain her meaning, the man must needs  
Either take her tendered love or distastefully refuse.  
His courtesy concerned him, lest crass he appear,  
But more his soul's mischief, should he commit sin  
And belie his loyal oath to the lord of that house.                 1775

"God forbid!" said the bold knight, "That shall not befall!"  
With a little fond laughter he lightly let pass  
All the words of special weight that were sped his way;  
"I find you much at fault," the fair one said,  
"Who can be cold toward a creature so close by your side,                 1780  
Of all women in this world most wounded in heart,  
Unless you have a sweetheart, one you hold dearer,  
And allegiance to that lady so loyally knit  
That you will never love another, as now I believe.  
And, sir, if it be so, then say it, I beg you;                         1785  
By all your heart holds dear, hide it no longer  
  with guile."

"Lady, by Saint John,"  
He answers with a smile,  
"Lover have I none,                                     1790  
Nor will have, yet awhile."

"Those words," said the woman, "are the worst of all,  
But I have had my answer, and hard do I find it!  
Kiss me now kindly: I can but go hence  
To lament my life long like a maid lovelorn."                     1795

She inclines her head quickly and kisses the knight,  
Then straightens with a sigh, and says as she stands,  
"Now, dear, ere I depart, do me this pleasure:  
Give me some little gift, your glove or the like,  
That I may think on you, man, and mourn the less."                 1800

"Now by heaven," said he, "I wish I had here  
My most precious possession, to put it in your hands,  
For your deeds, beyond doubt, have often deserved  
A repayment far passing my power to bestow.  
A love-token, lady, were of little avail;                     1805

It is not to your honor to have at this time  
A glove as a guerdon from Gawain's hand,  
And I am here on an errand in unknown realms  
And have no bearers with baggage with becoming gifts,  
Which distresses me, madame, for your dear sake.                 1810

A man must keep within his compass: account it neither grief  
nor slight."

"Nay, noblest knight alive,"

Said that beauty of body white,

"Though you be loath to give,

Yet you shall take, by right."

1815

She reached out a rich ring, wrought all of gold,  
With a splendid stone displayed on the band  
That flashed before his eyes like a fiery sun;  
It was worth a king's wealth, you may well believe.

1820

But he waved it away with these ready words:

"Before God, good lady, I forego all gifts;

None have I to offer, nor any will I take."

And she urged it on him eagerly, and ever he refused,

And vowed in very earnest, prevail she would not.

1825

And she sad to find it so, and said to him then,

"If my ring is refused for its rich cost—

You would not be my debtor for so dear a thing—

I shall give you my girdle; you gain less thereby."

She released a knot lightly, and loosened a belt

1830

That was caught about her kirtle, the bright cloak beneath,

Of a gay green silk, with gold overwrought,

And the borders all bound with embroidery fine,

And this she presses upon him, and pleads with a smile,

Unworthy though it were, that it would not be scorned.

1835

But the man still maintains that he means to accept

Neither gold nor any gift, till by God's grace

The fate that lay before him was fully achieved.

"And be not offended, fair lady, I beg,

And give over your offer, for ever I must

1840

decline.

I am grateful for favor shown

Past all deserts of mine,

And ever shall be your own

True servant, rain or shine."

1845

"Now does my present displease you," she promptly inquired,

"Because it seems in your sight so simple a thing?

And belike, as it is little, it is less to praise,

But if the virtue that invests it were verily known,

It would be held, I hope, in higher esteem.

1850

For the man that possesses this piece of silk,

If he bore it on his body, belted about,

There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down,

For he could not be killed by any craft on earth."

Then the man began to muse, and mainly he thought

1855

It was a pearl for his plight, the peril to come

When he gains the Green Chapel to get his reward:

Could he escape unscathed, the scheme were noble!

Then he bore with her words and withstood them no more,

And she repeated her petition and pleaded anew, 1860  
And he granted it, and gladly she gave him the belt,  
And besought him for her sake to conceal it well,  
Lest the noble lord should know—and the knight agrees  
That not a soul save themselves shall see it thenceforth  
with sight.

He thanked her with fervent heart, 1865  
As often as ever he might;  
Three times, before they part,  
She has kissed the stalwart knight.

Then the lady took her leave, and left him there, 1870  
For more mirth with that man she might not have.  
When she was gone, Sir Gawain got from his bed,  
Arose and arrayed him in his rich attire;  
Tucked away the token the temptress had left,  
Laid it reliably where he looked for it after. 1875

And then with good cheer to the chapel he goes,  
Approached a priest in private, and prayed to be taught  
To lead a better life and lift up his mind,  
Lest he be among the lost when he must leave this world.  
And shamefaced at shrift he showed his misdeeds 1880  
From the largest to the least, and asked the Lord's mercy,  
And called on his confessor to cleanse his soul,  
And he absolved him of his sins as safe and as clean  
As if the dread Day of Judgment should dawn on the morrow.  
And then he made merry amid the fine ladies 1885  
With deft-footed dances and dalliance light,  
As never until now, while the afternoon wore  
away.

He delighted all around him,  
And all agreed, that day, 1890  
They never before had found him  
So gracious and so gay.

Now peaceful be his pasture, and love play him fair!  
The host is on horseback, hunting afield;  
He has finished off this fox that he followed so long: 1895  
As he leapt a low hedge to look for the villain  
Where he heard all the hounds in hot pursuit,  
Reynard comes racing out of a rough thicket,  
And all the rabble in a rush, right at his heels.  
The man beholds the beast, and bides his time, 1900  
And bares his bright sword, and brings it down hard,  
And he blenches from the blade, and backward he starts;  
A hound hurries up and hinders that move,  
And before the horse's feet they fell on him at once  
And ripped the rascal's throat with a wrathful din. 1905  
The lord soon alighted and lifted him free,  
Swiftly snatched him up from the snapping jaws,  
Holds him over his head, halloos with a will,

And the dogs bayed the dirge, that had done him to death.  
 Hunters hastened thither with horns at their lips, 1910  
 Sounding the assembly till they saw him at last.  
 When that comely company was come in together,  
 All that bore bugles blew them at once,  
 And the others all hallooed, that had no horns.  
 It was the merriest medley that ever a man heard, 1915  
 The racket that they raised for Sir Reynard's soul  
 that died.

    Their hounds they praised and fed,  
 Fondling their heads with pride,  
 And they took Reynard the Red 1920  
 And stripped away his hide.

And then they headed homeward, for evening had come,  
 Blowing many a blast on their bugles bright.  
 The lord at long last alights at his house,  
 Finds fire on the hearth where the fair knight waits, 1925  
 Sir Gawain the good, that was glad in heart.  
 With the ladies, that loved him, he lingered at ease;  
 He wore a rich robe of blue, that reached to the earth  
 And a surcoat lined softly with sumptuous furs;  
 A hood of the same hue hung on his shoulders; 1930  
 With bands of bright ermine embellished were both.  
 He comes to meet the man amid all the folk,  
 And greets him good-humoredly, and gaily he says,  
 "I shall follow forthwith the form of our pledge  
 That we framed to good effect amid fresh-filled cups." 1935  
 He clasps him accordingly and kisses him thrice,  
 As amiably and as earnestly as ever he could.  
 "By heaven," said the host, "you have had some luck  
 Since you took up this trade, if the terms were good."  
 "Never trouble about the terms," he returned at once, 1940  
 "Since all that I owe here is openly paid."  
 "Marry!" said the other man, "mine is much less,  
 For I have hunted all day, and nought have I got  
 But this foul fox pelt, the fiend take the goods!  
 Which but poorly repays those precious things 1945  
 That you have cordially conferred, those kisses three  
 so good."  
 "Enough!" said Sir Gawain;  
 "I thank you, by the rood!"  
 And how the fox was slain 1950  
 He told him, as they stood.

With minstrelsy and mirth, with all manner of meats,  
 They made as much merriment as any men might  
 (Amid laughing of ladies and light hearted girls;  
 So gay grew Sir Gawain and the goodly host) 1955  
 Unless they had been besotted, or brainless fools.  
 The knight joined in jesting with that joyous folk,



Until at last it was late; ere long they must part,  
And be off to their beds, as behooved them each one.  
Then politely his leave of the lord of the house  
Our noble knight takes, and renews his thanks: 1960  
"The courtesies countless accorded me here,  
Your kindness at this Christmas, may heaven's King repay!  
Henceforth, if you will have me, I hold you my liege,  
And so, as I have said, I must set forth tomorrow, 1965  
If I may take some trusty man to teach, as you promised,  
The way to the Green Chapel, that as God allows  
I shall see my fate fulfilled on the first of the year."  
"In good faith," said the good man, "with a good will  
Every promise on my part shall be fully performed." 1970  
He assigns him a servant to set him on the path,  
To see him safe and sound over the snowy hills,  
To follow the fastest way through forest green  
and grove.  
Gawain thanks him again, 1975  
So kind his favors prove,  
And of the ladies then  
He takes his leave, with love.

Courteously he kissed them, with care in his heart,  
And often wished them well, with warmest thanks, 1980  
Which they for their part were prompt to repay.  
They commend him to Christ with disconsolate sighs;  
And then in that hall with the household he parts—  
Each man that he met, he remembered to thank  
For his deeds of devotion and diligent pains, 1985  
And the trouble he had taken to tend to his needs;  
And each one as woeful, that watched him depart,  
As he had lived with him loyally all his life long.  
By lads bearing lights he was led to his chamber  
And blithely brought to his bed, to be at his rest. 1990  
How soundly he slept, I presume not to say,  
For there were matters of moment his thoughts might well  
pursue.  
Let him lie and wait;  
He has little more to do, 1995  
Then listen, while I relate  
How they kept their rendezvous.

#### *Part IV*

Now the New Year draws near, and the night passes,  
The day dispels the dark, by the Lord's decree;  
But wild weather awoke in the world without: 2000  
The clouds in the cold sky cast down their snow  
With great gusts from the north, grievous to bear.  
Sleet showered aslant upon shivering beasts;

The wind warbled wild as it whipped from aloft,  
 And drove the drifts deep in the dales below. 2005  
 Long and well he listens, that lies in his bed;  
 Though he lifts not his eyelids, little he sleeps;  
 Each crow of the cock he counts without fail.  
 Radily from his rest he rose before dawn,  
 For a lamp had been left him, that lighted his chamber. 2010  
 He called to his chamberlain, who quickly appeared,  
 And bade him get him his gear, and gird his good steed,  
 And he sets about briskly to bring in his arms,  
 And makes ready his master in manner most fit.  
 First he clad him in his clothes, to keep out the cold, 2015  
 And then his other harness, made handsome anew,  
 His plate-armor of proof, polished with pains,  
 The rings of his rich mail rid of their rust,  
 And all was fresh as at first, and for this he gave thanks  
 indeed. 2020

With pride he wears each piece,  
 New-furbished for his need:  
 No gayer from here to Greece;  
 He bids them bring his steed.

In his richest raiment he robed himself then: 2025  
 His crested coat-armor, close-stitched with craft,  
 With stones of strange virtue on silk velvet set;  
 All bound with embroidery on borders and seams  
 And lined warmly and well with furs of the best.  
 Yet he left not his love-gift, the lady's girdle; 2030  
 Gawain, for his own good, forgot not that:  
 When the bright sword was belted and bound on his haunches,  
 Then twice with that token he twined him about.  
 Sweetly did he swathe him in that swatch of silk,  
 That girdle of green so goodly to see, 2035  
 That against the gay red showed gorgeous bright.  
 Yet he wore not for its wealth that wondrous girdle,  
 Nor pride in its pendants, though polished they were,  
 Though glittering gold gleamed at the tips,  
 But to keep himself safe when consent he must 2040  
 To endure a deadly dint, and all defense  
 denied.

And now the bold knight came  
 Into the courtyard wide;  
 That folk of worthy fame 2045  
 He thanks on every side.

Then was Gringolet girt, that was great and huge,  
 And had sojourned safe and sound, and savored his fare;  
 He pawed the earth in his pride, that princely steed.  
 The good knight draws near him and notes well his look, 2050  
 And says sagely to himself, and soberly swears,  
 "Here is a household in hall that upholds the right!"

The man that maintains it, may happiness be his!  
Likewise the dear lady, may love betide her!  
If thus they in charity cherish a guest 2055  
That are honored here on earth, may they have His reward  
That reigns high in heaven—and also you all;  
And were I to live in this land but a little while,  
I should willingly reward you, and well, if I might.”  
Then he steps into the stirrup and bestrides his mount; 2060  
His shield is shown forth; on his shoulder he casts it;  
Strikes the side of his steed with his steel spurs,  
And he starts across the stones, nor stands any longer

to prance.  
On horseback was the swain 2065  
That bore his spear and lance;  
“May Christ this house maintain  
And guard it from mischance!”

The bridge was brought down, and the broad gates  
Unbarred and carried back upon both sides; 2070  
He commended him to Christ, and crossed over the planks;  
Praised the noble porter, who prayed on his knees  
That God save Sir Gawain, and bade him good day,  
And went on his way alone with the man  
That was to lead him ere long to that luckless place 2075  
Where the dolorous dint must be dealt him at last.  
Under bare boughs they ride, where steep banks rise,  
Over high cliffs they climb, where cold snow clings;  
The heavens held aloof, but heavy thereunder  
Mist mantled the moors, moved on the slopes. 2080  
Each hill had a hat, a huge cape of cloud;  
Brooks bubbled and broke over broken rocks,  
Flashing in freshets that waterfalls fed.  
Roundabout was the road that ran through the wood  
Till the sun at that season was soon to rise, 2085  
that day.

They were on a hilltop high;  
The white snow round them lay;  
The man that rode nearby  
Now bade his master stay. 2090

“For I have seen you here safe at the set time,  
And now you are not far from that notable place  
That you have sought for so long with such special pains.  
But this I say for certain, since I know you, sir knight,  
And have your good at heart, and hold you dear— 2095  
Would you heed well my words, it were worth your while—  
You are rushing into risks that you reck not of:  
There is a villain in yon valley, the veriest on earth,  
For he is rugged and rude, and ready with his fists,  
And most immense in his mold of mortals alive, 2100  
And his body bigger than the best four

That are in Arthur's house, Hector <sup>2</sup> or any.  
 He gets his grim way at the Green Chapel;  
 None passes by that place so proud in his arms  
 That he does not dash him down with his deadly blows, 2105  
 For he is heartless wholly, and heedless of right,  
 For be it chaplain or churl that by the Chapel rides,  
 Monk or mass-priest or any man else,  
 He would as soon strike him dead as stand on two feet.  
 Wherefore I say, just as certain as you sit there astride, 2110  
 You cannot but be killed, if his counsel holds,  
 For he would trounce you in a trice, had you twenty lives  
 for sale.

He has lived long in this land  
 And dealt out deadly bale; 2115  
 Against his heavy hand  
 Your power cannot prevail.

"And so, good Sir Gawain, let the grim man be;  
 Go off by some other road, in God's own name!  
 Leave by some other land, for the love of Christ, 2120  
 And I shall get me home again, and give you my word  
 That I shall swear by God's self and the saints above,  
 By heaven and by my halidom <sup>3</sup> and other oaths more,  
 To conceal this day's deed, nor say to a soul  
 That ever you fled for fear from any that I knew." 2125  
 "Many thanks!" said the other man—and demurring he speaks—  
 "Fair fortune befall you for your friendly words!  
 And conceal this day's deed I doubt not you would,  
 But though you never told the tale, if I turned back now,  
 Forsook this place for fear, and fled, as you say, 2130  
 I were a caitiff coward; I could not be excused.  
 But I must to the Chapel to chance my luck  
 And say to that same man such words as I please,  
 Befall what may befall through Fortune's will  
 or whim. 2135

Though he be a quarrelsome knave  
 With a cudgel great and grim,  
 The Lord is strong to save:  
 His servants trust in Him."

"Marry," said the man, "since you tell me so much, 2140  
 And I see you are set to seek your own harm,  
 If you crave a quick death, let me keep you no longer!  
 Put your helm on your head, your hand on your lance,  
 And ride the narrow road down yon rocky slope  
 Till it brings you to the bottom of the broad valley. 2145  
 Then look a little ahead, on your left hand,  
 And you will soon see before you that self-same Chapel,  
 And the man of great might that is master there.

2. Either the Trojan hero or one of Arthur's knights.

3. Holiness or, more likely, patron saints.

Now goodbye in God's name, Gawain the noble!  
For all the world's wealth I would not stay here, 2150  
Or go with you in this wood one footstep further!"  
He tarried no more to talk, but turned his bridle,  
Hit his horse with his heels as hard as he might,  
Leaves the knight alone, and off like the wind  
goes leaping. 2155

“By God,” said Gawain then,  
“I shall not give way to weeping;  
God's will be done, amen!  
I commend me to His keeping.”

He puts his heels to his horse, and picks up the path; 2160  
Goes in beside a grove where the ground is steep,  
Rides down the rough slope right to the valley;  
And then he looked a little about him—the landscape was wild,  
And not a soul to be seen, nor sign of a dwelling,  
But high banks on either hand hemmed it about, 2165  
With many a ragged rock and rough-hewn crag;  
The skies seemed scored by the scowling peaks.

Then he halted his horse, and hove there a space,  
And sought on every side for a sight of the Chapel,  
But no such place appeared, which puzzled him sore, 2170  
Yet he saw some way off what seemed like a mound,  
A hillock high and broad, hard by the water,  
Where the stream fell in foam down the face of the steep  
And bubbled as if it boiled on its bed below.

The knight urges his horse, and heads for the knoll; 2175  
Leaps lightly to earth; loops well the rein  
Of his steed to a stout branch, and stations him there.  
He strides straight to the mound, and strolls all about,  
Much wondering what it was, but no whit the wiser;  
It had a hole at one end, and on either side, 2180  
And was covered with coarse grass in clumps all without,  
And hollow all within, like some old cave,  
Or a crevice of an old crag—he could not discern  
aright.

“Can this be the Chapel Green? 2185  
Alack!” said the man, “Here might  
The devil himself be seen  
Saying matins at black midnight!”

“Now by heaven,” said he, “it is bleak hereabouts;  
This prayer-house is hideous, half-covered with grass! 2190  
Well may the grim man mantled in green  
Hold here his orisons, in hell's own style!  
Now I feel it is the Fiend, in my five wits,  
That has tempted me to this tryst, to take my life;  
This is a Chapel of mischance, may the mischief take it!  
As accursed a country church as I came upon ever!” 2195

With his helm on his head, his lance in his hand,  
 He stalks toward the steep wall of that strange house.  
 Then he heard, on the hill, behind a hard rock,  
 Beyond the brook, from the bank, a most barbarous din: 2200  
 Lord! it clattered in the cliff fit to cleave it in two,  
 As one upon a grindstone ground a great scythe!  
 Lord! it whirred like a mill-wheel whirling about!  
 Lord! it echoed loud and long, lamentable to hear!  
 Then "By heaven," said the bold knight, "That business  
 up there 2205  
 Is arranged for my arrival, or else I am much  
 misled.

Let God work! Ah me!  
 All hope of help has fled!  
 Forfeit my life may be 2210  
 But noise I do not dread."

Then he listened no longer, but loudly he called,  
 "Who has power in this place, high parley to hold?  
 For none greets Sir Gawain, or gives him good day;  
 If any would a word with him, let him walk forth 2215  
 And speak now or never, to speed his affairs."  
 "Abide," said one on the bank above over his head,  
 "And what I promised you once shall straightway be given."  
 Yet he staved not his grindstone, nor stinted its noise,  
 But worked awhile at his whetting before he would rest, 2220  
 And then he comes around a crag, from a cave in the rocks,  
 Hurling out of hiding with a hateful weapon,  
 A Danish <sup>4</sup> ax devised for that day's deed,  
 With a broad blade and bright, bent in a curve,  
 Filed to a fine edge—four feet it measured 2225  
 By the length of the lace that was looped round the haft.  
 And in form as at first, the fellow all green,  
 His lordly face and his legs, his locks and his beard,  
 Save that firm upon two feet forward he strides,  
 Sets a hand on the ax-head, the haft to the earth; 2230  
 When he came to the cold stream, and cared not to wade,  
 He vaults over on his ax, and advances amain  
 On a broad bank of snow, overbearing and brisk  
 of mood.

Little did the knight incline 2235  
 When face to face they stood;  
 Said the other man, "Friend mine,  
 It seems your word holds good!"

"God love you, Sir Gawain!" said the Green Knight then,  
 "And well met this morning, man, at my place! 2240  
 And you have followed me faithfully and found me betimes,  
 And on the business between us we both are agreed:

4. I.e., long-bladed.

Twelve months ago today you took what was yours,  
And you at this New Year must yield me the same.  
And we have met in these mountains, remote from all eyes: 2245

There is none here to halt us or hinder our sport;  
Unhasp your high helm, and have here your wages;  
Make no more demur than I did myself  
When you hacked off my head with one hard blow."

"No, by God," said Sir Gawain, "that granted me life, 2250  
I shall grudge not the guerdon, grim though it prove;  
Bestow but one stroke, and I shall stand still,  
And you may lay on as you like till the last of my part  
be paid."

He proffered, with good grace, 2255  
His bare neck to the blade,  
And feigned a cheerful face:  
He scorned to seem afraid.

Then the grim man in green gathers his strength,  
Heaves high the heavy ax to hit him the blow. 2260

With all the force in his frame he fetches it aloft,  
With a grimace as grim as he would grind him to bits;  
Had the blow he bestowed been as big as he threatened,  
A good knight and gallant had gone to his grave.

But Gawain at the great ax glanced up aside 2265  
As down it descended with death-dealing force,  
And his shoulders shrank a little from the sharp iron.

Abruptly the brawny man breaks off the stroke,  
And then reproved with proud words that prince among knights.

"You are not Gawain the glorious," the green man said, 2270  
"That never fell back on field in the face of the foe,

And now you flee for fear, and have felt no harm:  
Such news of that knight I never heard yet!

I moved not a muscle when you made to strike,  
Nor caviled at the cut in King Arthur's house; 2275

My head fell to my feet, yet steadfast I stood,  
And you, all unharmed, are wholly dismayed—

Wherefore the better man I, by all odds,  
must be."

Said Gawain, "Strike once more; 2280  
I shall neither flinch nor flee;

But if my head falls to the floor  
There is no mending me!"

"But go on, man, in God's name, and get to the point!  
Deliver me my destiny, and do it out of hand, 2285

For I shall stand to the stroke and stir not an inch  
Till your ax has hit home—on my honor I swear it!"

"Have at thee then!" said the other, and heaves it aloft,  
And glares down as grimly as he had gone mad.

He made a mighty feint, but marred not his hide; 2290

Withdrew the ax adroitly before it did damage.  
 Gawain gave no ground, nor glanced up aside,  
 But stood still as a stone, or else a stout stump  
 That is held in hard earth by a hundred roots.  
 Then merrily does he mock him, the man all in green: 2295  
 "So now you have your nerve again, I needs must strike;  
 Uphold the high knighthood that Arthur bestowed,  
 And keep your neck-bone clear, if this cut allows!"  
 Then was Gawain gripped with rage, and grimly he said,  
 "Why, thrash away, tyrant, I tire of your threats; 2300  
 You make such a scene, you must frighten yourself."  
 Said the green fellow, "In faith, so fiercely you speak  
 That I shall finish this affair, nor further grace  
 allow."

He stands prepared to strike 2305  
 And scowls with both lip and brow;  
 No marvel if the man mislike  
 Who can hope no rescue now.

He gathered up the grim ax and guided it well:  
 Let the barb at the blade's end brush the bare throat; 2310  
 He hammered down hard, yet harmed him no whit  
 Save a scratch on one side, that severed the skin;  
 The end of the hooked edge entered the flesh,  
 And a little blood lightly leapt to the earth.  
 And when the man beheld his own blood bright on the snow, 2315  
 He sprang a spear's length with feet spread wide,  
 Seized his high helm, and set it on his head,  
 Shoved before his shoulders the shield at his back,  
 Bares his trusty blade, and boldly he speaks—  
 Not since he was a babe born of his mother 2320  
 Was he once in this world one-half so blithe—  
 "Have done with your hacking—harry me no more!  
 I have borne, as behooved, one blow in this place;  
 If you make another move I shall meet it midway  
 And promptly. I promise you, pay back each blow 2325  
 with brand.

One stroke acquits me here;  
 So did our covenant stand  
 In Arthur's court last year—  
 Wherefore, sir, hold your hand!" 2330

He lowers the long ax and leans on it there,  
 Sets his arms on the head, the haft on the earth,  
 And beholds the bold knight that bides there afoot,  
 How he faces him fearless, fierce in full arms,  
 And plies him with proud words—it pleases him well. 2335  
 Then once again gaily to Gawain he calls,  
 And in a loud voice and lusty, delivers these words:  
 "Bold fellow, on this field your anger forbear!



No man has made demands here in manner uncouth,  
Nor done, save as duly determined at court. 2340

I owed you a hit and you have it; be happy therewith!  
The rest of my rights here I freely resign.  
Had I been a bit busier, a buffet, perhaps,  
I could have dealt more directly, and done you some harm.

First I flourished with a feint, in frolicsome mood, 2345  
And left your hide unhurt—and here I did well  
By the fair terms we fixed on the first night;  
And fully and faithfully you followed accord:  
Gave over all your gains as a good man should.

A second feint, sir, I assigned for the morning 2350  
You kissed my comely wife—each kiss you restored.  
For both of these there behoved but two feigned blows  
by right.

True men pay what they owe;  
No danger then in sight. 2355  
You failed at the third throw,  
So take my tap, sir knight.

“For that is my belt about you, that same braided girdle,  
My wife it was that wore it; I know well the tale,  
And the count of your kisses and your conduct too, 2360  
And the wooing of my wife—it was all my scheme!  
She made trial of a man most faultless by far

Of all that ever walked over the wide earth;  
As pearls to white peas, more precious and prized,  
So is Gawain, in good faith, to other gay knights. 2365

Yet you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there,  
But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either,  
But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame.”

The other stout knight in a study stood a long while,  
So gripped with grim rage that his great heart shook. 2370

All the blood of his body burned in his face  
As he shrank back in shame from the man’s sharp speech.  
The first words that fell from the fair knight’s lips:

“Accursed be a cowardly and covetous heart!  
In you is villainy and vice, and virtue laid low!” 2375

Then he grasps the green girdle and lets go the knot,  
Hands it over in haste, and hotly he says:

“Behold there my falsehood, ill hap betide it!  
Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life, 2380

And coveting came after, contrary both  
To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights.

Now am I faulty and false, that fearful was ever  
Of disloyalty and lies, bad luck to them both!

and greed.

I confess, knight, in this place, 2385  
Most dire is my misdeed;

Let me gain back your good grace,  
And thereafter I shall take heed.”

Then the other laughed aloud, and lightly he said,  
 "Such harm as I have had, I hold it quite healed. 2390  
 You are so fully confessed, your failings made known,  
 And bear the plain penance of the point of my blade,  
 I hold you polished as a pearl, as pure and as bright  
 As you had lived free of fault since first you were born.  
 And I give you, sir, this girdle that is gold-hemmed 2395  
 And green as my garments, that, Gawain, you may  
 Be mindful of this meeting when you mingle in throng  
 With nobles of renown—and known by this token  
 How it chanced at the Green Chapel, to chivalrous knights.  
 And you shall in this New Year come yet again 2400  
 And we shall finish out our feast in my fair hall,  
 with cheer."

He urged the knight to stay,  
 And said, "With my wife so dear  
 We shall see you friends this day, 2405  
 Whose enmity touched you near."

"Indeed," said the doughty knight, and doffed his high helm,  
 And held it in his hands as he offered his thanks,  
 "I have lingered long enough—may good luck be yours,  
 And He reward you well that all worship bestows! 2410  
 And commend me to that comely one, your courteous wife,  
 Both herself and that other, my honoured ladies,  
 That have trapped their true knight in their trammels so quaint.  
 But if a dullard should dote, deem it no wonder,  
 And through the wiles of a woman be wooed into sorrow, 2415  
 For so was Adam by one, when the world began,  
 And Solomon by many more, and Samson the mighty—  
 Delilah was his doom, and David thereafter  
 Was beguiled by Bathsheba, and bore much distress;  
 Now these were vexed by their devices—'twere a very joy 2420  
 Could one but learn to love, and believe them not.  
 For these were proud princes, most prosperous of old,  
 Past all lovers lucky, that languished under heaven,  
 bemused.

And one and all fell prey 2425  
 To women that they had used;  
 If I be led astray,  
 Methinks I may be excused.

"But your girdle, God love you! I gladly shall take  
 And be pleased to possess, not for the pure gold, 2430  
 Nor the bright belt itself, nor the beauteous pendants,  
 Nor for wealth, nor worldly state, nor workmanship fine,  
 But a sign of excess it shall seem oftentimes  
 When I ride in renown, and remember with shame  
 The faults and the frailty of the flesh perverse, 2435  
 How its tenderness entices the foul taint of sin;  
 And so when praise and high prowess have pleased my heart,  
 A look at this love-lace will lower my pride.

But one thing would I learn, if you were not loath,  
Since you are lord of yonder land where I have long sojourned 2440  
With honor in your house—may you have His reward  
That upholds all the heavens, highest on throne!  
How runs your right name?—and let the rest go.”  
“That shall I give you gladly,” said the Green Knight then;  
“Bercilak de Hautdesert this barony I hold, 2445  
Through the might of Morgan le Faye,<sup>5</sup> that lodges at my house,  
By subtleties of science and sorcerers’ arts,  
The mistress of Merlin,<sup>6</sup> she has caught many a man,  
For sweet love in secret she shared sometime  
With that wizard, that knows well each one of your knights 2450  
and you.

Morgan the Goddess, she,  
So styled by title true;  
None holds so high degree  
That her arts cannot subdue. 2455

“She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall,  
To assay, if such it were, the surfeit of pride  
That is rumored of the retinue of the Round Table.  
She put this shape upon me to puzzle your wits,  
To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death: 2460  
With awe of that elvish man that eerily spoke  
With his head in his hand before the high table.  
She was with my wife at home, that old withered lady,  
Your own aunt<sup>7</sup> is she, Arthur’s half-sister,  
The Duchess’ daughter of Tintagel, that dear King Uther 2465  
Got Arthur on after, that honored is now.  
And therefore, good friend, come feast with your aunt;  
Make merry in my house; my men hold you dear,  
And I wish you as well, sir, with all my heart,  
As any mortal man, for your matchless faith.” 2470  
But the knight said him nay, that he might by no means.  
They clasped then and kissed, and commended each other  
To the Prince of Paradise, and parted with one  
assent.

Gawain sets out anew;  
Toward the court his course is bent; 2475  
And the knight all green in hue,  
Wheresoever he wished, he went.

Wild ways in the world our worthy knight rides  
On Gringolet, that by grace had been granted his life. 2480  
He harbored often in houses, and often abroad,  
And with many valiant adventures verily he met  
That I shall not take time to tell in this story.

5. Arthur’s half-sister, an enchantress who sometimes abetted him, sometimes made trouble for him.

6. The wise magician who had helped Arthur become king.

7. Morgan was the daughter of Igraine, Duchess of Tintagel, and her husband the Duke; Igraine conceived Arthur when his father Uther lay with her through one of Merlin’s trickeries.

The hurt was whole that he had had in his neck,  
 And the bright green belt on his body he bore, 2485  
 Oblique, like a baldric, bound at his side,  
 Below his left shoulder, laced in a knot,  
 In betokening of the blame he had borne for his fault;  
 And so to court in due course he comes safe and sound.  
 Bliss abounded in hall when the high-born heard 2490  
 That good Gawain was come; glad tidings they thought it.  
 The king kisses the knight, and the queen as well,  
 And many a comrade came to clasp him in arms,  
 And eagerly they asked, and awesomely he told,  
 Confessed all his cares and discomfitures many, 2495  
 How it chanced at the Chapel, what cheer made the knight,  
 The love of the lady, the green lace at last.  
 The nick on his neck he naked displayed  
 That he got in his disgrace at the Green Knight's hands,  
 alone. 2500

With rage in heart he speaks,  
 And grieves with many a groan;  
 The blood burns in his cheeks  
 For shame at what must be shown.

"Behold, sir," said he, and handles the belt, 2505  
 "This is the blazon of the blemish that I bear on my neck;  
 This is the sign of sore loss that I have suffered there  
 For the cowardice and coveting that I came to there;  
 This is the badge of false faith that I was found in there,  
 And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last. 2510  
 For one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit,  
 For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore."  
 The king comforts the knight, and the court all together  
 Agree with gay laughter and gracious intent  
 That the lords and the ladies belonging to the Table, 2515  
 Each brother of that band, a baldric should have,  
 A belt borne oblique, of a bright green,  
 To be worn with one accord for that worthy's sake.  
 So that was taken as a token by the Table Round,  
 And he honored that had it, evermore after, 2520  
 As the best book of knighthood bids it be known.  
 In the old days of Arthur this happening befell;  
 The books of Brutus' deeds bear witness thereto  
 Since Brutus, the bold knight, embarked for this land  
 After the siege ceased at Troy and the city fared 2525  
 amiss.

Many such, ere we were born,  
 Have befallen here, ere this.  
 May He that was crowned with thorn  
 Bring all men to His bliss! Amen. 2530

*Hony Soyt Qui Mal Pense* <sup>8</sup>

8. "Shame be to the man who has evil in his mind." This is the motto of the Order of the Garter, founded ca. 1350:

apparently a copyist of the poem associated this order with the one founded to honor Gawain.

## PEARL

(ca. 1375-1400)

*Pearl* is preserved in the same manuscript as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and is generally believed to have been written by the same poet. Like *Piers Plowman*, it is a dream vision concerning love and, again like *Piers Plowman*, it purports to be written by a Dreamer who needs to learn in his heart Christian truths that he already knows in his head. In *Pearl* the narrator's grief for the loss of a jewel is so extravagant as to suggest that the pearl he speaks of must stand for something more irreplaceable than a mere ornament. Yet it is only gradually that we come to realize that the pearl-be-decked maiden he meets in his dream is the thing he has lost, and that on earth she was his infant daughter—the adult form in which he sees her is of course “spiritual.” It is her mission to explain to him that his grief for her death is not only extravagant but according to Christian principles wrong, for she has become a Bride of the Lamb of God in a heaven whose physical characteristics are those of the New Jerusalem described by St. John in the Book of Revelation. She resolves the Dreamer's doubts about infant salvation—whether those who die in infancy can attain heaven—which apparently increased his grief for her death. But it is not without a struggle—and some impatience—that she manages to do this, for the Dreamer remains stubbornly earth-bound: he cannot easily accept the fact that his daughter has become so exalted in heaven, and fears that she has misbehaved, pushing herself forward too aggressively. He has trouble comprehending the paradox that in heaven varying degrees of honor and total equality exist simultaneously, and one feels that even after his dream he will find it hard to accept in his heart Pearl's doctrine that the pearl he ought to seek is not herself but the one the merchant in Matthew gave all his wealth for—the kingdom of heaven. The vision he is granted at the end of the poem is broken off when he tries to cross the stream that separates him from the Heavenly City because he is eager to rejoin his Pearl, whom he sees among the 144,000 virgins (as described by St. John) before the throne of the Lamb. He awakens from his dream a chastened and perhaps more patient man, who, like Langland's Will, has been taught that he must apprehend more profoundly what he already knew.

Technically the poem imitates a perfectly rounded gem. It consists of twenty sections, all but one of which contain five twelve-line stanzas with the inordinately difficult rhyme scheme *abababbcbc*, not unexampled in Middle English poetry but never elsewhere attempted in so long a poem. Within the sections, the last word of each stanza is the same (in form if not in meaning) and is repeated in the first line of the following stanza, and this word also appears in the first line of the succeeding section. The chain thus formed is made whole by the fact that the last lines of the poem echo, with expanded meaning, the first: Perfection of form is broken only by Section XV, which contains six instead of five stanzas, so that the poem is not of the round number of 1,200 lines, but of 1,212. Perhaps the poet intentionally broke the pattern because he felt that any jewel of man's making

must be imperfect; or perhaps he was responding to the fact that the multiple  $12 \times 12 = 144$ , and that 144 is a reflection of the 144,000 virgins in the Book of Revelation that provides much of the imaginative stimulus for the poem.

## Pearl<sup>1</sup>

### I

#### 1

Pearl, that a prince is well content  
 To give a circle of gold to wear,  
 Boldly I say, all orient  
 Brought forth none precious like to her;  
 So comely in every ornament, 5  
 So slender her sides, so smooth they were,  
 Ever my mind was bound and bent  
 To set her apart without a peer.  
 In a garden of herbs I lost my dear;  
 Through grass to ground away it shot; 10  
 Now, lovesick, the heavy loss I bear  
 Of that secret pearl without a spot.

#### 2

Since in that spot it sped from me so,  
 Often I watched and wished for that grace 15  
 That once was wont to banish woe  
 And bless with brightness all my days;  
 That clutches my heart in cruel throe  
 And causes my blood to rage and race,  
 Yet sweeter songs could no man know  
 Than silence taught my ear to trace; 20  
 And many there came, to think of her face  
 With cover of clay so coldly fraught:  
 O earth, you mar a gem past praise,  
 My secret pearl without a spot.

#### 3

That spot with spice must spring and spread 25  
 Where riches rotted in narrow room;  
 Blossoms white and blue and red  
 Lift now alight in blaze of noon;  
 Flower and fruit could never fade  
 Where pearl plunged deep in earthen tomb, 30  
 For the seed must die to bear the blade  
 That the wheat may be brought to harvest home.<sup>2</sup>

1. The verse translation, which follows the intricate pattern of the original, is

by Marie Borroff (1976).  
 2. John xii.24.

Good out of good to all and some:  
 Such a seed could never have come to naught  
 Nor spice in splendor spare to bloom 35  
 From that precious pearl without a spot.

4  
 To that especial spot I hied  
 And entered that same garden green  
 In August at a festive tide  
 When corn is cut with scythe-edge keen. 40  
 On the mound where pearl went tumbling wide,  
 Leaf vied with leaf in shade and sheen:  
 Gillyflower and ginger on every side  
 And peonies peerless blooming between.  
 But fairer yet, and all unseen, 45  
 Was the fragrance that my senses sought;  
 There, I know, is the dear demesne  
 Of my precious pearl without a spot.

5  
 Before that spot with head inclined  
 I stretched my hand in stark despair; 50  
 My heart lamented, deaf and blind,  
 Though reason reconciled my care.  
 I mourned my pearl so close confined  
 With thoughts in throng contending there;  
 Comfort of Christ might come to mind 55  
 But wretched will would not forbear.  
 I fell upon that flower-bed fair;  
 Such odor seized my brain distraught  
 I slipped into slumber unaware,  
 On that precious pearl without a spot. 60

## II

1  
 My soul forsook that spot in space  
 And left my body on earth to bide.  
 My spirit sped, by God's good grace,  
 On a quest where marvels multiplied.  
 I knew not where in the world it was, 65  
 But I saw I was set where cliffs divide;  
 A forest flourished in that place  
 Where many rich rocks might be descried.  
 The glory that flashed there far and wide  
 Eye could not credit, nor mind invent; 70  
 Pure cloth-of-gold were pale beside  
 Such rich and rare embellishment.

2  
 Embellished were those hills in view  
 With crystal cliffs as clear as day  
 And groves of trees with boles as blue 75

As indigo silks of rich assay;  
 The leaves, like silver burnished new,  
 Slide rustling rife on every spray;  
 As shifts of cloud let sunshine through,  
 They shot forth light in shimmering play. 80  
 The gravelstones that strewed the way  
 Were precious pearls of orient;  
 The beams of the sun but blind and gray  
 Beside such bright embellishment.

## 3

Amid those hills embellished bright 85  
 My sorrows fled in full retreat;  
 Fragrance of fruits with great delight  
 Filled me like food that mortals eat.  
 Birds of all colors fanned in flight  
 Their iridescent pinions fleet, 90  
 But lute or lyre, by craft or sleight,  
 Could not make music half so sweet,  
 For while in time their wings they beat  
 In glad accord their voices blent;  
 With more of mirth might no man meet 95  
 Than hear each brave embellishment.

## 4

So all embellished was the land  
 Where Fortune bears me on my way;  
 No tongue is worthy to command  
 Fit words those splendors to display. 100  
 I walked along with bliss at hand;  
 No slope so steep to make me stay;  
 The further, the fairer the pear trees stand,  
 The spice-plants spread, the blossoms sway,  
 And hedgerows run by banks as gay 105  
 As glittering golden filament;  
 I came to the shore of a waterway:  
 Dear God, what brave embellishment!

## 5

Embellishing those waters deep,  
 Banks of pure beryl greet my gaze; 110  
 Sweetly the eddies swirl and sweep  
 With a rest and a rush in murmuring phrase;  
 Stones in the stream their colors steep,  
 Gleaming like glass where sunbeam strays,  
 As stars, while men of the marshlands sleep, 115  
 Flash in winter from frosty space;  
 For every one was a gem to praise,  
 A sapphire or emerald opulent,  
 That seemed to set the pool ablaze,  
 So brilliant their embellishment. 120



III

1

Embellished with such wondrous grace  
 Were wood and water and shining plain,  
 My pleasures multiplied apace,  
 Conquered my cares, dispelled my pain.  
 By the brink of a river that runs a race 125  
 Blissful I walked with busy brain;  
 The more I explored that plashy place  
 The greater strength did gladness gain.  
 As proof of Fortune's purpose plain  
 Makes a man's heart to sink or soar, 130  
 He whom she plies with bliss or bane  
 Of what he draws is dealt still more.

2

More of bliss was there to prize  
 Than ever my tongue could testify,  
 For earthly heart could not suffice 135  
 To sustain one tenth of that pure joy.  
 It could not be but Paradise  
 Lay beyond those noble banks, thought I,  
 And the stream itself seemed a device,  
 A mark to know a boundary by. 140  
 Those peerless precincts to espy  
 I need but gain the further shore;  
 But I dared not wade, for the water ran high,  
 And longing mastered me more and more.

3

More than ever and ever the more 145  
 To cross that river was all my care,  
 For lovely though this landscape were,  
 What lay beyond was past compare.  
 I stared about, scanning the shore  
 For a ford to afford me thoroughfare, 150  
 But dangers direr than before  
 Appeared, the more I wandered there.  
 And still it seemed I should not forbear  
 For dangers, with delights in store;  
 But now was broached a new affair 155  
 My mind was moved by, more and more.

4

More marvels now amazed me quite:  
 Beyond that stream, strange to behold,  
 There rose a cliff of crystal bright  
 With resplendent rays all aureoled. 160  
 At the foot was seated in plain sight  
 A maiden child of mortal mold,

A gracious lady gowned in white;  
 I knew her well, I had seen her of old.  
 As fine-spun floss of burnished gold, 165  
 So shone she, peerless, as of yore;  
 I gazed on her with joy untold,  
 The longer, I knew her more and more.

## 5

The more I mused on that fair face,  
 The person of that most precious one, 170  
 Such gladness grew in my heart by grace  
 As little before had been, or none.  
 I longed to call across that space  
 But found my power of speech had flown;  
 To meet her in so strange a place— 175  
 Such a sight, in truth, might shock or stun!  
 Then raised she up her brow, that shone  
 All ivory pale on that far shore,  
 That stabbed my heart to look upon  
 And ever the longer, more and more. 180

## IV

## 1

More dread diminished my delight;  
 I stood stock-still and dared not call.  
 With eyes wide open and mouth shut tight  
 I hove there tame as hawk in hall.  
 Unearthly, I knew, must be that plight; 185  
 I dreaded much what might befall,  
 Lest she I viewed should vanish quite  
 And leave me there to stare and stall.  
 That slender one, so smooth, so small,  
 Unblemished, void of every vice, 190  
 Rose up in robes imperial,  
 A precious pearl in pearls of price.

## 2

Pearls of price in ample store  
 Were there to see by grace divine  
 As she, approaching, shone on shore  
 Like fleurs-de-lys<sup>3</sup> to kings condign. 195  
 Her surcoat of white linen pure<sup>4</sup>  
 Had open sides of fair design,  
 And filigree on bands it bore  
 Where lavish pearls their luster join, 200  
 And lappets large, with double line  
 Of pearls set round in that same guise;  
 Her gown of that same linen fine,  
 And all bedecked with pearls of price.

3. Flower of the iris.

4. See Revelation xix.7-8 (cf. VII., 5.5-6). "Surcoat": outer coat.

## 3

Her priceless crown with pearls alone 205  
 Was set, in fashion fit and fair;  
 High pinnacles upon it shone,  
 And florets carved with craft and care.  
 Other headdress had she none  
 To frame her ivory forehead bare; 210  
 As earl or duke by royal throne,  
 So sage she seemed, so grave her air.  
 About her shoulders fell her hair  
 Like gold spun fine by artifice,  
 Whose deepest hue yet had a share 215  
 Of pallor pure of pearls of price.

## 4

Pearls of price in rows ornate  
 On hem, on side, on wristband rest;  
 No other gem could suit her state  
 Who was in white so richly dressed. 220  
 But one pure pearl, a wonder great,  
 Was set secure upon her breast;  
 A man might ponder long and late  
 Ere its full worth were well assessed.  
 I think no tongue could ever attest 225  
 A discourteous thought of that device,  
 So white it was, so wholly blessed,  
 And proudest placed of pearls of price.

## 5

In pearls of price she moved at ease  
 Toward the rim of the river that flowed so free; 230  
 No gladder man from here to Greece  
 Than I, that blessed sight to see.  
 She was nearer my heart than aunt or niece:  
 So much the more my joy must be;  
 She proffered parley in sign of peace, 235  
 Bowed womanlike with bended knee,  
 Took off her crown of high degree  
 And bade me welcome with courteous voice;  
 That I was born O well for me  
 To greet that girl in pearls of price. 240

## V

## 1

"O pearl," said I, "in pearls of price,  
 Are you my pearl come back again,  
 Lost and lamented with desolate sighs  
 In darkest night, alone and in vain?  
 Since you slipped to ground where grasses rise 245  
 I wander pensive, oppressed with pain,  
 And you in the bliss of Paradise,  
 Beyond all passion and strife and strain.

What fate removed you from earth's domain  
 And left me hapless and heartsick there? 250  
 Since parting was set between us twain  
 I have been a joyless jeweler."

## 2

That jewel then with fair gems fraught  
 Lifted her face with eyes of gray,  
 Set on her crown and stood in thought, 255  
 And soberly then I heard her say,  
 "Sir, your tale is told for naught,  
 To say your pearl has gone away  
 That is closed in a coffer so cunningly wrought  
 As this same garden green and gay, 260  
 And here forever in joy to stay  
 Where lack nor loss can never come near;  
 Here were a casket fit to display  
 A prize for a proper jeweler.

## 3

"But, jeweler, if your mind is bound 265  
 To mourn for a gem in solitude,  
 Your care has set you a course unsound,  
 And a cause of a moment maddens your mood;  
 You lost a rose that grew in the ground:  
 A flower that fails and is not renewed, 270  
 But such is the coffer closing it round,  
 With the worth of a pearl it is now imbued.  
 And fate, you say, has robbed you of good,  
 That rendered you profit free and clear;  
 You blame a blessing misunderstood: 275  
 You are no proper jeweler."

## 4

A jewel to me then was this guest  
 And jewels her gentle sayings were.  
 "O blissful one," I said, "and best,  
 You have healed me wholly of heartache here! 280  
 To be excused I make request:  
 My pearl was away, I knew not where;  
 Now I have found it, now I shall rest,  
 And live with it ever, and make good cheer,  
 And love the Lord and his laws revere 285  
 That brought me the blissful sight of her.  
 Let me once cross and behold you near,  
 And I am a joyful jeweler!"

## 5

"Jeweler," said that gem at this,  
 "Such mockery comes of mortal pride! 290  
 Most ill-advised your answer is  
 And errors grave your thoughts misguide.  
 Three statements you have made amiss;

Your words from your wit have wandered wide;  
 You think me set in this vale of bliss 295  
 For so you see me, the brook beside;  
 The second, you say you shall abide  
 With me in this far country here;  
 The third, to cross this deep divide,  
 Behooves no joyful jeweler. 300

VI

1

“I hold that jeweler little to praise  
 Who believes no more than meets the eye,  
 And little courtesy he displays  
 Who doubts the word of the Lord on high 305  
 That faithfully pledged your flesh to raise  
 Though Fortune made it fail and die;  
 They twist the sense of his words and ways  
 Who believe what they see, and else deny;  
 And that is pride and obstinacy  
 And ill accords with honest intent, 310  
 To think each tale must be a lie  
 Except his reason give assent.

2

“Say, do you not, dissenting, strive  
 Against God’s will that all should uphold?  
 Here in this land you mean to live— 315  
 You might ask leave to make so bold!  
 Nor can you with such ease contrive  
 To cross this water deep and cold;  
 Your body fair, with senses five,  
 Must first sink down in mire and mold, 320  
 For in Eden garden, in days of old,  
 Our fathers’ father his life misspent;  
 Each man must suffer a death foretold  
 Ere God to this crossing give consent.”

3

“Consent,” said I, “to that hard fate 325  
 And you have cleft my heart in twain.  
 That which I lost I found but late—  
 And must I now forgo it again?  
 Why must I meet it and miss it straight?  
 My precious pearl has doubled my pain. 330  
 What use is treasure in worldly state  
 If a man must lose it and mourn in vain?  
 Now little I reckon what trials remain,  
 What bitter exile and banishment,  
 For Fortune is bound to be my bane 335  
 And suffer I must by her consent.”

## 4

"Such dire presentiments of distress,"  
 Said she, "I cannot comprehend;  
 But grief for a loss that matters less  
 Makes many miss what might amend. 340  
 Better to cross yourself, and bless  
 The name of the Lord, whatever he send;  
 No good can come of your willfulness;  
 Who bears bad luck must learn to bend.  
 Though like a stricken doe, my friend, 345  
 You plunge and bray, with loud lament,  
 This way and that, yet in the end  
 As he decrees, you must consent.

## 5

"Dissent, indict him through the years,  
 His step stirs not one inch astray. 350  
 No tittle is gained for all your tears,  
 Though you should grieve and never be gay.  
 Abate your bluster, be not so fierce,  
 And seek his grace as soon as you may,  
 For prayer has power to bite and pierce 355  
 And call compassion into play.  
 His mercy can wipe your tears away,  
 Redeem your loss, restore content,  
 But, grudge or be glad, agree or gainsay,  
 All lies with him to give consent." 360

## VII

## 1

Then I assented, answering in dread,  
 "Let not my Lord be wrathful here  
 Though blindly I rave, with speech ill-spiced;  
 Mourning had made me mad, or near.  
 As water flows from a fountainhead 365  
 I cast myself in his mercy clear;  
 Heap no reproaches on my head  
 Though I should stray, my dearest dear,  
 But speak in charity and good cheer;  
 Be merciful, remembering this: 370  
 You gave me a heavy grief to bear,  
 Who once were ground of all my bliss.

## 2

"My bliss you have been and bitterest woe;  
 The grief was the greater as time ran on;  
 Since last I looked for you high and low 375  
 I could not tell where my pearl had gone.  
 I rejoice in it now as long ago,  
 And when we parted we were as one;  
 God forbid I should vex you so—

We meet so seldom at any milestone. 380  
 Your courtesy is second to none;  
 I am of earth, and speak amiss,  
 But the mercy of Christ and Mary and John,<sup>5</sup>  
 These are the ground of all my bliss.

3

"I see you set in bliss profound, 385  
 And I afflicted, felled by fate;  
 And little you care though I am bound  
 To suffer harm and hardship great;  
 But since we are met upon this ground  
 I would beseech, without debate, 390  
 That in sober speech you would expound  
 The life you lead both early and late.  
 Indeed, I am glad that your estate  
 Is raised to such honor and worthiness;  
 It is my joy to contemplate 395  
 And royal road of all my bliss."

4

"Now bliss befall you!" she replied  
 In form and feature that had no peer,  
 "And welcome here to walk and bide;  
 Such words are grateful to my ear. 400  
 Headstrong hearts and arrogant pride,  
 I tell you, are wholly detested here;  
 My Lord the Lamb is loath to chide,  
 For all are meek who behold him near.  
 And when in his house you shall appear, 405  
 Be wholly devout in humbleness,  
 For that delights my Lord so dear  
 That is the ground of all my bliss."

5

"A blissful life I lead, you say;  
 You ask in what station I reside; 410  
 You know when pearl first slipped away  
 I was tender of age, by time untried.  
 But my Lord the Lamb whom all obey,  
 He took me to him to be his bride,  
 Crowned me queen in bliss to stay, 415  
 Forever and ever glorified.  
 And seized of his heritage far and wide  
 Am I, his love, being wholly his;  
 His royal rank, his praise, his pride  
 Are root and ground of all my bliss." 420

5. St. John the apostle, generally identified in the Middle Ages with the author of the Book of Revelation.

## VIII

## 1

"Oh, blissful one, can this be right?"  
 Said I, "Forgive me if I should err;  
 Are you the queen of heaven's height  
 Whom we in this world must all revere?  
 We believe in Mary, a virgin bright, 425  
 Who bore to man God's Son so dear;  
 Now who could assume her crown, by right,  
 But she in some feature fairer were?  
 Yet as none is lovely like unto her,  
 We call her Phoenix of Araby,<sup>6</sup> 430  
 Sent flawless from the artificer  
 As was our Queen of courtesy."

## 2

"Courteous Queen!" that blithe one said  
 Kneeling to ground with upturned face,  
 "Matchless Mother, most lovely Maid, 435  
 Blesséd beginner of every grace!"  
 Then rose she up, and silent stayed,  
 And spoke to me across that space:  
 "Sir, gifts are gained here, and prizes paid,  
 But none on another presumes or preys. 440  
 Empress peerless ever to praise  
 Of heaven and earth and hell is she,  
 Yet puts no man from his rightful place,  
 For she is Queen of courtesy.

## 3

"The court of the kingdom whose crown I bear 445  
 Has a property by nature and name:  
 Each who gains admittance there  
 Is king of that realm, or queen of the same,  
 And none would lessen the others' share  
 But each one, glad of the others' fame, 450  
 Would wish their crowns five times as fair,  
 Had they the power of amending them;  
 But she who bore Jesu in Bethlehem  
 Over all of us here has sovereignty,  
 And none of our number carps at that claim, 455  
 For she is Queen of courtesy.

## 4

"By courtesy, so says St. Paul,<sup>7</sup>  
 We are members of Christ in joy profound,  
 As head, arms, legs, and navel and all  
 Are parts of one person hale and sound; 460

6. A mythical Arabian bird of which there was said to be only one, which burned itself alive every five or six cen-

turies and then rose rejuvenated from its ashes.

7. I Corinthians xii.12-21, 26-27.



Likewise each Christian soul I call  
 A loyal limb of the Lord renowned;  
 Now what dispute could ever befall  
 Between two limbs in a body bound?  
 Though hand or wrist bear a golden round, 465  
 Your head will never the sornier be:  
 Just so in love is each of us crowned  
 A king or queen by courtesy."

5

"Courtesy, no doubt, there is,  
 And charity rife your ranks among; 470  
 Yet truly—take it not amiss—  
 [I cannot but think your words are wrong.]<sup>8</sup>  
 You set yourself too high in this,  
 To be crowned a queen, that was so young;  
 Why, what more honor might be his 475  
 That had lived in hardship late and long  
 And suffered pains and penance strong  
 To purchase bliss in heaven on high?  
 How might he more have thriven in throng  
 Than be crowned a king by courtesy? 480

IX

1

"That courtesy too free appears  
 If all be true as you portray;  
 You lived in our country not two years—  
 You could not please the Lord, or pray,  
 Or say 'Our Father,' or Creed rehearse— 485  
 And crowned a queen the very first day!  
 I cannot well believe my ears,  
 That God could go so far astray.  
 The style of countess, so I would say,  
 Were fair enough to attain unto, 490  
 Or a lesser rank in heaven's array,  
 But a queen! It is beyond your due."

2

"Beyond all due his bounty flows,"  
 So answered she in words benign;  
 "For all is justice that he does, 495  
 And truth is in his each design.  
 As the tale in the Gospel of Matthew goes  
 In the mass that blesses the bread and wine,  
 In parable his words propose  
 A likeness to the realm divine.<sup>9</sup> 500  
 A man possessed a vineyard fine—  
 So runs the tale in sermon true—

8. This line, omitted from the manu- script, is supplied by conjecture. 9. Matthew xx.1-16.

The time was come to tend the vine  
By tasks assigned in order due.

## 3

“The laborers duly gathered round;  
The lord rose up by daybreak bright, 505  
Sought at the marketplace, and found  
Some who would serve his turn aright.  
By the same bargain each was bound:  
Let a penny a day his pains requite; 510  
Then forth they go into his ground  
And prune and bind and put things right.  
He went back late by morning light,  
Found idle fellows not a few;  
‘Why stand you idle here in sight? 515  
Has not this day its service due?’

## 4

“ ‘Duly we came ere break of day,’  
So answered they in unison;  
‘The sun has risen and here we stay  
And look for labor and yet find none.’ 520  
‘Go to the vine; do what you may,’  
So said the lord, ‘till day is done;  
Promptly at nightfall I shall pay  
Such hire as each by right has won.’  
So at the vine they labored on, 525  
And still the lord, the long day through,  
Brought in new workmen one by one  
Till dusk approached at season due.

## 5

“When time was due of evensong,  
The sunset but one hour away, 530  
He saw there idle men in throng  
And had these sober words to say:  
‘Why stand you idle all day long?’  
None had required their help, said they.  
‘Go to the vine, young men and strong, 535  
And do as much there as you may.’  
Soon the earth grew dim and gray;  
The sun long since had sunk from view;  
He summoned them to take their pay;  
The day had passed its limit due. 540

## X

## 1

“Duly the lord, at day’s decline,  
Said to the steward, ‘Sir, proceed;  
Pay what I owe this folk of mine;  
And lest men chide me here, take heed:

Set them all in a single line,  
 Give each a penny as agreed; 545  
 Start with the last that came to the vine,  
 And let the first the last succeed.  
 And then the first began to plead;  
 Long had they toiled, they said and swore;  
 "These in an hour had done their deed; 550  
 It seems to us we should have more.

2

"More have we served, who suffered through  
 The heat of the day till evening came,  
 Than these who stayed but an hour or two, 555  
 Yet you allow them equal claim."  
 Then said the lord to one of that crew,  
 "Friend, I will not change the game;  
 Take your wage and away with you!  
 I offered a penny, to all the same; 560  
 Why begin to bicker and blame?  
 Was not our covenant set of yore?  
 Higher than covenant none should aim;  
 Why should you then ask for more?"

3

"More, am I not at liberty 565  
 To give my own as I wish to do?  
 Or have you lifted an evil eye,  
 As I am good, to none untrue?"  
 "Thus," says Christ, "shall I shift it awry:  
 The last shall be the first in the queue, 570  
 And the first the last, were he never so spry,  
 For many are called, but friends are few."  
 So poor men take their portion too,  
 Though late they came and puny they were,  
 And though they make but little ado, 575  
 The mercy of God is much the more.

4

"More of ladyship here is mine,  
 Of life in flower and never to fade,  
 Than any man in the world could win  
 By right and right alone," she said. 580  
 "Although but late I began in the vine—  
 I came at evening, as Fortune bade—  
 The lord allowed me first in the line  
 And then and there I was fully paid.  
 There were others came early and later stayed, 585  
 Who labored long and sweated sore,  
 And still their payment is delayed,  
 Shall be, perhaps, for many years more."

## 5

Then with more discourse I demurred:  
 "There seems small reason in this narration: 590  
 God's justice carries across the board  
 Or Holy Writ is prevarication!  
 In the psalter of David there stands a word  
 Admits no cavil or disputation:<sup>1</sup>  
 'You render to each his just reward, 595  
 O ruler of every dispensation!  
 Now he who all day kept his station,  
 If you to payment come in before,  
 Then the less, the more remuneration,  
 And ever alike, the less, the more.'" 600

## XI

## 1

"Of more and less," she answered straight,  
 "In the Kingdom of God, no risk obtains,  
 For each is paid at the selfsame rate  
 No matter how little or great his gains. 605  
 No niggard is our chief of state,  
 Be it soft or harsh his will ordains;  
 His gifts gush forth like a spring in spate  
 Or a stream in a gulley that runs in rains.  
 His portion is large whose prayers and pains  
 Please him who rescues when sinners call. 610  
 No bliss in heaven but he attains:  
 The grace of God is enough for all.

## 2

"Yet for all that, you stubbornly strive  
 To prove I have taken too great a fee;  
 You say I, the last to arrive, 615  
 Am not worthy so high degree.  
 When was there ever a man alive,  
 Were none so pious and pure as he,  
 Who by some transgression did not contrive  
 To forfeit the bliss of eternity? 620  
 And the older, the oftener the case must be  
 That he lapsed into sins both great and small.  
 Then mercy and grace must second his plea:  
 The grace of God is enough for all.

## 3

"But grace enough have the innocent: 625  
 When first they see the light of day  
 To the water of baptism they are sent  
 And brought to the vine without delay.  
 At once the light, its splendor spent,

1. Psalms lxi (lxi).12.

Bows down to darkness and decay; 630  
 They had done no harm ere home they went;  
 From the Master's hands they take their pay.  
 Why should he not acknowledge them, pray?  
 They were there with the rest, they came at his call—  
 Yes, and give them their hire straightway: 635  
 The grace of God is enough for all.

## 4

"It is known well enough, the human race  
 Was formed to live in pure delight.  
 Our first forefather altered that case  
 By an apple of which he took a bite. 640  
 We all were damned by that disgrace  
 To die in sorrow and desperate plight  
 And then in hell to take our place  
 And dwell there lost in eternal night.<sup>2</sup>  
 But then there came a remedy right: 645  
 Rich blood ran down rood-tree<sup>3</sup> tall  
 And with it flowed forth water bright:  
 The grace of God was enough for all.<sup>4</sup>

## 5

"Enough for all flowed from that well,  
 Blood and water plain to behold: 650  
 By the blood our souls were saved from hell  
 And the second death decreed of old.<sup>5</sup>  
 The water is baptism, truth to tell,  
 That followed the spearhead keen and cold,<sup>6</sup>  
 Old Adam's deadly guilt to dispel 655  
 That swamped us in sins a thousandfold.  
 Now all is withdrawn that ever could hold  
 Mankind from bliss, since Adam's fall,  
 And that was redeemed at a time foretold  
 And the grace of God is enough for all. 660

## XII

## 1

"Grace enough that man can have  
 Who is penitent, having sinned anew,  
 If with sorrow at heart he cry and crave  
 And perform the penance that must ensue.  
 But by right reason, that cannot rave, 665  
 The innocent ever receives his due:  
 To punish the guiltless with the knave  
 Is a plan God never was party to.  
 The guilty, by contrition true,

2. Genesis iii.17-19; Matthew xiii.41-42; Romans v.12.

3. I.e., the Cross.

4. John xix.34; Ephesians i.3-7.

5. Revelation xx.14.

6. I.e., the spear with which Christ was pierced on the Cross (see John xix.34).

Can attain to mercy requisite,  
But he that never had guile in view,  
The innocent is safe and right. 670

## 2

"I know right reason in this case  
And thereto cite authority:  
The righteous man shall see his face 675  
And the innocent bear him company.  
So in a verse the psalter says,<sup>7</sup>

'Lord, who shall climb your hill on high  
Or rest within your holy place?'  
And readily then he makes reply: 680

'Hands that did no injury,  
Heart that was always pure and light:  
There shall his steps be stayed in joy';  
The innocent is safe by right.

## 3

"The righteous also in due time,  
He shall approach that noble tor,  
Who cozens his neighbor with no crime 685  
Nor wastes his life in sin impure.  
King Solomon tells in text sublime

Of Wisdom and her honored lore;<sup>8</sup> 690

By narrow ways she guided him  
And lo! God's kingdom lay before.  
As who should say, 'Yon distant shore—  
Win it you may ere fall of night  
If you make haste'; but evermore 695  
The innocent is safe by right.

## 4

"Of the righteous man I find report  
In the psalter of David, if ever you spied it:<sup>9</sup>  
'Call not your servant, Lord, to court,  
For judgment is grim if justice guide it.' 700

And when to that seat you must resort  
Where each man's case shall be decided,  
Claim the right, you may be caught short  
By this same proof I have provided.  
But he who, scourged and sore derided, 705  
Bled on the cross through mortal spite,  
Grant that your sentence be decided  
By innocence and not by right.

## 5

"Who reads the Book of rightful fame  
May learn of it infallibly 710  
How good folk with their children came

7. Psalms xxiv (xxiii).3-4.

8. Wisdom (Apocrypha) x.9-10.

9. Psalms cxliii (cxlii).2.

To Jesus walking in Galilee.<sup>1</sup>  
 The touch of his hand they sought for them  
 For the goodness in him plain to see;  
 The disciples banned that deed with blame 715  
 And bade the children let him be.  
 But Jesus gathered them round his knee  
 And of that reprimand made light;  
 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven,' said he;  
 The innocent is safe by right. 720

## XIII

1

"Jesus on his faithful smiled  
 And said, 'God's kingdom shall be won  
 By him who seeks it as a child,  
 For other entry-right is none.'  
 Harmless, steadfast, undefiled, 725  
 Unsullied bright to gaze upon,  
 When such stand knocking, meek and mild,  
 Straightway the gate shall be undone.  
 There is the endless bliss begun  
 That the jeweler sought in earthly estate 730  
 And sold all his goods, both woven and spun,  
 To purchase a pearl immaculate.<sup>2</sup>

2

"This immaculate pearl I tell you of,  
 The jeweler gave his wealth to gain,  
 Is like the realm of heaven above;  
 The Father of all things said it plain. 735  
 No spot it bears, nor blemish rough,  
 But blithe in rondure ever to reign,  
 And of righteousness it is prize and proof:  
 Lo, here on my breast it long has lain; 740  
 Bestowed by the Lamb so cruelly slain,  
 His peace to betoken and designate;  
 I bid you turn from the world insane  
 And purchase your pearl immaculate."

3

"Immaculate pearl whom white pearls crown,  
 Who bear," said I, "the pearl of price, 745  
 Who fashioned your form? Who made your gown?  
 Oh, he that wrought it was most wise!  
 Such beauty in nature never was known;  
 Pygmalion<sup>3</sup> never painted your eyes, 750  
 Nor Aristotle,<sup>4</sup> of long renown,

1. Mark x.13-16; Luke xviii.15-17.

2. Matthew xiii.45-46.

3. A legendary Greek sculptor (statues in the Middle Ages were usually

painted)

4. The Greek philosopher, referred to here because of his work on natural history.

Discoursed of these wondrous properties;  
 Your gracious aspect, your angel guise,  
 More white than the lily, and delicate:  
 What duties high, what dignities  
 Are marked by the pearl immaculate?" 755

## 4

"My immaculate Lamb, my destiny sweet,"  
 Said she, "who can all harm repair,  
 He made me his mate in marriage meet,  
 Though once such a match unfitting were. 760  
 When I left your world of rain and sleet  
 He called me in joy to join him there:  
 'Come hither, my dove without deceit,  
 For you are spotless, past compare.'<sup>5</sup>  
 He gave me strength, he made me fair, 765  
 He crowned me a virgin consecrate,  
 And washed in his blood these robes I wear,<sup>6</sup>  
 And clad me in pearls immaculate."

## 5

"Immaculate being, bright as flame,  
 In royalties set and sanctified, 770  
 Tell me now, what is that Lamb  
 That sought you out to become his bride?  
 Over all others you pressed your claim  
 To live in honor with him allied,  
 Yet many a noble and worthy dame 775  
 For Christ's dear sake has suffered and died;  
 And you have thrust those others aside  
 And reserved for yourself that nuptial state,  
 Yourself all alone, so big with pride,  
 A matchless maid and immaculate?" 780

## XIV

## 1

"Immaculate," came her answer clear,  
 "Unblemished am I, my peers among;  
 So much I claim with honor here,  
 But matchless—there you have it wrong.  
 We all are brides of the Lamb so dear, 785  
 One hundred and forty-four thousand strong,  
 In Apocalypse the words appear  
 As John beheld it and told with tongue:<sup>7</sup>  
 Thousands on thousands, virgins young,  
 He saw on Mount Zion in sacred dream, 790  
 Arrayed for the wedding in comely throng  
 In the city called New Jerusalem.

5. Song of Solomon iv.7, v.2.

7. Revelation xiv.1.

6. Revelation vii.13-14.



## 2

"Of Jerusalem I speak perforce,  
 To tell his nature and degree,  
 My jewel dear, my joy's sole source, 795  
 My Lamb, my lord, my love, all three.  
 In the prophet Isaiah we find discourse  
 Of him and his humility,<sup>8</sup>  
 Condemned and martyred without remorse  
 And on false charges of felony, 800  
 As a sheep to the slaughter led was he,  
 As a lamb to the shearers meek and tame;  
 His lips were sealed to all inquiry  
 When Jews were his judge in Jerusalem.

## 3

"In Jerusalem my true love died,  
 Rent by rude hands with pain and woe;  
 Freely he perished for our pride,  
 And suffered our doom in mortal throe.<sup>9</sup>  
 His blessed face, or ever he died,  
 Was made to bleed by many a blow;<sup>1</sup> 810  
 For sin he set his power aside  
 Though never he sinned who suffered so.  
 For us he was beaten and bowed low  
 And racked on the rood-tree rough and grim,  
 And meek as the lamb with fleece of snow 815  
 He breathed his last in Jerusalem.

## 4

"In Jerusalem, Jordan, and Galilee,  
 When John the Baptist preached abroad,  
 The words with Isaiah well agree  
 That he said when Jesus before him stood;<sup>2</sup> 820  
 He made of him this prophecy:  
 'Steadfast as stone, O Lamb of God,  
 Who takes away the iniquity  
 That all this world has wrought in blood';  
 And he was guiltless and ever good, 825  
 Yet bore our sins and atoned for them;  
 O who can reckon his parenthood  
 Who perished for us in Jerusalem?

## 5

"In Jerusalem my lover true  
 Appeared as a lamb of purest white 830  
 In the eyes of the prophets old and new  
 For his meek mien and piteous plight.  
 The third fits well with the other two,  
 In Revelation written aright;<sup>3</sup>

8. Isaiah liii.7, 9.

9. Isaiah liii.4-5.

1. Matthew xxvi.67.

2. John i.29.

3. Revelation v.1, 6-7.

Where the saints sat round in retinue 835  
 The Apostle saw him throned in light,  
 Bearing the book with pages bright  
 And the seven seals set round the rim,  
 And all hosts trembled at that sight,  
 In hell, in earth, and Jerusalem. 840

## XV

## 1

"This Jerusalem Lamb in his array  
 Was whiter far than tongue could tell;  
 No spot or speck might on him stay,  
 His fair rich fleece did so excel. 845  
 And so each sinless soul, I say,  
 Is a worthy wife with the Lamb to dwell,  
 And though he fetch a score each day  
 No strife is stirred in our citadel,  
 But would each brought four others as well—  
 The more the merrier in blessedness! 850  
 Our love is increased as our numbers swell,  
 And honor more and never the less.

## 2

"Less of bliss none brings us here  
 Who bear the pearl upon our breast;  
 No mark of strife could ever appear 855  
 Where the precious pearl is worn for crest.  
 Our bodies lie on earthen bier,  
 And you go grieving, sore distressed,  
 But we, with knowledge full and clear,  
 See in one death all wrong redressed. 860  
 The Lamb has laid our cares to rest;  
 We partake of his table in joyfulness;  
 Each one's share of bliss is best.  
 Nor ever in honor any the less.

## 3

"Lest less you believe, incline your ear 865  
 To the Book of Revelation true:<sup>4</sup>  
 'I saw,' says John, 'the Lamb appear  
 On the Mount of Sion, all white of hue,  
 With a hundred thousand maidens dear  
 And forty-four thousand more in view; 870  
 On all their foreheads written were  
 The name of the Lamb, of his Father too.  
 But then in heaven a clamor grew,  
 Like waters running in rapid race;  
 As thunder crashes in storm-cloud blue, 875  
 Such was that sound, and nothing less.

4. Revelation xiv.1-5.

## 4

“Nevertheless, though it shouted shrill  
 And made the heavens resound again,  
 I heard them sing upon that hill  
 A new song, a most noble strain; 880  
 As harpers touch their harps with skill  
 Their voices lifted, full and plain;  
 And well they followed with a will  
 The phrases of that fair refrain.  
 Before his throne who ever shall reign 885  
 And the four beasts ranged about the dais <sup>5</sup>  
 And the solemn elders of that domain,  
 Great was their song, and grew no less.

## 5

“Nevertheless, there was none had might  
 Or for all his art might ever aspire 890  
 To sing that song, save those in white  
 Who follow the Lamb their lord and sire;  
 For they are redeemed from earth’s dark night  
 As first fruits given to God entire,  
 And joined with the Lamb on Sion’s height, 895  
 As like himself in speech and attire,  
 For never, in deed or heart’s desire,  
 Their tongues were touched with untruthfulness;  
 And none can sever that sinless choir  
 From that master immaculate, nevertheless.’ ” 900

## 6

“Never less welcome let me find,”  
 Said I, “for the queries I propose;  
 I should not tempt your noble mind  
 Whom Christ the Lord to his chamber chose.  
 I am of mire and mere mankind, 905  
 And you so rich and rare a rose,  
 And here to eternal bliss assigned  
 Where joy fails not, but forever grows.  
 Now, dame, whom simplicity’s self endows,  
 I would beseech a favor express, 910  
 And though I am rough and rude, God knows,  
 Let it be granted nevertheless.

## XVI

## 1

“Nevertheless, if you can see  
 In my request a reason sound,  
 Deny not my dejected plea, 915  
 But where grace is, let grace abound.  
 Have you no hall, no hostelry,

5. Revelation iv.6-9.

To dwell in and meet in daily round?  
 You tell of Jerusalem rich and free  
 Where reigned King David the renowned, 920  
 But that cannot be near this ground  
 But lies in Judea, by reckoning right;  
 As you under moon are flawless found,  
 Your lodgings should be wholly bright.

## 2

“These holy virgins in radiant guise, 925  
 By thousands thronged in processional—  
 That city must be of uncommon size  
 That keeps you together, one and all.  
 It were not fit such jewels of price  
 Should lie unsheltered by roof or wall, 930  
 Yet where these river-banks arise  
 I see no building large or small.  
 Beside this stream celestial  
 You linger alone, none else in sight;  
 If you have another house or hall, 935  
 Show me that dwelling wholly bright.”

## 3

That wholly blissful, that spice heaven-sent,  
 Declared, “In Judea’s fair demesne  
 The city lies, where the Lamb once went  
 To suffer for man death’s anguish keen. 940  
 The old Jerusalem by that is meant,  
 For there the old guilt was canceled clean,  
 But the new, in vision prescient,  
 John saw sent down from God pristine.<sup>6</sup>  
 The spotless Lamb of gracious mien 945  
 Has carried us all to that fair site,  
 And as in his flock no fleck is seen,  
 His hallowed halls are wholly bright.

## 4

“Two holy cities I figure forth;  
 One name suits well with both of these, 950  
 Which in the language of your birth  
 Is ‘City of God,’ or ‘Sight of Peace.’<sup>7</sup>  
 In the one the Lamb brought peace on earth  
 Who suffered for our iniquities;  
 In the other is peace with heavenly mirth, 955  
 And ever to last, and never to cease.  
 And to that city in glad release  
 From fleshly decay our souls take flight;  
 There glory and bliss shall ever increase  
 In the household that is wholly bright.” 960

6. Revelation xxi.2.

7. Revelation iii.12; Ezekiel xiii.16.

## 5

"Holy maid compassionate,"  
 Said I to that fresh flower and gay,  
 "Let me approach those ramparts great  
 And see the chamber where you stay."  
 "The Lord forbids," she answered straight, 965  
 "That a stranger in his streets should stray,  
 But through the Lamb enthroned in state  
 I have won you a sight of it this day.  
 Behold it from far off you may,  
 But no man's foot may there alight; 970  
 You have no power to walk that way  
 Save as a spirit wholly bright.

## XVII

## 1

"This holy city that I may show,  
 Walk upwards toward the river's head,  
 And here against you I shall go 975  
 Until to a hill your path has led."  
 Then to stir I was not slow,  
 But under leafy boughs I sped  
 Until from a hill I looked below  
 And saw the city, as she had said, 980  
 Beyond the stream in splendor spread,  
 That brighter than shafts of sunlight shone.  
 In Apocalypse it may all be read  
 As he set it forth, the apostle John.<sup>8</sup>

## 2

As John the apostle saw it of old 985  
 I saw the city beyond the stream,  
 Jerusalem the new and fair to behold,  
 Sent down from heaven by power supreme.  
 The streets were paved with precious gold,  
 As flawless pure as glass agleam, 990  
 Based on bright gems of worth untold,  
 Foundation-stones twelvefold in team;  
 And set in series without a seam,  
 Each level was a single stone,  
 As he beheld it in sacred dream 995  
 In Apocalypse, the apostle John.

## 3

As John had named them in writ divine  
 Each stone in order by name I knew;  
 Jasper was the first in line;  
 At the lowest level it came in view; 1000  
 Green ingrained I saw it shine.

8. Revelation xxi.10-27; xxii.1-2.

The second was the sapphire blue;  
 The clear chalcedony, rare and fine,  
 Was third in degree in order due.  
 The fourth the emerald green of hue; 1005  
 Sardonyx fifth was set thereon;  
 The sixth the ruby he saw ensue  
 In Apocalypse, the apostle John.

## 4

To these John joined the chrysolite,  
 The seventh in that foundation's face; 1010  
 The eighth the beryl clear and white,  
 The twin-hued topaz ninth to trace;  
 The chrysoprase tenth in order right;  
 Jacinth held the eleventh place;  
 The twelfth, the amethyst most of might, 1015  
 Blent blue and purple in royal blaze.  
 The jasper walls above that base  
 Like lustrous glass to gaze upon;  
 I knew them all by his every phrase  
 In Apocalypse, the apostle John. 1020

## 5

As John had written, so I was ware  
 How broad and steep was each great tier;  
 As long as broad as high foursquare  
 The city towered on twelfefold pier.  
 The streets like glass in brilliance bare, 1025  
 The walls like sheen on parchment sheer;  
 The dwellings all with gemstones rare  
 Arrayed in radiance far and near.  
 The sides of that perimeter  
 Twelve thousand furlongs spanned, each one; 1030  
 Length, breadth, and height were measured there  
 Before his eyes, the apostle John.

## XVIII

## 1

Yet more, John saw on every side  
 Three gateways set commensurate,  
 So twelve I counted in compass wide, 1035  
 The portals rich with precious plate.  
 Each gate a pearl of princely pride,  
 Unfading, past all earthly fate,  
 On which a name was signified  
 Of Israel's sons, in order of date, 1040  
 That is, by birthright ranked in state,  
 The eldest ever the foremost one.  
 The streets were alight both early and late;  
 They needed neither sun nor moon.

## 2

Sun and moon were far surpassed;  
 The Lord was their lamp eternally, 1045  
 The Lamb their lantern ever to last  
 Made bright that seat of sovereignty.  
 Through roof and wall my looking passed,  
 Pure substance hindered not to see;  
 There I beheld the throne steadfast 1050  
 With the emblems that about it be,  
 As John in text gave testimony;  
 Upon it sat the Lord triune;<sup>9</sup>  
 A river therefrom ran fresh and free,  
 More bright by far than sun or moon. 1055

## 3

Sun nor moon shone never so fair  
 As that flood of plenteous waters pure;  
 Full it flowed in each thoroughfare;  
 No filth or taint its brightness bore. 1060  
 Church they had none, nor chapel there,  
 House of worship, nor need therefor;  
 The Almighty was their place of prayer,  
 The Lamb the sacrifice all to restore.  
 No lock was set on gate or door  
 But evermore open both night and noon; 1065  
 None may take refuge on that floor  
 Who bears any spot beneath the moon.

## 4

The moon has in that reign no right;  
 Too spotty she is, of body austere; 1070  
 And they who dwell there know no night—  
 Of what avail her varying sphere?  
 And set beside that wondrous light  
 That shines upon the waters clear  
 The planets would lose their luster quite, 1075  
 And the sun itself would pale appear.  
 Beside the river are trees that bear  
 Twelve fruits of life their boughs upon;  
 Twelve times a year they burgeon there  
 And renew themselves with every moon. 1080

## 5

Beneath the moon so much amazed  
 No fleshly heart could bear to be  
 As by that city on which I gazed,  
 Its form so wondrous was to see.  
 As a quail that couches, dumb and dazed, 1085  
 I stared on that great symmetry;

9. I.e., three in one: the Trinity.

Nor rest nor travail my soul could taste,  
 Pure radiance so had ravished me.  
 For this I say with certainty:  
 Had a man in the body borne that boon, 1090  
 No doctor's art, for fame or fee,  
 Had saved his life beneath the moon.

## XIX

## 1

As the great moon begins to shine  
 While lingers still the light of day,  
 So in those ramparts crystalline 1095  
 I saw a procession wend its way.  
 Without a summons, without a sign,  
 The city was full in vast array  
 Of maidens in such raiment fine  
 As my blissful one had worn that day. 1100  
 As she was crowned, so crowned were they;  
 Adorned with pearls, in garments white;  
 And in like fashion, gleaming gay,  
 They bore the pearl of great delight.

## 2

With great delight, serene and slow,  
 They moved through every golden street; 1105  
 Thousands on thousands, row on row,  
 All in one raiment shining sweet.  
 Who gladdest looked, was hard to know;  
 The Lamb led on at station meet, 1110  
 Seven horns of gold upon his brow,<sup>1</sup>  
 His robe like pearls with rays replete.  
 Soon they approached God's mighty seat;  
 Though thick in throng, unhurried quite;  
 As maidens at communion meet 1115  
 They moved along with great delight.

## 3

Delight that at his coming grew  
 Was greater than my tongue can tell;  
 The elders when he came in view  
 Prostrate as one before him fell; 1120  
 Hosts of angels in retinue  
 Cast incense forth of sweetest smell;  
 Then all in concert praised anew  
 That jewel with whom in joy they dwell.<sup>2</sup>  
 The sound could pierce through the earth to hell 1125  
 When the powers of heaven in song unite;  
 To share his praises in citadel  
 My heart indeed had great delight.

1. Revelation v.6.

2. Revelation v.8, 11-14.



## 4

Delight and wonder filled me in flood  
 To hear all heaven the Lamb acclaim; 1130  
 Gladdest he was, most kind and good  
 Of any that ever was known to fame.  
 His dress so white, so mild his mood,  
 His looks so gracious, himself the same;  
 But a wound there was, and wide it stood, 1135  
 Thrust near his heart with deadly aim.  
 Down his white side the red blood came;  
 "O God," thought I, "who had such spite?  
 A breast should consume with sorrow and shame  
 Ere in such deeds it took delight." 1140

## 5

The Lamb's delight was clearly seen,  
 Though a bitter wound he had to bear;  
 So glorious was his gaze serene,  
 It gladdened all who beheld him there.  
 I looked where that host had been, 1145  
 How charged with life, how changed they were,  
 And then I saw my little queen  
 That I thought but now I had stood so near.  
 Lord! how she laughed and made good cheer  
 Among her friends, who was so white! 1150  
 To rush in the river then and there  
 I longed with love and great delight.

## XX

## 1

Moved by delight of sight and sound,  
 My maddened mind all fate defied.  
 I would follow her there, my newly found, 1155  
 Beyond the river though she must bide.  
 I thought that nothing could turn me round,  
 Forestall me, or stop me in mid-stride,  
 And wade I would from the nearer ground  
 And breast the stream, though I sank and died. 1160  
 But soon those thoughts were thrust aside;  
 As I made for the river incontinent  
 I was summoned away and my wish denied:  
 My Prince therewith was not content.

## 2

It contented him not that I, distraught, 1165  
 Should dare the river that rimmed the glade;  
 Though reckless I was, and overwrought,  
 In a moment's space my steps were stayed.  
 For just as I started from the spot  
 I was reft of my dream and left dismayed; 1170  
 I waked in that same garden-plot,

On that same mound my head was laid.  
 I stretched my hand where Pearl had strayed;  
 Great fear befell me, and wonderment;  
 And, sighing, to myself I said,  
 "Let all things be to his content."  
 1175

## 3

I was ill content to be dispossessed  
 Of the sight of her that had no peer  
 Amid those scenes so bright and blessed;  
 Such longing seized me, I swooned, or near;  
 Then sorrow broke from my burning breast;  
 "O honored Pearl," I said, "how dear  
 Was your every word and wise behest  
 In this true vision vouchsafed me here.  
 If you in a garland never sere  
 Are set by that Prince all-provident,  
 Then happy am I in dungeon drear  
 That he with you is well content."  
 1180  
 1185

## 4

Had I but sought to content my Lord  
 And taken his gifts without regret,  
 And held my place and heeded the word  
 Of the noble Pearl so strangely met,  
 Drawn heavenward by divine accord  
 I had seen and heard more mysteries yet;  
 But always men would have and hoard  
 And gain the more, the more they get.  
 So banished I was, by cares beset,  
 From realms eternal untimely sent;  
 How madly, Lord, they strive and fret  
 Whose acts accord not with your content!  
 1190  
 1195  
 1200

## 5

To content that Prince and well agree,  
 Good Christians can with ease incline,  
 For day and night he has proved to be  
 A Lord, a God, a friend benign.  
 These words came over the mound to me  
 As I mourned my Pearl so flawless fine,  
 And to God committed her full and free,  
 With Christ's dear blessing bestowing mine,  
 As in the form of bread and wine  
 Is shown us daily in sacrament;  
 O may we serve him well, and shine  
 As precious pearls to his content.  
 1205  
 1210

Amen.

## PIERS PLOWMAN

(ca 1372-1389)

The large number of manuscripts in which the *Vision of Piers Plowman* has been preserved indicates its wide popularity from the end of the 14th century up to the reign of Elizabeth I. Yet celebrated as the poem was, we know little about its origin. It exists in three versions, which scholars refer to as the A, B, and C Texts. The first, about 2,400 lines long, stops at a rather inconclusive point in the action; the second (generally agreed to be the best form of the poem) is a revision of the first plus an extension of more than 4,000 lines; and the third is a revision of the second. The name frequently associated with the poem is William Langland, but who he was and whether he wrote all three versions is not known. The little that can be inferred about him suggests that he came from the west of England and was probably a native of the Malvern Hills area in which the poem is set and where many of the surviving manuscripts were copied. If he wrote all three versions, then his interests and opinions must have changed while he was at work, for the versions differ from one another in many respects; but if more than one poet was involved, then it is extraordinary that all three versions share the same highly individual style and reflect the same curious and interesting poetic personality. Whatever its origin, the poem was avidly read and studied by a great many people. Within four years of the writing of the second version—which scholars have good evidence to date 1377, the year of Edward III's death and Richard II's accession to the throne—it had become so well known that the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 used phrases borrowed from it as part of the rhetoric of the rebellion. The poem must therefore have managed to catch the imagination of a number of readers.

*Piers Plowman* has the form of a dream vision, a common medieval type in which the author presents his story under the guise of having dreamed it. Most dream visions concern romantic love; *Piers Plowman* also concerns love, but in this instance the love is theological. The dream vision generally involves allegory, not only because one expects from a dream the unrealistic, the fanciful, but also because people have always suspected that dreams relate the truth in a disguised form—that they are natural allegories. *Piers Plowman* is perhaps the greatest of English allegories, though the reader who expects to find in it the kind of definite and clear statement that allegory makes in the morality *Everyman* will be disappointed; allegory here is used not so much in order to define the known, as the character "Good Deeds" does in that play, as to explore the unknown, in particular the great spiritual mysteries of Christianity. When handling these the poet's imagination (for convenience let us assume a single poet, Langland) is apt to soar into a mode of expression that stimulates and excites readers' imaginations while, perhaps, bewildering their intellects. Langland's theme is nothing less than the history of Christianity as it unfolds both in the world of the Old and New Testaments and in the life and heart of an

individual 14th-century Christian—two seemingly distinct realms between which the poet's allegory moves with dizzying rapidity.

Expanding the genre of dream-vision, *Piers Plowman* takes the form of a whole series of visions, separated by brief intervals when the narrator is awake. The first passage chosen for translation—the Prologue to the poem—introduces the famous first vision of the Field of Folk. The poet thought of Christianity as properly informing—and reforming—society, and he describes 14th-century English society in terms of its failure to represent an ideal society living in accord with Christian principles: hence the satirical poetry for which Langland is generally noted. Society's failure, of course, is attributable in part to the corruption of the church and churchmen, and whenever he considers clerical and ecclesiastical corruption, he pours out savagely indignant satire. But he is equally angry with the failure of the wealthy laity—untaught by the church to practice charity—to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, and it was probably his preoccupation with the poor that made his poem popular with the rebels of 1381; these, though confused in their motives, were eager to obtain correction of certain social abuses that Langland touches upon. This use of his poem must have horrified him, for despite his interest in social reform, he remains a fundamentally conservative and orthodox thinker: yet his passionate sympathy for the common man—idealized in his titular hero Piers the Plowman—made him seem a radical who felt that true religion was best represented not by the church but by the humblest orders of society. Many persons reading his poem more than a century and a half after it was written (it was first printed in 1550) saw in its Prologue strong historical reasons for the reformation of the church that had been carried out in the intervening years.

After his vision of the Field of Folk in the Prologue, Will the Dreamer is in Passus I ("Passus" is Latin for step, and the word the poet uses for the sections of his poem) approached by Lady Holy Church, who explains to him the fundamental principles of Christianity—with which, presumably, he has been familiar since childhood. But mere knowledge is not enough for him: he must learn by experience and feel in his heart what he learns. Now that he has seen truth in the person of Lady Holy Church, he asks to be shown the false, and Holy Church leaves him to witness the marriage of a suddenly personified False to Lady Meed. Meed, portrayed as an alluring wealthy woman, is an ambiguous allegorical figure: her many rascally followers recognize her as bribery, but Theology considers her the reward God has promised to give to true men, and objects to her proposed marriage to False. As a result of this objection, Meed and False, accompanied by a vast train of dishonest members of society, proceed to London to get legal opinion on the validity of their marriage. The king is warned of their coming and sends officers to arrest Meed: all the remainder of the company runs away. Though under arrest, Meed is warmly welcomed in the royal court, whose functionaries she at once starts to corrupt with money and promises of influence. The king proposes that she marry one of his knights named Conscience, to which she gladly assents; but when Conscience appears, he refuses to marry her, and she and he have a long debate about the true meaning of her name Meed. She tries to describe herself as merely payment for services rendered or things purchased, but Conscience will allow her no licit role in society. He declines to obey the king's com-

mand to become reconciled with her, unless Reason advises him to do so. Reason is summoned and, aided by Meed's flagrant attempts to corrupt the king's justice, succeeds in persuading the king and his subjects that Meed must be condemned.

Here the Dreamer awakes for the first time, but after a very short interval he falls asleep again and dreams that Reason preaches a sermon to the entire kingdom. At the end of this, the people confess their sins, an action which Langland describes by personifying the seven deadly sins; each one then relates (to a personified figure Repentance) how he behaves in society. These confessions, constituting much of Passus V of the B text of the poem, display most clearly Langland's social realism.

## From The Vision of Piers Plowman<sup>1</sup>

### From *The Prologue* [*The Field of Folk*]

In a summer season when the sun was mild  
 I got myself up in garb as though I'd grown into a sheep;  
 In the habit of a hermit, unholy of works,<sup>2</sup>  
 I went wide in the world, watching for wonders.  
 And on a May morning on Malvern Hills 5  
 A marvel befell me—magic it seemed.  
 I was wearied from wandering and went to rest  
 At the bottom of a broad bank by a brook's side,  
 And as I lay lazily looking in the water  
 I slid into a slumber, it sounded so soothing. 10  
 Then there came to me reclining there a most curious dream,  
 That I was in a wilderness—where, I'd no idea.  
 But as I looked into the east, up high toward the sun,  
 I saw a tower on a hill-top, trimly constructed,  
 A deep dale beneath, a dungeon-tower in it, 15  
 With deep dark ditches, dreadful to see.  
 A fair field full of folk I found between the towers,  
 Of people of all positions, the poor and the rich,  
 Working and wandering as the world requires.  
 Some applied themselves to plowing, played full seldom, 20  
 Sowing seeds and setting plants worked full hard;  
 Won what wasters destroy with their gluttony.  
 And some applied themselves to pride, wore proud garments,  
 Came all costumed in costly clothes.  
 To prayers and to penance many put themselves, 25  
 All for love of our Lord lived hard lives  
 In hope to have afterwards heaven's bliss—  
 Such as anchorites and hermits that hold to their cells  
 And don't care to go cantering about the countryside,  
 With some lush livelihood delighting their bodies. 30

1. The translations by the editor of the beginning and end of the Prologue and of two excerpts from Passus V of the B text are based on *Piers Plowman: The*

*B Version*, edited by George Kane and E. T. Donaldson (1975).

2. For Langland's opinion of hermits see lines 28–30 immediately below.

And some made themselves merchants—they managed better,  
 As it seems to our sight that such men prosper.  
 And some make mirths as minstrels can,  
 And get gold with their glee,<sup>3</sup> guiltless, I think.  
 But word-jugglers and jokers, Judas' children,<sup>4</sup> 35  
 Invent fantasies to speak of and make fools of themselves,  
 Yet they have whatever wit they need to work if they wanted.  
 What Paul preaches of them I don't dare repeat it here:  
*Qui loquitur turpiloquim*<sup>5</sup> is Lucifer's servant.  
 Beggars and beadsmen<sup>6</sup> went about fast 40  
 Till both their bellies and their bags were crammed to the brim;  
 Staged flytings<sup>7</sup> for their food, fought over ale.  
 In gluttony, God knows, they go to bed  
 And rise up with ribaldry, those Robert's boys;<sup>8</sup>  
 Sleep and sloth always pursue them. 45  
 Pilgrims and palmers<sup>9</sup> made pacts with each other  
 To seek Saint James<sup>1</sup> and saints at Rome.  
 They went along the way with many wise tales,  
 And had leave to tell lies all their lives after.  
 I saw some that said they'd sought after saints: 50  
 In every tale they told their tongues tended to lie  
 More than to tell the truth, their talk was such.  
 A heap of hermits carrying hooked staffs  
 Went off to Walsingham,<sup>2</sup> with their wenches behind.  
 Great long lubbers that don't like to work 55  
 Clothed themselves in copes<sup>3</sup> to keep distinct from other men,  
 And behaved like hermits to have their ease.  
 Friars I found there, all the four orders,<sup>4</sup>  
 Preaching to the populace for their own paunches' profit,  
 Explaining Holy Scripture as seemed best for themselves, 60  
 In hope to acquire copes<sup>5</sup> construed it as they pleased.  
 Many of these Masters<sup>6</sup> may clothe themselves gaily  
 For their money and their merchandise march hand in hand.<sup>7</sup>  
 Since Charity<sup>8</sup> has proved a peddler and principally shrives lords  
 Many marvels have been meted out within a few years. 65

3. I.e., music.

4. Minstrels who entertain with jokes and fantastic stories are regarded as descendants of Christ's betrayer, Judas.

5. "Who speaks slander": the text is not St. Paul's but expresses the poet's reason for not quoting St. Paul in such a way as to speak maliciously about the minstrels under discussion.

6. Prayer-sayers, i.e., people who offered to pray for the souls of those who gave them alms.

7. Contests in which the participants took turns insulting each other, preferably in verse.

8. I.e., robbers.

9. Virtually professional pilgrims, who took advantage of the hospitality offered pilgrims in order to go on trav-

eling year after year.

1. I.e., his shrine at Compostella, Spain.

2. English town, site of a famous shrine to the Virgin Mary.

3. Monks', friars', and hermits' capes.

4. In Langlands' day there were four orders of friars in England: Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, and Augustinians.

5. I.e., new garments.

6. I.e., Masters of Divinity.

7. The "merchandise" sold by the friars for money is shrift, which by canon law may not be sold.

8. The ideal of the friars, as stated by St. Francis, founder of the Franciscans, was simply love.

Unless Holy Church and friars' orders hold together better  
The worst trouble in the world will well up soon.

A pardoner<sup>9</sup> preached there as if he'd a priest's rights,

Brought out a bull with bishop's seals,

And said he himself could absolve them all

70

Of failure to fast, of vows they'd broken.

Unlearnéd men believed him and liked his words,

Came crowding up on knees to kiss his bulls.

He baged them with his brevet<sup>1</sup> and bleared their eyes,

And raked in with his parchment-roll rings and brooches.

75

Thus you give your gold for gluttons' profit,

And squander it on scoundrels who're schooled as lechers.

If the bishop were blessed and worth both his ears

His seal should not be sent out to deceive the people.

It's not by the bishop's leave that the blackguard preaches;

80

What's more, the parish priest and the pardoner split the money

That the poor people of the parish should otherwise have.

Parsons and parish priests complained to the bishop

That their parishes were poor since the pestilence-time,<sup>2</sup>

Asked for licence and leave to live in London,

85

And sing masses there for simony, for silver is sweet.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

Yet there stood scores of men in scarves of silk,<sup>4</sup>

Law-sergeants<sup>5</sup> they seemed to be who served at the bar,

Pleaded cases for pennies<sup>6</sup> and impounded the law,

And for love of our Lord not once unloosed their lips:

You might better measure mist on Malvern Hills

215

Than get a "mum" from their mouths till money is produced.

Barons and burgesses and bondmen also

I saw in this assemblage, as you shall hear later;

Bakers and brewers and butchers aplenty.

Woolen-weavers and weavers of linen.

220

Tailors, tinkers, tax-collectors in markets,

Masons, miners, many other craftsmen.

Of all kinds of living laborers there leapt forth some,

Such as diggers of ditches that do their jobs badly

And dawdle away the long day with "*Dieu save dame Emma*."<sup>7 225</sup>

9. An official empowered to pass on from the pope temporal indulgence for the sins of people who contributed to charitable enterprises—a function frequently abused (see Chaucer's Pardoner, General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, lines 671 ff.). "Bull": papal license.

1. Pardoner's license.

2. Since 1349, England had suffered a number of epidemics of the plague, which had caused famine and depopulated the countryside.

3. Wealthy persons, especially in London, set up foundations to pay priests to sing masses for their souls

and those of their relatives. "Simony": abuse of ecclesiastical office; a priest who had charge of a parish was forbidden to exercise any other salaried function in the church.

4. A silk scarf was a lawyer's badge of office.

5. Important lawyers (see the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, lines 311 ff.).

6. Pennies were fairly valuable coins in medieval England; "impounded": detained in legal custody.

7. "God save Dame Emma": apparently a popular song.

Cooks and their kitchen-boys cried, "Hot pies, hot!  
Good goose and pork! Let's go and dine!"

Taverners told the same tale to them:

"White wine of Alsace and wine of Gascony,  
Of the Rhine and of La Rochelle, to wash the roast down." 230  
All this I saw sleeping and seven times more.

FROM *PASSUS V*

[THE CONFESSION OF ENVY]

Envy with heavy heart asked for shrift 75  
And, grieving for his guilt, began his confession.  
He was pale as a sheep's pelt, appeared to have the palsy;  
He was clothed in a coarse cloth—I couldn't describe it—  
A tabard<sup>1</sup> and a tunic, a knife attached to his side,  
Like those of a friar's frock were the foresleeves. 80  
Like a leek that had lain long in the sun  
So he looked with lean cheeks, louring foully.  
His body was so blown up for wrath that he bit his lips  
And shook his fist fiercely—he wanted to avenge himself  
With deeds or with words when he saw his chance. 85  
Every syllable he spat out was of a serpent's tongue;  
From chiding and bringing charges was his chief livelihood,  
With backbiting and bitter scorn and bearing false witness.  
This was all his courtesy wherever he showed himself.  
"I'd like to be shriven," said this scoundrel, "if shame  
would let me. 90  
By God, I'd be gladder that Gib had bad luck  
Than if I'd won this week a wey<sup>2</sup> of Essex cheese.  
I have a near neighbor, I've nettled him often  
And blamed him behind his back to blacken his name:  
I've done my best to damage him day after day, 95  
And lied to lords about him to make him lose money,  
And turned his friends into his foes with my false tongue.  
His good luck and glad lot grieve me greatly.  
Between one household and another I often start disputes  
So that both life and limb are lost for my speech. 100  
When I met in the market the man I most hated  
I fondled him affectionately as if I was a friend of his:  
He's stronger than I am—I don't dare harm him.  
But if I had might and mastery I'd murder him once for all.  
When I come to kirk<sup>3</sup> and kneel before Christ's cross 105  
And ought to pray for the people as the priest teaches,  
For pilgrims, for palmers, for all the people after,  
Then crouching there I call on Christ to give him sorrow  
That took away my tankard and my torn sheet.<sup>4</sup>

1. A loose sleeveless jacket, worn over the tunic.

2. A very large measure.

3. Church.

4. The loss of Envy's tankard and torn sheet, and his fury at it, have not been explained.



Away from the altar I turn my eyes 110  
 And see how Heinie has a new coat;  
 Then I wish it were mine, and all the web<sup>5</sup> it came from.  
 And when he loses I laugh—that lightens my heart;  
 But when he wins I weep and wail the time.  
 I condemn men when they do evil, yet I do much worse: 115  
 Whoever upbraids me for that, I hate him deadly after.  
 I wish that everyone were my servant,  
 And if any man has more than I, that angers my heart.  
 So I live loveless like a loathsome dog  
 So that all my breast is blown up for bitterness of spirit. 120  
 For many years I might not eat as a man ought,  
 For envy and ill will are hard to digest.  
 Is there any sugar or sweet thing to assuage my swelling,  
 Or any *diapenidion*<sup>6</sup> that will drive it from my heart,  
 Or any shrift or shame, unless I have my stomach scraped?" 125  
 "Yes, readily," said Repentance, directing him to live better;  
 "Sorrow for sins is salvation for souls."  
 "I am sorry," said Envy. "I'm seldom otherwise,  
 And that makes me so miserable, since I may not avenge myself.  
 I've been among burgesses<sup>7</sup> buying at London 130  
 And made Backbiting a broker to blame men's wares.  
 When he sold and I didn't, then I was ready  
 To lie and to lour at my neighbor and belittle his merchandise.  
 I will amend this if I may, by might of God almighty.

## [THE CONFESSION OF GLUTTONY]

Now Glutton begins to go to shrift  
 And takes his way toward the church to tell his sins.  
 But Betty the brewer bade him good morning  
 And she asked him where he was going.  
 "To Holy Church," he said, "to hear mass, 300  
 And then I shall be shriven and sin no more."  
 "I've good ale, good friend," said she. "Glutton, will you try it?"  
 "Have you," he asked, "any hot spices?"  
 "I have pepper and peony<sup>8</sup> and a pound of garlic,  
 A farthing-worth of fennel seed<sup>9</sup> for fasting days." 305  
 Then Glutton goes in, and great oaths after.  
 Cissy the seamstress was sitting on the bench,  
 Wat the warren-keeper and his wife both,  
 Tim the tinker and two of his servants,  
 Hick the hackneyman and Hugh the needle-seller, 310  
 Clarice of Cock's Lane<sup>1</sup> and the clerk of the church,  
 Sir Piers of Pridie and Parnel of Flanders,  
 Dave the ditch-digger and a dozen others,

5. I.e., bolt.

6. A twist of medicinal sugar.

7. City people.

8. In the Middle Ages, a spice.

9. This herb was apparently considered

salubrious to one drinking on an empty stomach.

1. Clarice (and Parnel of the next line) are prostitutes.

A rebeck-player,<sup>2</sup> a rat-catcher, a street-raker of Cheapside,  
 A rope-maker, a redinking, and Rose the dish-vendor, 315  
 Godfrey of Garlickhithe and Griffin the Welshman,  
 A heap of old clothesmen early in the morning  
 Gladly treated Glutton to drinks of good ale.  
 Clement the cobbler took the coat off his back  
 And put it up as a prize for whoever would play "New Fair."<sup>3</sup> 320  
 Then Hick the ostler<sup>4</sup> took off his hood  
 And bade Bette the butcher to be on his side.  
 Then peddlers were appointed to appraise the goods:  
 Clement for his coat should get the hood plus compensation.  
 They went to work quickly and whispered together 325  
 And appraised these prizes apart by themselves.  
 There were heaps of oaths for anyone to hear.  
 They couldn't in conscience come to an agreement  
 Till Robin the roper was requested to arise  
 And named as an umpire so no quarrel should break out. 330  
 Then Hick the ostler had the cloak  
 In covenant that Clement should have his cup filled  
 And have Hick the ostler's hood, and call it a deal;  
 The first to regret the agreement should get up at once  
 And greet Sir Glutton with a gallon of ale. 335  
 There was laughing and louting and "Let go the cup!"  
 They began to make bets and bought more rounds,  
 And sat so till evensong and sang sometimes,  
 Till Glutton had gulped down a gallon and a gill.<sup>5</sup>  
 His guts began to grumble like two greedy sows; 340  
 He pissed four pints in a Paternoster's length,<sup>6</sup>  
 And on the bugle of his backside he blew a fanfare  
 So that all that heard that horn held their noses after  
 And wished it had been waxed<sup>7</sup> with a wisp of gorse.  
 He had no strength to stand before he had his staff in hand, 345  
 And then he made off, moving like a minstrel's bitch,<sup>8</sup>  
 Sometimes sideways and sometimes backwards,  
 Like some one laying lines to lime<sup>9</sup> birds with.  
 But as he started stepping to the door his sight grew dim;

2. Fiddle-player: "street-raker": a scavenger—hence street-cleaner—of Cheapside, a section of London. What a "redinking" was is not known.

3. "New Fair" was a game in which two participants exchanged items in their possession which were not of equal value and hence involved a cash payment by the player who put up the least valuable object. Clement puts up his cloak, Hick his hood; each chooses an agent to represent him in the evaluation of the objects, which is carried on by peddlers. Hick is represented by Bette, but since the evaluators are unable to agree, Robin is named as an umpire. It is decided that Hick should have Clement's cloak and Clement

Hick's hood, but that Clement should receive a cup of ale as well, or perhaps the money for a cup of ale which he would then share with all the participants. A fine of further ale would be placed on either of the men who grumbled at the exchange.

4. I.e., a stableman.

5. I.e., a quarter-pint.

6. I.e., the time it takes to say the Lord's Prayer.

7. I.e., sealed; "gorse" is a spiny shrub.

8. I.e., a trained dog.

9. Birds were caught by smearing a sticky substance ("lime") on strings laid out on the ground.

He felt for the threshold and fell on the ground. 350  
 Clement the cobbler caught him by the waist  
 To lift him aloft, and laid him on his knees.  
 But Glutton was a large lout and a load to lift.  
 And he coughed up a custard in Clement's lap.  
 There's no hound so hungry in Hertfordshire 355  
 That would dare lap up that leaving, so unlovely the taste.  
 With all the woe of this world his wife and his maid  
 Brought him to his bed and bundled him in it,  
 And after all this excess he had a fit of sloth  
 So that he slept Saturday and Sunday till the sun set. 360  
 When he was awake and had wiped his eyes,  
 The first word he spoke was, "Where is the bowl?"  
 His spouse scolded him for his sin and wickedness,  
 And right so Repentance rebuked him at that time.  
 "As with words and with deeds you've worked evil in your life 365  
 Shrive yourself and be ashamed, and show it with your mouth."  
 "I, Glutton," he began, "admit I'm guilty of this:  
 That I've trespassed with my tongue, I can't tell how often;  
 Sworn by God's soul and his sides and 'so God help me!  
 When there was no need for it, nine hundred times; 370  
 And overstuffed myself at supper and sometimes at midday  
 So that I, Glutton, got rid of it before I'd gone a mile;  
 And swilled what might have been saved and dispensed  
 to the hungry;  
 Overindulgently on feast days I've drunk and eaten both;  
 And sometimes sat so long there that I slept and ate at once; 375  
 To hear tales in taverns I've taken more drink;  
 Fed myself before noon on fasting days."  
 "This full confession," said Repentance, "will procure favor for  
 you."  
 Then Glutton began to groan and to make great woe  
 For his life that he had lived in so loathsome a way, 380  
 And vowed he would fast, what for hunger or for thirst:  
 "Never shall fish on Friday be fed to my belly  
 Till Abstinence my aunt has given me leave,  
 And yet I have hated her all my lifetime."

## MIDDLE ENGLISH LYRICS

The best of the Middle English lyrics, both religious and secular, seem remarkably fresh despite the fact that in both theme and form they are extremely conventional—at times almost stylized. The song of spring (the French: *reverdie*), the love lyric and love complaint, the celebration of the Virgin Mary, the witty satire of women, the meditation upon Calvary—even the rollicking verse in praise of good food, good drink, and good living—are members of ancient genres, most of which had developed in France

(some of the poems here printed closely parallel French lyrics). The poet's love in *Alison* is conventional even in her name, which is that of the Wife of Bath and of the heroine of the Miller's Tale, and the poet could have written her praise without ever having loved anything more feminine than books, which contained hundreds of ladies with Alison's charms. The fact that most of them would have been blue-eyed blondes might make love for a black-eyed brunette seem daringly realistic, but conventions set up anti-conventions which become as rigid as their older antitheses. Yet those who feel that such a lyric as *Alison* is the genuine complaint of a 13th-century English lad are right in their reactions as readers if wrong in fact, for the poem re-creates excellently the excitement of young love—and the time must have been full of young men yearning for black-eyed Alisons.

It is the same with the spring songs. Spring returns in much the same literary terms in poem after poem, year after year, century after century, but the best medieval spring songs also vigorously reproduce the actual excitement of its natural return every March and April. For while every good poet brings something of his own observing to the tradition he is following, the writers of medieval lyrics are especially distinguished for their unself-consciousness and immediacy. Just as there was no consciousness on the part of the medieval man of anachronism—historical differences in time or place—there seems to have been no self-consciousness about his attempts to express himself in poetic terms: convention apparently liberated him, instead of oppressing him in the way it is often supposed to do. It is with perfect naturalness that the poet of *Sunset on Calvary* relives the scene, standing with the mother Mary beside the cross on which her Son hangs; or the poet of *I Sing of a Maiden* visualizes the mystery of the Virgin Birth in terms of the most natural of mysteries, the falling dew; or the poet of *Adam Lay Bound* cheerfully regards Adam's sin and its dire consequences as a kind of childish naughtiness and punishment that had the tremendous effect of bringing Christ to earth. The very simplicity of the poet's attitude achieves the most striking artistic results.

Several of the poems printed here depend on traditions that are no longer alive. The *Corpus Christi Carol* relies upon the ancient fertility myth of the Fisher King which had been caught up and Christianized in Arthurian legend. *I Have a Young Sister* is a riddling poem that is reminiscent of the Old English riddles, though its clues, highly suggestive sexual symbols, are of a fully developed sophistication.

It is impossible to date the individual lyrics with any certainty. Perhaps the oldest is the *Cuckoo Song*, which is probably of the 12th century, and one may guess that the other spring songs are of the late 13th or early 14th; but some of the best of the lyrics (*I Sing of a Maiden*, *Adam Lay Bound*) may be of the 15th century. In general, we know only that the poems must be earlier than the manuscripts in which they appear, but because of the fact that an early lyric might have been reworded by a late scribe in such a way as to make it appear late, we can rarely tell by how many years any given lyric preceded the manuscript that records it. The sources of the texts printed here are too diverse to be listed. Spelling has been normalized as in the selections from Chaucer.

## Fowls in the Frith

Fowles° in the frith,° birds / woods  
 The fisses in the flood,  
 And I mon waxe wood:¹  
 Much sorwe° I walke with sorrow  
 5 For beste² of boon° and blood. bone

## Alison

Bitweene° Merch and Averil, in the seasons of  
 When spray biginneth to springe,  
 The litel fowl hath hire wil° pleasure  
 On hire leod³ to singe.  
 5 Ich° libbe° in love-longinge I / live  
 For semlokest° of alle thinge. seemliest, fairest  
 Heo° may me blisse bringe: she  
 Ich am in hire baundoun.° power  
 An hendy hap ich habbe yhent,⁴  
 10 Ichoot° from hevne it is me sent: I know  
 From alle⁵ wommen my love is lent,° removed  
 And light° on Alisoun. alights

On hew° hire heer° is fair ynough, hue / hair  
 Hire browe browne, hire yē° blake; eye  
 15 With lossum checre heo on me lough,⁶  
 With middel smal and wel ymake.  
 But° heo me wolle to hire take Unless  
 For to been hire owen make,° mate  
 Longe to liven ichulle° forsake, I will  
 20 And feye° fallen adown. dead  
 An hendy hap, etc.

Nightes when I wende° and wake, turn  
 Forthy° mine wonges° waxeth wan: therefore / cheeks  
 Levedy,° al for thine sake lady  
 25 Longinge is ylent me on.⁷  
 In world nis noon so witr° man clever  
 That al hire bountee° telle can; excellence  
 Hire swire° is whittere° than the swan, neck / whiter  
 And fairest may° in town. maid  
 30 An hendy, etc.

Ich am for wowing° al forwake,° wooing / worn out from waking  
 Wery so water in wore.⁸  
 Lest any reve me⁹ my make  
 Ich habbe y-ycrned yore.¹

1. Must go mad.

2. Probably "the best," i.e., his lady. The meaning "best" is, however, not impossible.

3. In her language.

4. A gracious chance I have received.

5. I.e., all other.

6. With lovely face she on me smiled.

7. Longing has come upon me.

8. Perhaps "millpond."

9. Deprive me.

1. I have been worrying long since.

- 35 Bettere is tholien<sup>o</sup> while<sup>o</sup> sore *endure / for a time*  
 Than mournen evermore.  
 Geinest under gore,<sup>2</sup>  
 Herkne to my roun:<sup>o</sup> *song*  
 An heny, etc.

## My Lief Is Faren in Londe

- My lief is faren in londe<sup>3</sup>—  
 Allas, why is she so?  
 And I am so sore bonde<sup>o</sup> *bound*  
 I may nat come her to.  
 5 She hath myn licrte in holde *walk*  
 Wherever she ride or go<sup>o</sup>—  
 With trewe love a thousand folde.

## Western Wind

Westron wind, when will thou blow?  
 The small rain down can rain.  
 Christ, that my love were in my arms,  
 And I in my bed again.

## I Have a Young Sister

- I have a yong suster  
 Fer<sup>o</sup> biyonde the see; *far*  
 Manye be the druries<sup>o</sup> *gifts*  
 That she sente me.
- 5 She sente me the cherye *stone*  
 Withouten any stoon,<sup>o</sup>  
 And so she dide the dove *bone*  
 Withouten any boon.<sup>o</sup>
- She sente me the brere<sup>o</sup> *briar*  
 10 Withouten any rinde;<sup>o</sup> *bark*  
 She bad me love my lemman<sup>o</sup> *mistress*  
 Withoute longinge.
- How sholde any cherye  
 Be withoute stoon?  
 15 And how sholde any dove  
 Be withoute boon?
- How sholde any brere  
 Be withoute rinde?  
 How sholde I love my lemman  
 20 Withoute longinge?

2. Fairest beneath clothing.

3. My beloved has gone away.

Whan the cherye was a flowr,  
 Thanne hadde it no stoon;  
 Whan the dove was an ey,<sup>o</sup> egg  
 Thanne hadde it no boon.

25 Whan the brere was unbred,<sup>o</sup> ungrown  
 Thanne hadde it no rinde;  
 Whan the maiden hath that<sup>o</sup> she loveth, what  
 She is withoute longinge.

## A Bitter Lullaby

Lullay, lullay, litel child, why weepstou so sore?  
 Needes most<sup>o</sup> thou weepe, it was y-yarked<sup>o</sup> thee  
 yore<sup>4</sup> must / destined  
 Evere to live in sorwe, and siken<sup>o</sup> everemore, sigh  
 As thine eldren dide er this, whil they alives<sup>o</sup> wore.<sup>o</sup> alive / were  
 5 Lullay, lullay, litel child, child, lullay, lullow,  
 Into uncouth<sup>o</sup> world ycomen so art thou. strange

Beestes and thise fowles, the fisshes in the flood,  
 And eech sheef<sup>o</sup> alives; ymaked of boon and blood, creature  
 Whan they cometh to the world they dooth himself som  
 good—  
 10 Al but the wrecche<sup>o</sup> brot<sup>o</sup> that is of Adames  
 blood, wretched / brat  
 Lullay, lullay, litel child, to care art thou bimet:<sup>o</sup> destined  
 Thou noost nat this worldes wilde bifore thee is yset.<sup>5</sup>

Child, if it bitideth that thou shalt thrive and thee,<sup>o</sup> prosper  
 Think<sup>o</sup> thou were yfostered up thy moder<sup>o</sup>  
 knee; remember / mother's  
 15 Evere have minde<sup>o</sup> in thyn herte of thise thinges three: thought  
 Whennes thou comest, what thou art, and what shal come of  
 thee.  
 Lullay, lullay, litel child, child, lullay, lullay:  
 With sorwe thou come into this world, with sorwe thou  
 shalt away.

Ne tristou<sup>6</sup> to this world, it is thy fulle<sup>o</sup> fo: entire  
 20 The riche it maketh poore, the poore riche also;  
 It turneth wo to wele<sup>o</sup> and eek wele to wo: well-being  
 Ne triste<sup>o</sup> no man to this world whil it turneth so. trust  
 Lullay, lullay, litel child, the foot is in the whele:<sup>7</sup>  
 Thou noost<sup>8</sup> whether it wol turne to wo other to wele.  
 25 Child, thou art a pilgrim in wikkednesse ybore;<sup>o</sup> born  
 Thou wandrest in this false world—thou looke thee bifore:

4. Long since.

5. You don't know that the wild beasts of this world are set before you (i.e., preferred to you).

6. Don't trust.

7. I.e., Fortune's foot is turning the wheel on which all people must ride.

8. Don't know.

- Deeth shal come with a blast out of a wel dim bore°      *cranny*  
 Adames kinne down to caste—himself hath do bifore.<sup>9</sup>  
 Lullay, lullay, litel child, so wo thee warp° Adam      *wove*  
 30 In the land of Paradis through wikkenesse° of  
 Satan.      *wickedness*
- Child, thou nart<sup>1</sup> a pilgrim, but an uncouth° gest:      *unknown*  
 Thy dayes beeth ytold,° thy journeyes  
 beeth ycest°      *numbered / determined*  
 Whider thou shalt wenden, north other° est,°      *or / east*  
 Deeth thee shal bitide with bitter bale° in brest.      *pain*  
 35 Lullay, lullay, litel child, this wo Adam thee wroughte  
 Whan he the apple eet, and Eve it him bitoughte.<sup>2</sup>

## The Cuckoo Song

- Sumer is ycomen in,  
 Loude sing cuckou!  
 Groweth seed and bloweth meed,<sup>3</sup>  
 And springth the wode° now.      *wood*  
 5 Sing cuckou!
- Ewe bleteth after lamb,  
 Loweth after calve cow,  
 Bulloc sterteth,° bucke verteth,°      *leaps / breaks wind*  
 Merye sing cuckou!
- 10 Cuckou, cuckou,  
 Wel singest thou cuckou:  
 Ne swik° thou never now!      *cease*

## Tell Me, Wight in the Broom

- “Say me, wight in the broom,°      *shrub*  
 What is me for to doon?  
 Ich° have the werste bonde°      *I / husband*  
 That is in any londe.”
- 5 “If thy bonde is ille,°      *bad*  
 Hold thy tonge stille.”

## I Am of Ireland

Ich am of Irlonde,  
 And of the holy londe  
 Of Irlonde.  
 Goode sire, praye ich thee,

9. ? To cast down Adam's kin as Adam himself has previously caused that it should be cast down.

1. Are not.

2. Gave it to him.

3. The meadow blossoms.



5 For of° sainte charitee,  
Com and dance with me  
In Irlonde. sake of

## Sunset on Calvary

Now gooth sunne under wode:<sup>4</sup>  
Me reweth,<sup>5</sup> Marye, thy faire rode.° face  
Now gooth sunne under tree:  
Me reweth, Marye, thy sone and thee.

## I Sing of a Maiden

I sing of a maiden  
That is makelees:° matchless  
King of alle kinges  
To° her sone she checs.° as / chose  
5 He cam also° stille as  
Ther° his moder° was where / mother  
As dewe in Aprille  
That falleth on the gras.  
He cam also stille  
10 To his modres bowr  
As dewe in Aprille  
That falleth on the flowr.  
He cam also stille  
Ther his moder lay  
15 As dewe in Aprille  
That falleth on the spray.  
Moder and maiden  
Was nevere noon but she:  
Wel may swich° a lady such  
20 Godes moder be.

## Adam Lay Bound

Adam lay ybounden, bounden in a bond,  
Four thousand winter thoughte he not too long;  
And al was for an apple, an apple that he took,  
As clerkes finden writen, writen in hire book.  
5 Ne hadde<sup>6</sup> the apple taken been, the apple taken been,  
Ne hadde nevere Oure Lady ybeen hevene Queen.  
Blessed be the time that apple taken was:  
Therefore we mown° singen *Deo Gratias*.<sup>7</sup> may

4. Wood, i.e., the Cross.  
5. I pity.

6. Had not.  
7. Thanks be to God.

## The Corpus Christi Carol

Lully, lullay, lully, lullay,

The faucon<sup>o</sup> hath borne my make<sup>o</sup> away.*falcon / mate*

He bare him up, he bare him down,

He bare him into an orchard brown.

5 In that orchard ther was an hall

That was hanged with purple and pall.<sup>o</sup>*black velvet*

And in that hall ther was a bed:

It was hanged with gold so red.

And in that bed ther lith<sup>o</sup> a knight,*lies*

10 His woundes bleeding by day and night.

By that beddes side ther kneeleth a may,<sup>o</sup>

And she weepeth both night and day.

*maid*And by that beddes side ther standeth a stoon:<sup>o</sup>*Corpus Christi*<sup>8</sup> writen theron.*stone*

8. Body of Christ.

## THE SECOND SHEPHERDS' PLAY

(ca. 1425)

The *Second Shepherds' Play* is the finest example in English of a medieval mystery play. The word "mystery" in this context refers to the spiritual mystery of Christ's redemption of mankind, and mystery plays are dramatizations of incidents of the Old Testament, which foretells that redemption, and of the New, which recounts it. In England the mysteries were generally composed in cycles containing as many as 48 individual plays; a typical cycle would begin with the Creation, continue with the Fall of Man, and proceed through the most significant events of the Old Testament, such as the Flood, to the New Testament, which provided plays on the Nativity, the chief events of Christ's life, the Crucifixion, the Harrowing of Hell (based on sources now deemed apocryphal), and the Last Judgment. This kind of drama had its origin within the very walls of the medieval church, in the liturgical dialogue that had long been a characteristic feature of formal Christian worship. The exchanges between priest and congregation in the celebration of the Mass are essentially dramatic, as are also the exchanges between several sections of the choir in the singing of an anthem. By a natural elaboration of these dialogues, the texts of which are based on Biblical or Apocryphal sources, a church drama came into being—indeed, it ultimately developed so fully that there was no longer room for it within the liturgy; it then had to be presented separately. In England it was given a home in the churchyard, but as it became increasingly secularized and increasingly pervaded by the rough popular humor of medieval minstrelsy, it lost its place even in the churchyard. By the time of their fullest development, the mysteries were acted in the streets of the town.

Despite secularization and separation from the church proper, mystery plays never lost their religious impulse. They were generally performed at the time of one of two great church festivals—Whitsuntide, the week following the seventh Sunday after Easter, or Corpus Christi, a week later—and their performance was one of the important ways in which the unlearned layman of the Middle Ages participated directly in the celebration of his religion. Every trade in urban society had its guild, an organization combining the functions of a modern club, trade union, and religious society, and each of these guilds had its traditional play to perform on the days when the cycles were presented. In certain of the towns each company had a wagon which served as a stage. The wagon would proceed from one strategic point in the town to another, and the play would be performed a number of times on the same day: the spectators gathered at any one strategic point would never be without a play before them, and might see the whole cycle without moving. In other towns, however, the plays were probably acted out in sequence at a single place—an innyard or some other such natural theater.

The *Second Shepherds' Play*, which was probably played at Wakefield in Yorkshire, is a member of one of the four great cycles of English mysteries that have been preserved in their entirety; from what must have originally been a great number of other cycles we possess only a few individual pieces. The Wakefield cycle has two plays for shepherds; it is the second which is reprinted below. The artistic level of most of the Middle English mysteries is not high: a kind of rough piety, at times mixed with a crude humor, is characteristic of most of them, though there are happy exceptions. The happiest of these are certain of the Wakefield plays, which display a sophisticated artistic intelligence at work beneath the apparent naïveté. This intelligence belonged undoubtedly to one individual, who probably revised traditional plays. His identity is not known, but because of his achievement scholars refer to him as the Wakefield Master. He was probably a highly educated cleric stationed in the vicinity of Wakefield, perhaps a friar of a nearby priory. He appreciated the rough humor and rough piety of the traditional plays, but he also knew how to refine both qualities without appearing to do so, and, more important, he knew how to combine the humorous and the religious so that the former serves the latter rather than detracting from it. In the *Second Shepherds' Play*, by linking the comic subplot of Mak and Gill with the solemn story of Christ's nativity, the Wakefield Master has produced a dramatic parable of what the Nativity means in Christian history and in Christian hearts. No one will fail to observe the parallelism between the stolen sheep, ludicrously disguised as Mak's latest heir, lying in the cradle, and the real Lamb of God, born in the stable among beasts. A complex of relationships based upon this relationship suggests itself. But perhaps the most important point is that the charity twice shown by the shepherds—in the first instance to the supposed son of Mak and in the second instance to Mak and Gill when they decide to let them off with only the mildest of punishments—is rewarded when they are invited to visit the Christ Child, the embodiment of charity. The bleak beginning of the play, with its series of individual complaints, is ultimately balanced by the optimistic ending, which sees the shepherds once again singing together in harmony.

Characterization in the mystery plays is usually rather slight, except in

the case of stereotypes like Noah's stubborn wife or the ranting Herod (both mentioned in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*). Mak therefore stands high above the generality and is perhaps the best humorous character outside of Chaucer's works in this period. A braggart of the worst kind, he has something of Falstaff's charm; and he resembles Falstaff also in his grotesque attempts to maintain the last shreds of his dignity when he is caught in a lie. Most readers will be glad that the shepherds do not carry out their threat to have the death penalty invoked for his crime.

## The Second Shepherds' Play<sup>1</sup>

### *Dramatis Personae*

COLL	GILL
GIB	ANGEL
DAW	MARY
MAK	

[A moor.]

[Enter COLL.]

COLL. Lord, what<sup>2</sup> these weathers are cold, and I am ill happed;  
I am nearhand dold,<sup>3</sup> so long have I napped; *numb*  
My legs they fold,<sup>4</sup> my fingers are chapped. *give way*  
It is not as I would, for I am all lapped<sup>5</sup> *wrapped*

5

In sorrow:  
In storms and tempest,  
Now in the east, now in the west,  
Woe is him has never rest  
Midday nor morrow.

10

But we silly<sup>6</sup> husbands<sup>6</sup> that walks on the *poor / farmers*  
moor,  
In faith we are nearhands out of the door.<sup>3</sup>  
No wonder, as it stands, if we be poor,  
For the tilth<sup>6</sup> of our lands lies fallow as the *arable part*  
floor, *know*

15

As ye ken.<sup>6</sup>  
We are so hammed,  
Fortaxed, and rammed,  
We are made hand-tamed  
With these gentlery-men.<sup>4</sup>

20

Thus they reave us<sup>5</sup> our rest—Our Lady them wary!<sup>6</sup> *curse*  
These men that are lord-fest,<sup>6</sup> they cause the plow tarry.

1. The text is based on that given by A. W. Pollard in *The Towneley Plays* (1897), but has been freely edited. Spelling has been normalized except where rhyme makes changes impossible. Since the original text has no indications of scenes and only four stage directions, written in Latin, appropriate scenes of action and additional stage directions have been added; the four original stage directions are identified in the

footnotes.

2. How; "ill happed": badly covered.

3. I.e., homeless.

4. We are so hamstrung, overtaxed, and beaten down (that) we are made slaves by these highborn men. Coll is complaining of the peasant's hard lot, at the mercy of the agents of the Crown and of the wealthy landholders.

5. Deprive us of.

6. Attached to lords.

That men say is for the best, we find it contrary.  
Thus are husbands oppressed in point to miscarry.<sup>7</sup>

On live

25 Thus hold they us under,  
Thus they bring us in blunder,<sup>o</sup> *trouble*  
It were a great wonder  
And<sup>o</sup> ever should we thrive. *if*

There shall come a swain as proud as a po:<sup>o</sup> *peacock*  
He must borrow my wain,<sup>o</sup> my plow also; *wagon*  
30 Then I am full fain<sup>o</sup> to grant ere he go. *glad*  
Thus live we in pain, anger, and woe,

By night and by day.

He must have if he lang<sup>o</sup> it, *wants*  
If I should forgang it:<sup>8</sup>  
35 I were better be hanged  
Than once say him nay.<sup>9</sup>

For may he get a paint-sleeve<sup>1</sup> or a brooch nowadays,  
Woe is him that him grieve or once again-says.<sup>o</sup> *gainsays*  
Dare no man him reprieve, what mastery he maes.<sup>2</sup>  
40 And yet may no man lieve<sup>o</sup> one word that he says, *believe*  
No letter.

He can make purveyance<sup>3</sup>

With boast and bragance,<sup>o</sup> *bragging*  
45 And all is through maintenance<sup>o</sup> *protection*  
Of men that are greater.

It does me good, as I walk thus by mine one,<sup>o</sup> *self*  
Of this world for to talk in manner of moan.

To my sheep will I stalk, and hearken anon,  
There abide on a balk,<sup>o</sup> or sit on a stone, *grassy mound*

50 Full soon;  
For I trow,<sup>o</sup> pardie,<sup>o</sup> *think / by God*  
True men if they be,  
We get more company  
Ere it be noon.

[Enter GIB, who at first does not see COLL.]

55 GIB. Benste and Dominus,<sup>4</sup> what may this bemean?<sup>o</sup> *mean*  
Why fares this world thus? Such have we not seen.  
Lord, these winds are spiteous<sup>o</sup> and the weathers full  
keen *cruel*

And the frosts so hideous they water mine ecn,<sup>o</sup> *eyes*  
No lie.

60 Now in dry, now in wet,

7. To the point of ruin. "On live": in life.

8. Even if I have to do without it.

9. In the manuscript, this stanza follows the next.

1. Embroidered sleeve (i.e., sign of au-

thority).

2. No one dares to reprove him, no matter what force he uses.

3. Requisition (of private property).

4. Bless us and Lord.

Now in snow, now in sleet,  
When my shoon° freeze to my feet *shoes*  
It is not all easy.

65 But as far as I ken,° or yet as I go,° *see / walk*  
We silly wedmen dree mickle woe;<sup>5</sup>  
We have sorrow then and then<sup>6</sup>—it falls oft so.  
Silly Capple,<sup>7</sup> our hen, both to and fro

She cackles;  
But begin she to croak,  
70 To groan or to cluck,  
Woe is him our cock,  
For he is in the shackles.

These men that are wed have not all their will:  
When they are full hard stead<sup>8</sup> they sigh full still;  
75 God wot° they are led full hard and full ill; *knows*  
In bower nor in bed they say nought theretill.° *thereagainst*  
This tide° *time*

My part have I fun;° *found, learned*  
I know my lesson:  
80 Woe is him that is bun,° *bound*  
For he must abide.

But now late in our lives—a marvel to me,  
That I think my heart rives° such wonders to see; *splits*  
85 What that destiny drives it should so be<sup>9</sup>—  
Some men will have two wives, and some men three  
In store.

Some are woe<sup>1</sup> that has any,  
But so far can° I, *know*  
90 Woe is him that has many,  
For he feels sore.

But young men a-wooving, for God that you  
bought,° *redeemed*  
Be well ware of wedding and think in your thought:  
“Had I wist”° is a thing, it serves of nought. *known*  
Mickle° still° mourning has wedding home  
brought, *much / continual*

95 And griefs  
With many a sharp shower,° *fight*  
For thou may catch in an hour  
That° shall savor° full sour *what / taste*  
As long as thou lives.

100 For as ever read I 'pistle,° I have one to my fere<sup>2</sup> *Epistle*  
As sharp as a thistle, as rough as a brere;° *briar*

5. We poor married men suffer much woe.

6. Constantly.

7. I.e., one's wife.

8. Beset; “still”: constantly.

9. What destiny causes must occur.

1. I.e., wretched.

2. As my mate.

She is browed like a bristle, with a sour-loten cheer;<sup>3</sup>  
 Had she once wet her whistle she could sing full clear  
 Her Pater Noster.

105 She is great as a whale;  
 She has a gallon of gall:  
 By Him that died for us all,  
 I would I had run to° I had lost her. *until*

COLL. Gib, look over the raw!<sup>o</sup> Full deaffly ye stand! *hedge*

110 GIB. Yea, the devil in thy maw, so tariand!<sup>4</sup>  
 Saw thou awhere° of Daw? *anywhere*

COLL. Yea, on a  
 lea-land° *pasture land*

Heard I him blaw.<sup>5</sup> He comes here at hand,  
 Not far.  
 Stand still.

GIB. Why?

115 COLL. For he comes, hope° I. *think*

GIB. He will make us both a lie  
 But if<sup>6</sup> we be ware.

[Enter DAW, who does not see the others.]

120 DAW. Christ's cross me speed, and Saint Nicholas!  
 Thereof had I need: it is worse than it was.  
 Whoso could take heed and let the world pass,  
 It is ever in dread° and brickle° as glass, *doubt / brittle*  
 And slithes.° *slips away*

This world foor° never so, *behaved*  
 With marvels mo° and mo, *more*

125 Now in weal, now in woe,  
 And all thing writhes.° *changes*

Was never sin° Noah's flood such floods seen, *since*  
 Winds and rains so rude and storms so keen:  
 Some stammered, some stood in doubt,<sup>7</sup> as I  
 ween.° *suppose*

130 Now God turn all to good! I say as I mean.

For ponder:

These floods so they drown

Both in fields and in town,

And bears all down,

135 And that is a wonder.

We that walk on the nights, our cattle to keep,  
 We see sudden° sights when other men sleep. *unexpected*  
 Yet methink my heart lights: I see shrews peep.<sup>8</sup>

3. She has brows like pig's bristles and a sour-looking face.

4. Yes, the devil take thy guts for being so late.

5. Blow (his horn).

6. Unless.

7. The line apparently refers to men's behavior at the time of Noah's flood.

8. I see rascals are watching.

- [*He sees the others, but does not hail them.*]  
 Ye are two tall wights.<sup>o</sup> I will give my sheep *creatures*  
 A turn.  
 140 But full ill have I meant:<sup>9</sup>  
 As I walk on this bent<sup>o</sup> *field*  
 I may lightly<sup>o</sup> repent, *quickly*  
 My toes if I spurn.<sup>o</sup> *stub*
- 145 Ah, sir, God you save, and master mine!  
 A drink fain would I have, and somewhat to dine.  
 COLL. Christ's curse, my knave, thou art a lither hine!<sup>1</sup>  
 GIB. What, the boy list<sup>o</sup> rave! Abide unto sine.<sup>2</sup> *wants to*  
 We have made it.<sup>3</sup>
- 150 Ill thrift on thy pate!  
 Though the shrew<sup>o</sup> came late *rascal*  
 Yet is he in state  
 To dine, if he had it.
- DAW. Such servants as I, that sweats and swinks,<sup>o</sup> *toil*  
 155 Eats our bread full dry, and that me forthinks.<sup>o</sup> *angers*  
 We are oft wet and weary when master-men winks,<sup>o</sup> *sleep*  
 Yet comes full lately<sup>o</sup> both dinners and drinks. *tardily*  
 But nately<sup>o</sup> *profitably*  
 Both our dame and our sire,  
 160 When we have run in the mire,  
 They can nip at our hire,<sup>4</sup>  
 And pay us full lately.
- But here my troth, master, for the fare<sup>o</sup> that ye  
 make<sup>o</sup> *food / provide*  
 I shall do thereafter: work as I take.<sup>5</sup>  
 165 I shall do a little, sir, and among<sup>o</sup> ever  
 lake,<sup>o</sup> *meanwhile / play*  
 For yet lay my supper never on my stomach  
 In fields.  
 Whereto should I threap?<sup>o</sup> *haggle*  
 With my staff can I leap,<sup>6</sup>  
 170 And men say, "Light cheap  
 Litherly foryields."<sup>7</sup>
- COLL. Thou were an ill lad to ride a-woeing  
 With a man that had but little of spending.<sup>8</sup>  
 GIB. Peace, boy, I bade—no more jangling,  
 175 Or I shall make thee full rad,<sup>o</sup> by the heaven's  
 King, *frightened*  
 With thy gauds.<sup>o</sup> *tricks*

9. But that is a poor idea.

1. Thou art a worthless servant.

2. Wait till later.

3. I.e., had dinner.

4. They can deduct from our wages.

5. I.e., work in the same way as I am

paid.

6. I.e., run away.

7. A cheap bargain repays badly (a proverb).

8. You would be a bad servant for a poor man to take wooing with him.



Where are our sheep, boy? We scorn.<sup>9</sup>  
 DAW. Sir, this same day at morn  
 I them left in the corn  
 180 When they rang Lauds.<sup>1</sup>

They have pasture good, they cannot go wrong.  
 COLL. That is right. By the rood,<sup>2</sup> these nights are long! *cross*  
 Yet I would, ere we yode,<sup>3</sup> one gave us a song. *went*  
 GIB. So I thought as I stood, to mirth<sup>4</sup> us  
 among.<sup>5</sup> *cheer / meanwhile*

185 DAW. I grant.  
 COLL. Let me sing the tenory.<sup>6</sup> *tenor*  
 GIB. And I the treble so hee.<sup>6</sup> *high*  
 DAW. Then the mean<sup>6</sup> falls to me. *middle part*  
 Let see how you chant.

[*They sing.—Enter MAK with a cloak over his clothes.*]<sup>2</sup>  
 190 MAK. Now, Lord, for thy names seven, that made both moon  
 and starns<sup>3</sup>  
 Well mo than I can neven, thy will, Lord, of me tharns.<sup>4</sup>  
 I am all uneven<sup>5</sup>—that moves oft my harns.<sup>5</sup> *at odds*  
 Now would God I were in heaven, for there weep no  
 barns<sup>5</sup> *children*  
 So still.<sup>5</sup> *continually*

195 COLL. Who is that pipes so poor?  
 MAK. [*aside*] Would God ye wist<sup>7</sup> how I foor!<sup>7</sup> *knew / fared*  
 [*aloud*] Lo, a man that walks on the moor  
 And has not all his will.

GIB. Mak, where has thou gane?<sup>8</sup> Tell us tiding. *gone*  
 200 DAW. Is he come? Then ilkane<sup>6</sup> take heed to his thing.  
 [*Snatches a cloak from him.*]  
 MAK. What! Ich<sup>7</sup> be a yeoman, I tell you, of the king,  
 The self and the same, sond<sup>8</sup> from a great  
 lording *messenger*  
 And sich.<sup>8</sup> *suchlike*

Fie on you! Goth hence  
 205 Out of my presence:  
 I must have reverence.  
 Why, who be ich?

COLL. Why make ye it so quaint? Mak, ye do wrang.<sup>8</sup>  
 GIB. But, Mak, list ye saint? I trow that ye lang.<sup>9</sup>

9. I.e., waste time.

1. Rang the bells for the church service held at dawn.

2. Mak's entrance is a stage direction in the original MS.

3. Stars.

4. Well more than I can name, thy will, Lord, falls short in regard to me.

5. That often disturbs my brains.

6. Each one; "thing": possessions. The stage direction here is in the MS.

7. I (the southern form): Mak is pretending to be an important person from the south.

8. Why do you behave in such an unfriendly manner? Mak, you do wrong.

9. But, Mak, do you want to act as if you were a saint? I guess you do.

- 210 DAW. I trow the shrew can paint<sup>1</sup>—the devil might him hang!  
 MAK. Ich shall make complaint and make you all to  
     thwang<sup>o</sup> *be flogged*  
     At a word,  
     And tell even<sup>o</sup> how ye doth. *exactly*
- COLL. But Mak, is that sooth?  
 215 Now take out that southern tooth,<sup>2</sup>  
     And set in a turd!
- GIB. Mak, the devil in your ee!<sup>3</sup> A stroke would I lean you!  
 DAW. Mak, know ye not me? By God, I could teen<sup>o</sup> you. *vex*  
 MAK. God look<sup>o</sup> you all three: Methought I had seen you. *guard*  
 220 Ye are a fair company.
- COLL. Can ye now mean you?<sup>4</sup>  
 GIB. Shrew, peep!<sup>5</sup>  
     Thus late as thou goes,  
     What will men suppose?  
     Thou has an ill nose<sup>6</sup>  
 225 Of stealing of sheep.
- MAK. And I am true as steel, all men wate.<sup>o</sup> *know*  
     But a sickness I feel that holds me full hate:<sup>o</sup> *hot, feverish*  
     My belly fares not weel, it is out of estate.  
 DAW. Seldom lies the devil dead by the gate.<sup>7</sup>
- 230 MAK. Therefore  
     Full sore am I and ill  
     If I stand stone-still:  
     I eat not a needill<sup>8</sup>  
     This month and more.
- 235 COLL. How fares thy wife? By my hood, how fares sho?<sup>o</sup> *she*  
 MAK. Lies waltering,<sup>o</sup> by the rood, by the fire, lo! *lounging*  
     And a house full of brood.<sup>o</sup> She drinks well, too: *children*  
     Ill speed other good that she will do!<sup>9</sup>  
     But sho  
 240 Eats as fast as she can;  
     And ilk<sup>o</sup> year that comes to man *every*  
     She brings forth a lakan,<sup>o</sup> *baby*  
     And some years two.
- But were I now more gracious<sup>o</sup> and richer by  
     far,  
 245 I were caten out of house and of harbar.<sup>o</sup> *prosperous*  
     Yet is she a foul douce,<sup>o</sup> if ye come nar:<sup>1</sup> *home*  
     There is none that trows<sup>o</sup> nor knows a  
     war<sup>o</sup> *sweetheart*  
*imagines / worse*

1. I think the shrew can play tricks.  
 2. Now stop speaking like a southerner.  
 3. Eye; "lean": lend.  
 4. Remember.  
 5. Rascal, watch out.  
 6. Noise, i.e., reputation.

7. Road (i.e., the devil is always on the move).  
 8. Needle, i.e., a little bit.  
 9. I.e., that's the only good thing she does.  
 1. I.e., near the truth.

Than ken° I. know

Now will ye see what I proffer:

250

To give all in my coffer  
Tomorn at next<sup>2</sup> to offer  
Her head-masspenny.<sup>3</sup>

GIB. I wot° so forwaked° is none in this shire. *know / sleepless*  
I would sleep if° I taked less to my hire. *even if*

255

DAW. I am cold and naked and would have a fire.  
I am weary forraked° and run in the mire. *from walking*  
Wake thou.<sup>4</sup>

GIB. Nay, I will lie down by,  
For I must sleep, truly.

260

DAW. As good a man's son was I  
As any of you.

But Mak, come hither, between shall thou lie down.

MAK. Then might I let you bedeen of that ye would rown,<sup>5</sup>  
No dread.<sup>o</sup> *doubt*

265

From my top to my toe,  
[Saying his prayers.]  
Manus tuas commendo  
Pontio Pilato.<sup>6</sup>

Christ's cross me speed!

[He gets up as the others sleep and speaks.]<sup>7</sup>

270

Now were time for a man that lacks what he would  
To stalk privily than° unto a fold, *then*  
And nimble to work than, and be not too bold,  
For he might abuy° the bargain if it were told *pay for*  
At the ending.

275

Now were time for to reel:<sup>o</sup> *move spryly*  
But he needs good counseel  
That fain would fare weel° *well*  
And has but little spending.

[He casts a spell.]

280

But about you a circill,<sup>o</sup> as round as a moon, *circle*  
To° I have done that° I will, till that it be  
noon, *until / what*  
That ye lie stone-still to that I have done;  
And I shall say theretill° of good words a  
foon:<sup>o</sup> *moreover / few*

“On height,  
Over your heads my hand I lift.  
Out go your eyes! Fordo your sight!”<sup>8</sup>

2. “Tomorn at next”: tomorrow.

3. The penny paid for a mass for her departed spirit.

4. You stay awake.

5. Then I might hinder you if you wanted to whisper together.

6. Mak's prayer means, “Thy hands I commend to Pontius Pilate.”

7. One of the original stage directions.

8. May your sight be rendered powerless.

285 But yet I must make better shift  
And it be right.<sup>9</sup>

Lord, what° they sleep hard—that may ye all hear. *how*  
Was I never a shephard, but now will I lear.° *learn*  
If the flock be scar'd, yet shall I nip near.

290 How! Draws hitherward! Now mends our cheer  
From sorrow.

A fat sheep, I dare say!  
A good fleece, dare I lay!° *bet*  
Eft-quit° when I may, *repay*

295 But this will I borrow.  
[*Exit with sheep.*]

[*MAK'S house. MAK speaks outside the door.*]

MAK. How, Gill, art thou in? Get us some light.

GILL. [*within*] Who makes such a din this time of the night?  
I am set for to spin; I hope not I might<sup>1</sup>

300 Rise a penny to win—I shrew° them on height! *curse*  
So fares

A housewife that has been  
To be raised thus between:<sup>2</sup>  
Here may no note° be seen *completed work*  
For such small chares.° *chores*

305 MAK. Good wife, open the heck!° Sees thou not what I  
bring? *door*

GILL. I may thow thee draw the sneck.<sup>3</sup> Ah, come in, my  
sweeting.

MAK. Yea, thou thar not reck of<sup>4</sup> my long standing.  
[*She opens the door.*]

GILL. By the naked neck art thou like for to hing.° *hang*

MAK. Do way!  
310 I am worthy° my meat, *worthy of*  
For in a strait° can I get *pinch*  
More than they that swink° and sweat *work*  
All the long day.

Thus it fell to my lot, Gill, I had such grace.

315 GILL. It were a foul blot to be hanged for the case.

MAK. I have 'scaped,° Jelot,<sup>5</sup> oft as hard a glase.° *escaped / blow*

GILL. But "So long goes the pot to the water," men says,  
"At last

320 MAK. Comes it home broken."  
Well know I the token,  
But let it never be spoken!  
But come and help fast.

9. If it is to be all right.

1. I don't think I could.

2. This is what happens to anyone  
who's been a housewife—to be got up

all the time.

3. I may let you draw the latch.

4. You need not care about.

5. I.e., Gill.

- I would he were flain,<sup>o</sup> I list<sup>o</sup> well eat: *skinned / wish*  
 This twelvemonth was I not so fain of one sheep-meat.
- 325 GILL. Come they ere he be slain, and hear the sheep bleat—  
 MAK. Then might I be taen<sup>o</sup>—that were a cold sweat! *taken*  
           Go spar<sup>o</sup> *fasten*  
           The gate<sup>o</sup> door. *street*
- GILL. Yes, Mak,  
 For and<sup>o</sup> they come at thy back— *if*
- 330 MAK. Then might I buy,<sup>o</sup> for all the pack, *have to pay*  
           The devil of the war.<sup>o</sup> *worse*
- GILL. A good bourd have I spied, sin thou can none:<sup>6</sup>  
 Here shall we him hide, to<sup>o</sup> they be gone, *until*  
 In my cradle. Abide, let me alone,  
 335 And I shall lie beside in childbed and groan.
- MAK. Thou red,<sup>o</sup> *get ready*  
           And I shall sav thou was light<sup>o</sup> *delivered*  
           Of a knave-child<sup>o</sup> this night. *boy child*
- GILL. Now well is me day bright  
 340 That ever was I bred.<sup>7</sup>
- This is a good guise<sup>o</sup> and a fair cast:<sup>o</sup> *method / trick*  
 Yet a woman's advise helps at the last.  
 I wot<sup>o</sup> never who spies: again go thou fast. *know*
- MAK. But<sup>o</sup> I come ere they rise, else blows a cold blast. *unless*  
 345 I will go sleep.  
           Yet sleeps all this meny,<sup>o</sup> *company*  
           And I shall go stalk privily,  
           As it had never been I  
           That carried their sheep.
- [The moor. The shepherds are waking.]
- 350 COLL. *Resurrex a mortuus!*<sup>8</sup> Have hold my hand!  
           *Judas carnas dominus!*<sup>9</sup> I may not well stand.  
           My foot sleeps, by Jesus, and I walter<sup>o</sup>  
           fastand.<sup>o</sup> *lie / fasting*
- GIB. I thought that we laid us full near England.  
           Ah, yea?
- 355 Lord, what<sup>o</sup> I have slept weel!<sup>o</sup> *how / well*  
           As fresh as an eel,  
           As light I me feel  
           As leaf on a tree.
- DAW. Benste<sup>o</sup> be herein! So my body quakes, *blessing*  
 360 My heart is out of skin, what-so<sup>o</sup> it  
           makes.<sup>o</sup> *whatever / causes*

6. A good trick have I found, since you know none.

7. Now it was a good day that I was born.

8. An illiterate oath referring, apparently, to Christ's Resurrection from the dead.

9. Judas, (in?)carnate lord.

Who makes all this din? So my brows blakes,<sup>1</sup>  
To the door will I win. Hark, fellows, wakes!

We were four:

See ye awwhere of Mak now?

365 COLL. We were up ere thou.

GIB. Man, I give God avow  
Yet yede he naw're.<sup>2</sup>

DAW. Methought he was lapped° in a wolfskin. *covered*

COLL. So are many happed° now, namely°  
within. *clad / especially*

370 DAW. When we had long napped, methought with a gin° *snare*  
A fat sheep he trapped, but he made no din.

GIB. Be still:

Thy dream makes thee wood.° *mad*

It is but phantom, by the rood.° *cross*

375 COLL. Now God turn all to good,  
If it be his will.

GIB. Rise, Mak, for shame! Thou lies right lang.° *long*

MAK. Now Christ's holy name be us amang!° *among*

380 What is this? For Saint Jame, I may not well gang.° *walk*  
I trow° I be the same. Ah, my neck has lain

wrang.° *think / wrong*

[*One of them twists his neck.*]

Enough!

Mickle thank! Sin yestereven

Now, by Saint Strephen,<sup>3</sup>

I was flayed with a sweven<sup>4</sup>—

385 My heart out of slough.° *skin*

I thought Gill began to croak and travail full sad,° *hard*

Well-near at the first cock, of a young lad,

For to mend° our flock—then be I never glad: *increase*

390 I have tow on my rock<sup>5</sup> more than ever I had.

Ah, my head!

A house full of young tharms!°

The devil knock out their harns!° *guts*

Woe is him has many barns,° *brains*

And thereto little bread. *children*

395 I must go home, by your leave, to Gill, as I thought.

I pray you look° my sleeve, that I steal nought. *examine*

I am loath you to grieve or from you take aught.

DAW. Go forth! Ill might thou chieve!° Now would I we  
sought<sup>6</sup> *prosper*

This morn

1. The meaning is probably "my eyes are dim." Daw's head may be under a blanket.

2. He's gone nowhere yet.

3. Probably St. Stephen.

4. I was terrified by a dream.

5. Flax on my distaff (i.e., trouble).

6. I want us to seek.

- 400 That we had all our store.  
 COLL. But I will go before.  
 Let us meet.
- GIB. Whore?° *where*  
 DAW. At the crooked thorn.  
 [MAK'S house. MAK at the door.]
- MAK. Undo this door! Who is here? How long shall I stand?  
 405 GILL. Who makes such a bere?° Now walk in the  
 weniand!° *clamor*
- MAK. Ah, Gill, what cheer? It is I, Mak, your husband.  
 GILL. Then may we see here the devil in a band,<sup>8</sup>  
 Sir Guile!  
 Lo, he comes with a lote° *noise*  
 410 As he were holden in the throat:  
 I may not sit at my note° *work*  
 A hand-long° while. *short*
- MAK. Will ye here what fare<sup>9</sup> she makes to get her a glose?  
 And does nought but lakes° and claws her toes? *plays*
- 415 GILL. Why, who wanders? Who wakes? Who comes? Who  
 goes?  
 Who brews? Who bakes? What makes me thus  
 hose?° *hoarse*  
 And than° *then*  
 It is ruth° to behold, *pity*  
 Now in hot, now in cold,  
 420 Full woeful is the household  
 That wants° a woman. *lacks*
- But what end has thou made with the herds,<sup>°</sup>  
 Mak? *shepherds*
- MAK. The last word that they said when I turned my back,  
 They would look that they had their sheep all the pack.  
 425 I hope<sup>1</sup> they will not be well paid when they their sheep  
 lack.  
 Pardie!° *by God*  
 But how-so the game goes,  
 To me they will suppose,<sup>°</sup> *suspect*  
 And make a foul nose,<sup>°</sup> *noise*  
 430 And cry out upon me.
- But thou must do as thou hight.<sup>°</sup> *promised*
- GILL. I shall swaddle him right in my cradill.  
 If it were a greater sleight, vet could I help till.<sup>3</sup>

7. Waning of the moon (an unlucky time).

8. On a leash.

9. Fuss; "glose": excuse.

1. Expect; "paid": pleased.

2. I agree to it.

3. I.e., with it.

I will lie down straight.° Come, hap°  
me.

*straightway / cover*

MAK. I will.

435 GILL. Behind  
Come Coll and his marrow;° *mate*  
They will nip us full narrow.

MAK. But I may cry "Out, harrow,"° *help*  
The sheep if they find.

440 GILL. Hearken ay when they call—they will come anon.  
Come and make ready all, and sing by thine one.° *self*  
Sing "lullay"° thou shall, for I must groan, *lullaby*  
And cry out by the wall on Mary and John  
For sore.° *pain*

445 Sing "lullay" on fast  
When thou hears at the last,  
And but I play a false cast,<sup>4</sup>  
Trust me no more.

[*The moor.*]

DAW. Ah, Coll, good morn. Why sleeps thou not?  
450 COLL. Alas that ever I was born! We have a foul blot:  
A fat wether° have we lorn.° *ram / lost*

DAW. Marry, God's forbot!<sup>5</sup>

GIB. Who should do us that scorn? That were a foul spot!

COLL. Some shrew.° *rascal*

I have sought with my dogs  
455 All Horbury shrogs,° *thickets*  
And of fifteen hogs  
Found I but one ewe.<sup>6</sup>

DAW. Now trow me,° if ye will, by Saint Thomas of  
Kent, *believe*

Either Mak or Gill was at that assent.° *conspiracy*  
460 COLL. Peace, man, be still! I saw when he went.  
Thou slanders him ill, thou ought to repent  
Good speed.

GIB. Now as ever might I thee,° *thrive*  
If I should even here. dee,° *die*

465 I would say it were he  
That did that same deed.

DAW. Go we thither, I read,° and run on our feet. *advise*

Shall I never eat bread the sooth to I weet.<sup>7</sup>

COLL. Nor drink in my head, with him till I meet.

4. Unless I play a false trick.

5. God forbid.

6. And with fifteen young sheep I found

only a ewe (i.e., the wether was missing).

7. Until I know the truth.



470 GIB. I will rest in no stead° till that I him greet, place  
 My brother.  
 One I will hight:<sup>8</sup>  
 Till I see him in sight  
 Shall I never sleep one night  
 475 There° I do another. where

[MAK's house. MAK and GILL within, she in bed groaning, he singing a lullaby; the shepherds enter outside the door.]

DAW. Will ye hear how they hack?<sup>9</sup> Our sire list croon.  
 COLL. Heard I never none crack° so clear out of tune. song  
 Call on him.

GIB. Mak, undo your door soon!<sup>0</sup> at once  
 MAK. Who is that spake, as° it were noon, as if  
 480 On loft?<sup>1</sup>

Who is that, I say?  
 DAW. Good fellows, were it day.<sup>2</sup>

MAK. As far as ye may,  
 [opening] Good,° speaks soft good men

485 Over a sick woman's head, that is at malease.<sup>3</sup>  
 I had liefer° be dead ere she had any  
 disease.° rather / distress

GILL. Go to another stead, I may not well wheeze:° breathe  
 Each foot that ye tread goes through my nese.° nose  
 So, hee!<sup>0</sup> scat

490 COLL. Tell us, Mak, if you may,  
 How fare ye, I say?

MAK. But are ye in this town today?  
 Now how fare ye?

Ye have run in the mire and are wet yit.  
 495 I shall make you a fire if you will sit.  
 A nurse would I hire—Think ye one<sup>4</sup> yit?  
 Well quit is my hire—my dream, this is it  
 A season.<sup>5</sup>

I have barns,° if ye knew, children  
 500 Well mo° than enew:° more / enough  
 But we must drink as we brew,  
 And that is but reason.

I would ye dined ere ye yode.° Methink that ye  
 sweat. went

GIB. Nay, neither mends our mood<sup>6</sup> drink nor meat.

505 MAK. Why, sir, ails you aught but good?<sup>7</sup>

8. One thing will I promise.

9. Bellow. "List": wants to.

1. Loudly.

2. Good companions, if it were daytime.

3. That feels badly.

4. Can you think of one?

5. Right on time.

6. Appeases our anger.

7. Is there anything wrong with you?

"Get": tend.

- DAW. Yea, our sheep that we get  
Are stolen as they yode:° our loss is great. *walked*
- MAK. Sirs, drinks!  
Had I been thore°  
Some should have bought° it full sore. *there*
- 510 COLL. Marry, some men trows° that ye wore,° *paid for*  
And that us forthinks.° *think / were*  
*disturbs*
- GIB. Mak, some men trows that it should be ye.
- DAW. Either ye or your spouse, so say we.
- 515 MAK. Now if you have suspouse° to Gill or to me, *suspicion*  
Come and ripe° the house, and then may ye see *search*  
Who had her<sup>8</sup>—  
If I any sheep fot,° *fetchd*  
Either cow or stot<sup>9</sup>—  
And Gill my wife rose not  
520 Here sin she laid her.
- As I am true and leal,° to God here I pray *just*  
That this be the first meal that I shall eat this day.
- COLL. Mak, as I have sele,<sup>1</sup> advise thee, I say:  
[*They begin the search.*]  
He learned timely to steal that could not say nay.
- 525 GILL. I swelt!° *die*  
Out, thieves, from my wones!° *dwelling*  
Ye come to rob us for the nones.<sup>2</sup>
- MAK. Hear ye not how she groans?  
Your hearts should melt.
- 530 GILL. Out, thieves, from my barn!° Nigh him not thore!<sup>3</sup> *child*  
MAK. Wist ye how she had farn,<sup>4</sup> your hearts would be sore.  
You do wrong, I you warn, that thus comes before  
To a womman that has farn°—but I say no  
more. *been in labor*
- GILL. Ah, my middill!  
535 I pray to God so mild,  
If ever I you beguiled,  
That I eat this child  
That lies in this cradill.
- MAK. Peace, woman, for God's pain, and cry not so!  
540 Thou spills° thy brain and makes me full wo. *spoil*
- GIB. I trow our sheep be slain. What find ye two?  
DAW. All work we in vain; as well may we go.  
But hatters,<sup>5</sup>  
I can find no flesh,

8. I.e., the sheep.

9. Either female or male.

1. Happiness; "advise thee": take thought.

2. You come for the purpose of robbing

us.

3. Approach him not there.

4. If you knew how she had fared.

5. Except for clothing.

545 Hard nor nesh,<sup>o</sup> soft  
Salt nor fresh,  
But two tome<sup>o</sup> platters. empty

Quick cattle<sup>6</sup> but this, tame nor wild,  
None, as have I bliss, as loud as he smiled.<sup>7</sup>  
[Approaches the cradle.]

550 GILL. No, so God me bliss,<sup>o</sup> and give me joy of my child! *bless*  
COLL. We have marked<sup>o</sup> amiss—I hold us beguiled. *aimed*  
GIB. Sir, don!<sup>o</sup> *thoroughly*

Sir—Our Lady him save—  
Is your child a knave?<sup>8</sup>  
555 MAK. Any lord might him have,  
This child, to his son.

When he wakens he kips,<sup>o</sup> that joy is to see. *kicks*  
DAW. In good time to his hips, and in sely.<sup>9</sup>  
But who were his gossips,<sup>o</sup> so soon ready? *godparents*

560 MAK. So fair fall their lips—  
COLL. Hark, now, a lee.<sup>o</sup> *lie*  
MAK. So God them thank,

Perkin, and Gibbon Waller, I say,  
And gentle John Horne, in good fay<sup>o</sup>— *faith*  
He made all the garray

565 With the great shank.<sup>1</sup>

GIB. Mak, friends will we be, for we are all one.<sup>o</sup> *in accord*

MAK. We? Now I hold for me, for mends get I none.<sup>2</sup>  
Farewell all three, all glad<sup>3</sup> were ye gone.

DAW. Fair words may there be, but love is there none  
570 This year.

[They go out the door.]

COLL. Gave ye the child anything?

GIB. I trow not one farthing.

DAW. Fast again will I fling.<sup>o</sup> *dash*  
Abide ye me there.

575 Mak, take it to no grief if I come to thy barn.<sup>o</sup> *child*

MAK. Nay, thou does me great reproof,<sup>4</sup> and foul has thou farn.

DAW. Thy child it will not grief, that little day-starn<sup>o</sup> *day star*

Mak, with your leaf,<sup>o</sup> let me give your barn *leave*

But sixpence.

580 MAK. Nay, do way, he sleeps.

DAW. Methinks he peeps.<sup>o</sup> *opens his eyes*

MAK. When he wakens he weeps.

I pray you go hence.

6. Livestock.

7. Smelled as badly as he (the baby).

8. Boy (although Mak takes the word

in its alternate meaning of "rascal").

9. Perhaps "that's the best thing for him."

1. He made all the trouble with his long legs (the reference is obscure).

2. Now I'll remain apart, for I get no apology.

3. I.e., I would be glad.

4. Shame; "farn": behaved.

- DAW. Give me leave him to kiss, and lift up the clout.<sup>5</sup>  
 [*Lifts the cover.*]
- 585 What the devil is this? He has a long snout.  
 [*The others re-enter.*]
- COLL. He is marked<sup>6</sup> amiss. We wot ill about.  
 GIB. Ill-spun weft, ywis, ay comes foul out.<sup>7</sup>  
 Aye, so!  
 He is like to our sheep.
- 590 DAW. How, Gib, may I peep?  
 COLL. I trow kind will creep  
 Where it may not go.<sup>8</sup>
- GIB. This was quaint gaud and a fair cast.<sup>9</sup>  
 It was a high fraud.
- DAW. Yea, sirs, was't.  
 595 Let burn this bawd and bind her fast.  
 A false scaud<sup>o</sup> hang at the last: *scold*  
 So shall thou.  
 Will you see how they swaddle  
 His four feet in the middle?
- 600 Saw I never in cradle  
 A horned lad ere now.
- MAK. Peace bid I! What, let be your fare!<sup>o</sup> *fuss*  
 I am he that him gat,<sup>o</sup> and yond woman him bare. *begot*
- COLL. What devil shall he hat?<sup>o</sup> Mak? Lo, Gib, Mak's  
 heir! *be named*
- 605 GIB. Let be all that: now God give him care<sup>o</sup>— *sorrow*  
 I sawgh.<sup>1</sup>
- GILL. A pretty child is he  
 As sits on a woman's knee,  
 A dillydown, pardie,  
 610 To gar<sup>o</sup> a man laugh. *make*
- DAW. I know him by the earmark—that is a good token.  
 MAK. I tell you, sirs, hark, his nose was broken.  
 Sithen<sup>o</sup> told me a clark that he was  
 forspoken.<sup>o</sup> *later / bewitched*
- COLL. This is a false wark.<sup>o</sup> I would fain be  
 wroken.<sup>o</sup> *work / avenged*
- 615 Get wapen.<sup>o</sup> *weapon*  
 GILL. He was taken with<sup>o</sup> an elf—  
 I saw it myself—  
 When the clock struck twelf  
 He was forshapen.<sup>o</sup> *by transformed*

5. Cover.

6. Fashioned. "We wot ill about": we know mischief has been at work.

7. An ill-spun web, indeed, always comes out badly.

8. I think kinship will creep where it

can't walk (i.e., only a parent could love this child).

9. This was a strange trick and a fine dodge.

1. Probably "I saw it."

620 GIB. Ye two are well feft sam in a stead.<sup>2</sup>  
 DAW. Sin<sup>3</sup> they maintain their theft, let do them to dead.  
 MAK. If I trespass eft,<sup>o</sup> gird<sup>o</sup> off my head. *again / cut*  
 With you will I be left.<sup>4</sup>

COLL.                      Sirs, do my read:<sup>o</sup>                      *advice*

                    For this trespass  
 625                      We will neither ban<sup>o</sup> ne flite,<sup>o</sup>                      *curse / wrangle*  
                     Fight nor chite,<sup>o</sup>    *chide*  
                     But have done as tite,<sup>o</sup>                                      *quickly*  
                     And cast him in canvas.  
 [They toss MAK in a blanket.]

[The moor.]

COLL. Lord, what<sup>o</sup> I am sore, in point for to brist!<sup>o</sup> *how / burst*  
 630 In faith, I may no more—therefore will I rist.<sup>o</sup>                      *rest*

GIB. As a sheep of seven score<sup>5</sup> he weighed in my fist:  
 For to sleep aywhore<sup>o</sup> methink that I list.<sup>o</sup> *anywhere / want*

DAW.                      Now I pray you

                    Lie down on this green.

635 COLL.                      On these thieves yit I mean.<sup>o</sup>                                      *think*

DAW.                      Whereto should ye teen?<sup>o</sup>                                      *worry*

                    Do as I say you.

[An ANGEL sings Gloria in Excelsis and then speaks.]<sup>6</sup>

ANGEL. Rise, herdmen hend,<sup>o</sup> for now is he born                      *gentle*

                    That shall take fro the fiend that Adam had lorn;<sup>7</sup>

640                      That warlock<sup>o</sup> to shend,<sup>o</sup> this night is he  
                     born.    *devil / confound*

                    God is made your friend now at this morn

                    He beheests.<sup>o</sup>    *promises*

                    At Bedlem<sup>o</sup> go see:    *Bethlehem*

                    There lies that free,<sup>o</sup>    *noble one*

645                      In a crib full poorly,

                    Betwixt two beasts.

[Exit.]

COLL. This was a quaint steven<sup>8</sup> that ever yet I hard.<sup>o</sup>                      *heard*

                    It is a marvel to neven<sup>o</sup> thus to be scar'd.<sup>o</sup>                      *tell of / scared*

GIB. Of God's Son of heaven he spake upward.<sup>o</sup>                      *on high*

650 All the wood on a leven methought that he gard

                    Appear.<sup>9</sup>

DAW.                      He spake of a barn<sup>o</sup>    *child*

                    In Bedlem, I you warn.

COLL.                      That betokens yond starn.<sup>1</sup>

655                      Let us seek him there.

2. I.e., you two birds of a feather properly flock together.

3. Since; "dead": death.

4. I put myself in your mercy.

5. 140 pounds.

6. One of the original stage directions.

7. What Adam had brought to ruin.

8. Fine voice.

9. I thought he made the whole wood seem full of light.

1. That's what yonder star means.

- GIB. Say, what was his song? Heard ye not how he cracked it,<sup>2</sup>  
Three breves<sup>3</sup> to a long?
- DAW. Yea, marry, he hacked it.  
Was no crochet<sup>o</sup> wrong, nor nothing that lacked it.<sup>4</sup> *note*
- COLL. For to sing us among, right as he knacked<sup>o</sup> it, *trilled*  
I can.<sup>o</sup> *know how*
- 660 GIB. Let see how ye croon!  
Can ye bark at the moon?
- DAW. Hold your tongues! Have done!
- COLL. Hark after, than!
- 665 GIB. To Bedlem he bade that we should gang:<sup>o</sup> *go*  
I am full rad<sup>o</sup> that we tarry too lang.<sup>o</sup> *afraid / long*
- DAW. Be merry and not sad; of mirth is our sang:  
Everlasting glad to meed may we fang.<sup>5</sup>
- COLL. Without nose<sup>o</sup> *noise*
- 670 Hie we thither forthy<sup>o</sup> *therefore*  
To that child and that lady;  
If<sup>o</sup> we be wet and weary, *though*  
We have it not to lose.<sup>6</sup>
- GIB. We find by the prophecy—let be your din!—  
675 Of David and Isay, and mo than I min,<sup>7</sup>  
That prophesied by clergy<sup>o</sup> that in a virgin *learning*  
Should he light<sup>o</sup> and lie, to sloken<sup>o</sup> our sin *alight / quench*  
And slake<sup>o</sup> it, *relieve*  
Our kind,<sup>8</sup> from woe,
- 680 For Isay said so:  
*Ecce virgo*  
*Concipiet*<sup>9</sup> a child that is naked.
- DAW. Full glad may we be and<sup>o</sup> we abide that day *if*  
That lovely to see, that all mights may.<sup>1</sup>
- 685 Lord, well were me for once and for ay  
Might I kneel on my knee, some word for to say  
To that child.  
But the angel said  
In a crib was he laid,
- 690 He was poorly arrayed,  
Both mean<sup>o</sup> and mild. *lowly*
- COLL. Patriarchs that has been, and prophets befor,  
That desired to have seen this child that is born,  
They are gone full clean—that have they lorn.<sup>2</sup>
- 695 We shall see him, I ween,<sup>o</sup> ere it be morn, *think*

2. Sang it out.

3. Short notes; "hacked": sang loud.

4. It lacked.

5. Eternal joy as our reward may we receive.

6. We must not neglect it.

7. Of David and Isaiah and more than

I remember.

8. I.e., mankind.

9. Behold, a virgin shall conceive (Isaiah vii.14).

1. I.e., when we see that lovely one who is all-powerful.

2. That (sight) have they lost.

To token.<sup>3</sup>  
 When I see him and feel,  
 Then wot I full weel<sup>4</sup>  
 It is true as steel

700

That prophets have spoken:

To so poor as we are that he would appear,  
 First find, and declare by his messenger.

GIB. Go we now, let us fare, the place is us near.

DAW. I am ready and yare,<sup>5</sup> go we in fere<sup>5</sup>

705

To that bright.<sup>6</sup>

*prepared  
 glorious one*

Lord, if thy wills be—

We are lewd<sup>6</sup> all three—

*ignorant*

Thou grant us some kins glee<sup>6</sup>

To comfort thy wight.<sup>6</sup>

*creature*

[A stable in Bethlehem.]

710

COLL. Hail, comely and clean! Hail, young child!

Hail Maker, as I mean, of<sup>6</sup> a maiden so mild!

*born of*

Thou has waried,<sup>6</sup> I ween, the warlock<sup>6</sup> so

wild.

*put a curse on / devil*

The false guiler of teen,<sup>7</sup> now goes he beguiled.

Lo, he merries!

715

Lo, he laughs, my sweeting!

A well fair meeting!

I have holden my heting:<sup>6</sup>

*promise*

Have a bob<sup>6</sup> of cherries.

*bunch*

GIB. Hail, sovereign Saviour, for thou has us sought!

720

Hail freely food<sup>8</sup> and flower, that all thing has wrought!

Hail, full of favor, that made all of nought!

Hail! I kneel and I cower.<sup>6</sup> A bird have I brought

*crouch*

To my barn.<sup>6</sup>

*child*

Hail, little tiny mop!<sup>6</sup>

*baby*

725

Of our creed thou art crop.<sup>6</sup>

*head*

I would drink on thy cup,

Little day-starn.

DAW. Hail, darling dear, full of Godhead!

I pray thee be near when that I have need.

730

Hail, sweet is thy cheer<sup>6</sup>—my heart would bleed

*face*

To see thee sit here in so poor weed,<sup>6</sup>

*clothing*

With no pennies.

Hail! Put forth thy dall!<sup>6</sup>

*hand*

I bring thee but a ball:

735

Have and play thee withal,

And go to the tennis.

3. As a sign.

4. Then know I full well.

5. Together.

6. Some kind of cheer.

7. The false grievous deceiver.

8. Noble child.

- MARY. The Father of heaven, God omnipotent,  
That set all on seven,<sup>9</sup> his Son has he sent.  
My name could he neven, and light ere he went.<sup>1</sup>  
740 I conceived him full even through might as he meant.<sup>2</sup>  
And now is he born.  
He<sup>3</sup> keep you from woe!  
I shall pray him so.  
Tell forth as ye go,  
745 And min on<sup>4</sup> this morn.
- COLL. Farewell, lady, so fair to behold,  
With thy child on thy knee.
- GIB. But he lies full cold.  
Lord, well is me. Now we go, thou behold.
- DAW. Forsooth, already it seems to be told  
750 Full oft.
- COLL. What grace we have fun!<sup>o</sup> *received*  
GIB. Come forth, now are we won!<sup>o</sup> *redeemed*  
DAW. To sing are we bun:<sup>o</sup> *bound*  
Let take on loft.<sup>5</sup>  
[*They sing.*]

9. Who created everything perfectly. just as he intended.  
1. My name did he name, and alighted 3. May he.  
ere he went. 4. Remember.  
2. I conceived him through his power, 5. Let's raise our voices.

## EVERYMAN

(after 1485)

*Everyman* is the best surviving example of that kind of medieval drama which is known as the morality play. Moralities apparently evolved side by side with the mysteries and in England were, like them, acted by trade guilds, though they were composed individually and not in cycles. They too have a primarily religious purpose, though their method of attaining it is different. The mysteries endeavored to make the Christian religion more real to the unlearned by dramatizing significant events in Biblical history and by showing what these events meant in terms of human experience. The moralities, on the other hand, employed allegory to dramatize the moral struggle that Christianity envisions as present in every man: the actors are every man and the qualities within him, good or bad, and the plot consists of his various reactions to these qualities as they push and pull him one way or another—that is, in Christian terms, toward heaven or toward hell. The intent of the morality is more overtly didactic than the mystery, but most of the moralities share with the mysteries a good deal of rough humor. This is perhaps more evident in other plays of the genre than in *Everyman*, where the chief humor lies in the undue haste with which the hero's friends abandon him when he calls on them for help.



*Everyman* inculcates its austere lesson by the simplicity and directness of its language and of its approach. A fine sense of inevitability is built up as *Everyman* is stripped, one by one, of those apparent goods on which he had relied. First he is deserted by his patently false friends: his casual companions, his kinsmen, and his wealth. Receiving some comfort from his enfeebled good deeds, he falls back on them and on his other resources—his strength, his beauty, his intelligence, and his knowledge—qualities which, when properly used, help to make an integrated man. These assist him through the crisis in which he must make up his book of accounts, but at the end, when he must go to the grave, all desert him save his good deeds alone. While the play contains rather too much direct sermonizing, it makes most effectively its grim point that man can take with him from this world nothing that he has received, only what he has given.

In *Everyman* allegory appears in its most meticulously worked-out form. Each actor has his allegorical significance defined by his name and behaves entirely within the limits of that definition. The onlooker takes a good deal of intellectual satisfaction in watching the nice operation of the allegorical equations. On the other hand, one might object that allegory, when so neatly handled, sacrifices for a kind of mathematical regularity the suggestiveness that inheres in the far looser allegory of such a work as *Piers Plowman*, which stimulates the imagination more than it satisfies the intellect. Nevertheless, when it is well staged and well acted, *Everyman*, despite its uncompromising didacticism, is a powerful drama.

The play was written near the end of the 15th century. It is probably a translation of a Flemish play, though it is not impossible that the Flemish play is the translation and the English *Everyman* the original.

## Everyman<sup>1</sup>

### *Dramatis Personae*

MESSENGER	KNOWLEDGE
GOD	CONFESSION
DEATH	BEAUTY
EVERYMAN	STRENGTH
FELLOWSHIP	DISCRETION
KINDRED	FIVE-WITS
COUSIN	ANGEL
GOODS	DOCTOR
GOOD DEEDS	

HERE BEGINNETH A TREATISE HOW THE HIGH FATHER OF  
HEAVEN SENDETH DEATH TO SUMMON EVERY CREATURE

1. The text is based upon the earliest printing of the play (no manuscript is known) by John Skot about 1530, as reproduced by W. W. Greg (Louvain, 1904). The spelling has been modern-

ized except where modernization would spoil the rhyme, and modern punctuation has been added. The stage directions have been amplified.

TO COME AND GIVE ACCOUNT OF THEIR LIVES IN THIS  
WORLD, AND IS IN MANNER OF A MORAL PLAY

[*Enter* MESSENGER.]

MESSENGER. I pray you all give your audience,  
And hear this matter with reverence,  
By figure<sup>2</sup> a moral play,  
*The Summoning of Everyman* called it is,  
5 That of our lives and ending shows  
How transitory we be all day.<sup>3</sup>  
The matter is wonder precious,  
But the intent of it is more gracious  
And sweet to bear away.  
10 The story saith: Man, in the beginning  
Look well, and take good heed to the ending,  
Be you never so gay.  
You think sin in the beginning full sweet,  
Which in the end causeth the soul to weep,  
15 When the body lieth in clay.  
Here shall you see how fellowship and jollity,  
Both strength, pleasure, and beauty,  
Will fade from thee as flower in May.  
For ye shall hear how our Heaven-King  
20 Calleth Everyman to a general reckoning.  
Give audience and hear what he doth say.

[*Exit* MESSENGER.—*Enter* GOD.]

GOD. I perceive, here in my majesty,  
How that all creatures be to me unkind,<sup>o</sup> *thoughtless*  
Living without dread in worldly prosperity.  
25 Of ghostly<sup>o</sup> sight the people be so blind, *spiritual*  
Drowned in sin, they know me not for their God.  
In worldly riches is all their mind:  
They fear not of my righteousness the sharp rod;  
My law that I showed when I for them died  
30 They forget clean, and shedding of my blood red.  
I hanged between two,<sup>4</sup> it cannot be denied:  
To get them life I suffered to be dead.  
I healed their feet, with thorns hurt was my head.  
I could do no more than I did, truly—  
35 And now I see the people do clean forsake me.  
They use the seven deadly sins damnable,  
As pride, covetise,<sup>o</sup> wrath, and lechery<sup>o</sup> *avarice*  
Now in the world be made commendable.  
And thus they leave of angels the heavenly company.  
40 Every man liveth so after his own pleasure,  
And yet of their life they be nothing sure.  
I see the more that I them forbear,  
The worse they be from year to year:  
All that liveth appaireth<sup>o</sup> fast. *degenerates*

2. In form.

3. Always.

4. I.e., the two thieves between whom

Christ was crucified.

5. The other three deadly sins are envy, gluttony, and sloth.

45 Therefore I will, in all the haste,  
 Have a reckoning of every man's person.  
 For, and° I leave the people thus alone *if*  
 In their life and wicked tempests,  
 Verily they will become much worse than beasts;  
 50 For now one would by envy another up eat.  
 Charity do they all clean forget.  
 I hoped well that every man  
 In my glory should make his mansion,  
 And thereto I had them all elect.° *chosen*  
 55 But now I see, like traitors deject,° *abased*  
 They thank me not for the pleasure that I to° them  
 meant, *for*  
 Nor yet for their being that I them have lent.  
 I proffered the people great multitude of mercy,  
 And few there be that asketh it heartily.° *sincerely*  
 60 They be so cumbered° with worldly riches *encumbered*  
 That needs on them I must do justice—  
 On every man living without fear.  
 Where art thou, Death, thou mighty messenger?

[Enter DEATH.]

DEATH. Almighty God, I am here at your will,  
 65 Your commandment to fulfill.

GOD. Go thou to Everyman,  
 And show him, in my name,  
 A pilgrimage he must on him take,  
 Which he in no wise may escape;  
 70 And that he bring with him a sure reckoning  
 Without delay or any tarrying.

DEATH. Lord, I will in the world go run over all,°  
 And cruelly out-search both great and small.

[Exit GOD.]

Everyman will I beset that liveth beastly  
 75 Out of God's laws, and dreadeth not folly.  
 He that loveth riches I will strike with my dart,  
 His sight to blind, and from heaven to depart°— *separate*  
 Except that Almsdeeds be his good friend—  
 In hell for to dwell, world without end  
 80 Lo, yonder I see Everyman walking:  
 Full little he thinketh on my coming;  
 His mind is on fleshly lusts and his treasure,  
 And great pain it shall cause him to endure  
 Before the Lord, Heaven-King.

[Enter EVERYMAN.]

85 Everyman, stand still! Whither art thou going  
 Thus gaily? Hast thou thy Maker forgeet?° *forgotten*

EVERYMAN. Why askest thou?

Why wouldest thou weet?° *know*

DEATH. Yea, sir, I will show you:  
 90 In great haste I am sent to thee

From God out of his majesty.

EVERYMAN. What! sent to me?

DEATH. Yea, certainly.

Though thou have forgot him here,

95 He thinketh on thee in the heavenly sphere,

As, ere we depart, thou shalt know.

EVERYMAN. What desireth God of me?

DEATH. That shall I show thee:

A reckoning he will needs have

100 Without any longer respite.

EVERYMAN. To give a reckoning longer leisure I crave.

This blind<sup>o</sup> matter troubleth my wit.

*unexpected*

DEATH. On thee thou must take a long journay:

Therefore thy book of count<sup>o</sup> with thee thou bring, *accounts*

105 For turn again thou cannot by no way.

And look thou be sure of thy reckoning,

For before God thou shalt answer and shew

Thy many bad deeds and good but a few—

How thou hast spent thy life and in what wise,

110 Before the Chief Lord of Paradise.

Have ado that we were in that way,<sup>7</sup>

For wect thou well thou shalt make none attorney.<sup>8</sup>

EVERYMAN. Full unready I am such reckoning to give.

I know thee not. What messenger art thou?

115 DEATH. I am Death that no man dreadeth,<sup>9</sup>

For every man I 'rest,<sup>o</sup> and no man spareth;

*arrest*

For it is God's commandment

That all to me should be obedient.

EVERYMAN. O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in  
mind.

120 In thy power it lieth me to save:

Yet of my good<sup>o</sup> will I give thee, if thou will be kind, *goods*

Yea, a thousand pound shalt thou have—

And defer this matter till another day.

DEATH. Everyman, it may not be, by no way.

125 I set nought by<sup>1</sup> gold, silver, nor riches,

Nor by pope, emperor, king, duke, nor princes,

For, and<sup>o</sup> I would receive gifts great,

*if*

All the world I might get.

But my custom is clean contrary:

130 I give thee no respite. Come hence and not tarry!

EVERYMAN. Alas, shall I have no longer respite?

I may say Death giveth no warning.

To think on thee it maketh my heart sick,

For all unready is my book of reckoning.

135 But twelve year and I might have a bidding,<sup>2</sup>

My counting-book I would make so clear

That my reckoning I should not need to fear.

7. I.e., let's get started at once.

8. I.e., none to appear in your stead.

9. That fears nobody.

1. I care nothing for.

2. If I might have a delay for just twelve years.

Wherefore, Death, I pray thee, for God's mercy,  
Spare me till I be provided of remedy.

140 DEATH. Thee availeth not to cry, weep, and pray;  
But haste thee lightly° that thou were gone that  
journey,

And prove° thy friends, if thou can.

For weet° thou well the tide° abideth no man,

And in the world each living creature

145 For Adam's sin must die of nature.

EVERYMAN. Death, if I should this pilgrimage take

And my reckoning surely make,

Show me, for saint° charity,

Should I not come again shortly?

150 DEATH. No, Everyman. And thou be once there,

Thou mayst never more come here,

Trust me verily.

EVERYMAN. O gracious God in the high seat celestial,

Have mercy on me in this most need!

155 Shall I have no company from this vale terrestrial

Of mine acquaintance that way me to lead?

DEATH. Yea, if any be so hardy

That would go with thee and bear thee company.

Hie° thee that thou were gone to God's magnificence, *hasten*

160 Thy reckoning to give before his presence.

What, weenest° thou thy life is given thee,

And thy worldly goods also?

EVERYMAN. I had weened so, verily.

DEATH. Nay, nay, it was but lent thee.

165 For as soon as thou art go,

Another a while shall have it and then go therefro,

Even as thou hast done.

Everyman, thou art mad! Thou hast thy wits° five, *senses*

And here on earth will not amend thy live!<sup>4</sup>

170 For suddenly I do come.

EVERYMAN. O wretched caitiff! Whither shall I flee

That I might 'scape this endless sorrow?

Now, gentle Death, spare me till tomorrow,

That I may amend me

175 With good advisement.° *preparation*

DEATH. Nay, thereto I will not consent,

Nor no man will I respite,

But to the heart suddenly I shall smite,

Without any advisement.

180 And now out of thy sight I will me hie:

See thou make thee ready shortly,

For thou mayst say this is the day

That no man living may 'scape away.

[Exit DEATH.]

3. Naturally.

4. In thy life.

- EVERYMAN. Alas, I may well weep with sighs deep:  
 185 Now have I no manner of company  
 To help me in my journey and me to keep.° *guard*  
 And also my writing<sup>5</sup> is full unready—  
 How shall I do now for to excuse me?  
 I would to God I had never be geet!<sup>6</sup>  
 190 To my soul a full great profit it had be.  
 For now I fear pains huge and great.  
 The time passeth: Lord, help, that all wrought!  
 For though I mourn, it availeth nought.  
 The day passeth and is almost ago:° *gone by*  
 195 I wot° not well what for to do. *know*  
 To whom were I best my complaint to make?  
 What and I to Fellowship thereof spake,  
 And showed him of this sudden chance?  
 For in him is all mine affiance,° *trust*  
 200 We have in the world so many a day  
 Be good friends in sport and play.  
 I see him yonder, certainly.  
 I trust that he will bear me company.  
 Therefore to him will I speak to ease my sorrow.  
 [Enter FELLOWSHIP.]  
 205 Well met, good Fellowship, and good morrow!  
 FELLOWSHIP. Everyman, good morrow, by this day!  
 Sir, why lookest thou so piteously?  
 If anything be amiss, I pray thee me say,  
 That I may help to remedy.  
 210 EVERYMAN. Yea, good Fellowship, yea:  
 I am in great jeopardy.  
 FELLOWSHIP. My true friend, show to me your mind.  
 I will not forsake thee to my life's end  
 In the way of good company.  
 215 EVERYMAN. That was well spoken, and lovingly!  
 FELLOWSHIP. Sir, I must needs know your heaviness.° *sorrow*  
 I have pity to see you in any distress.  
 If any have you wronged, ye shall revenged be,  
 Though I on the ground be slain for thee,  
 220 Though that I know before that I should die.  
 EVERYMAN. Verily, Fellowship, gramercy.° *many thanks*  
 FELLOWSHIP. Tush! by thy thanks I set not a stree.° *straw*  
 Show me your grief and say no more.  
 EVERYMAN. If I my heart should to you break,° *disclose*  
 225 And then you to turn your mind fro me,  
 And would not me comfort when ye hear me speak,  
 Then should I ten times sorrier be.  
 FELLOWSHIP. Sir, I say as I will do, indeed.  
 EVERYMAN. Then be you a good friend at need.  
 230 I have found you true herebefore.

5. I.e., ledger.

6. Been begotten.

FELLOWSHIP. And so ye shall evermore.

For, in faith, and thou go to hell,  
I will not forsake thee by the way.

EVERYMAN. Ye speak like a good friend. I believe you well.

235 I shall deserve<sup>o</sup> it, and<sup>o</sup> I may. *repay / if*

FELLOWSHIP. I speak of no deserving, by this day!

For he that will say and nothing do  
Is not worthy with good company to go.  
Therefore show me the grief of your mind,  
240 As to your friend most loving and kind.

EVERYMAN. I shall show you how it is:

Commanded I am to go a journey,  
A long way, hard and dangerous,  
And give a strait<sup>o</sup> count,<sup>o</sup> without delay, *strict / accounting*

245 Before the high judge Adonai.<sup>7</sup>  
Wherefore I pray you bear me company,  
As ye have promised, in this journey.

FELLOWSHIP. This is matter indeed! Promise is duty—

250 But, and I should take such a voyage on me,  
I know it well, it should be to my pain.

Also it maketh me afeard, certain.

But let us take counsel here, as well as we can—

For your words would fear<sup>o</sup> a strong man. *frighten*

EVERYMAN. Why, ye said if I had need,

255 Ye would me never forsake, quick ne dead,  
Though it were to hell, truly.

FELLOWSHIP. So I said, certainly.

But such pleasures<sup>o</sup> be set aside, the sooth to say. *jokes*

And also, if we took such a journey,

260 When should we again come?

EVERYMAN. Nay, never again, till the day of doom.

FELLOWSHIP. In faith, then will not I come there!

Who hath you these tidings brought?

EVERYMAN. Indeed, Death was with me here.

265 FELLOWSHIP. Now by God that all hath bought,<sup>o</sup> *redeemed*

If Death were the messenger,

For no man that is living today

I will not go that loath<sup>o</sup> journey— *loathsome*

Not for the father that begat me!

270 EVERYMAN. Ye promised otherwise, pardie.<sup>o</sup> *by God*

FELLOWSHIP. I wot well I said so, truly.

And yet, if thou wilt eat and drink and make good cheer,

Or haunt to women the lusty company,<sup>8</sup>

I would not forsake you while the day is clear,

275 Trust me verily!

EVERYMAN. Yea, thereto ye would be ready—

To go to mirth, solace,<sup>o</sup> and play: *pleasure*

7. I.e., God.

8. Or frequent the lusty company of women.

- Your mind to folly will sooner apply° *attend*  
 Than to bear me company in my long journey.
- 280 FELLOWSHIP. Now in good faith, I will not that way.  
 But, and thou will murder or any man kill,  
 In that I will help thee with a good will.
- EVERYMAN. O that is simple° advice, indeed! *foolish*  
 Gentle fellow, help me in my necessity:  
 285 We have loved long, and now I need—  
 And now, gentle Fellowship, remember me!
- FELLOWSHIP. Whether ye have loved me or no,  
 By Saint John, I will not with thee go!
- EVERYMAN. Yet I pray thee take the labor and do so much for  
 me,  
 290 To bring me forward,<sup>9</sup> for saint charity,  
 And comfort me till I come without the town.
- FELLOWSHIP. Nay, and thou would give me a new gown,  
 I will not a foot with thee go.  
 But, and thou had tarried, I would not have left thee so.
- 295 And as now, God speed thee in thy journey!  
 For from thee I will depart as fast as I may.
- EVERYMAN. Whither away, Fellowship? Will thou forsake me?
- FELLOWSHIP. Yea, by my fay!° To God I betake°  
 thee. *faith / commend*
- EVERYMAN. Farewell, good Fellowship! For thee my heart is  
 sore.
- 300 Adieu forever—I shall see thee no more.
- FELLOWSHIP. In faith, Everyman, farewell now at the ending:  
 For you I will remember that parting is mourning.  
 [Exit FELLOWSHIP.]
- EVERYMAN. Alack, shall we thus depart° indeed— *part*  
 Ah, Lady, help!—without any more comfort?
- 305 Lo, Fellowship forsaketh me in my most need!  
 For help in this world whither shall I resort?  
 Fellowship herebefore with me would merry make,  
 And now little sorrow for me doth he take.  
 It is said, “In prosperity men friends may find  
 310 Which in adversity be full unkind.”  
 Now whither for succor shall I flee,  
 Sith° that Fellowship hath forsaken me? *since*  
 To my kinsmen I will, truly,  
 Praying them to help me in my necessity.
- 315 I believe that they will do so,  
 For kind will creep where it may not go.<sup>1</sup>  
 I will go 'say°—for yonder I see them—  
 Where° be ye now my friends and kinsmen. *assay*  
*whether*  
 [Enter KINDRED and COUSIN.]
- KINDRED. Here be we now at your commandment:

9. Escort me.

1. For kinship will creep where it can-

not walk (i.e., kinsmen will suffer hard-  
 ship for one another).



- 320 Cousin, I pray you show us your intent  
In any wise, and not spare.  
COUSIN. Yea, Everyman, and to us declare  
If ye be disposed to go anywhither.  
For, weet<sup>o</sup> you well, we will live and die together. *know*
- 325 KINDRED. In wealth and woe we will with you hold,  
For over his kin a man may be bold.<sup>2</sup>  
EVERYMAN. Gramercy,<sup>o</sup> my friends and kinsmen  
kind. *much thanks*  
Now shall I show you the grief of my mind.  
I was commanded by a messenger  
330 That is a high king's chief officer:  
He bade me go a pilgrimage, to my pain—  
And I know well I shall never come again.  
Also I must give a reckoning strait,<sup>o</sup> *strict*  
For I have a great enemy that hath me in wait,<sup>3</sup>  
335 Which intendeth me to hinder.  
KINDRED. What account is that which ye must render?  
That would I know.  
EVERYMAN. Of all my works I must show  
How I have lived and my days spent;  
340 Also of ill deeds that I have used  
In my time sith life was me lent,  
And of all virtues that I have refused.  
Therefore I pray you go thither with me  
To help me make mine account, for saint charity.
- 345 COUSIN. What, to go thither? Is that the matter?  
Nay, Everyman, I had liefer fast<sup>4</sup> bread and water  
All this five year and more!  
EVERYMAN. Alas, that ever I was bore!<sup>o</sup> *born*  
For now shall I never be merry  
350 If that you forsake me.  
KINDRED. Ah, sir, what? Ye be a merry man:  
Take good heart to you and make no moan.  
But one thing I warn you, by Saint Anne,  
As for me, ye shall go alone.
- 355 EVERYMAN. My Cousin, will you not with me go?  
COUSIN. No, by Our Lady! I have the cramp in my toe:  
Trust not to me. For, so God me speed,  
I will deceive you in your most need.  
KINDRED. It availeth you not us to 'tice.<sup>o</sup> *entice*  
360 Ye shall have my maid with all my heart:  
She loveth to go to feasts, there to be nice,<sup>o</sup> *wanton*  
And to dance, and abroad to start.<sup>5</sup>  
I will give her leave to help you in that journey,  
If that you and she may agree.

2. I.e., for a man may make demands of his kinsmen.

3. I.e., Satan lies in ambush for me.

4. I.e., rather fast on.

5. To go gadding about.

365 EVERYMAN. Now show me the very effect<sup>o</sup> of your mind: *bent*  
Will you go with me or abide behind?

KINDRED. Abide behind? Yea, that will I and I may!  
Therefore farewell till another day.

[Exit KINDRED.]

EVERYMAN. How should I be merry or glad?  
370 For fair promises men to me make,  
But when I have most need they me forsake.  
I am deceived. That maketh me sad.

COUSIN. Cousin Everyman, farewell now,  
For verily I will not go with you;  
375 Also of mine own an unready reckoning  
I have to account—therefore I make tarrying.  
Now God keep thee, for now I go.

[Exit COUSIN.]

EVERYMAN. Ah, Jesus, is all come hereto?<sup>o</sup> *to this*  
Lo, fair words maketh fools fain:<sup>o</sup> *glad*

380 They promise and nothing will do, certain.  
My kinsmen promised me faithfully  
For to abide with me steadfastly,  
And now fast away do they flee.  
Even so Fellowship promised me.

385 What friend were best me of to provide?  
I lose my time here longer to abide.  
Yet in my mind a thing there is:  
All my life I have loved riches;

If that my Good<sup>o</sup> now help me might, *Goods*  
390 He would make my heart full light.  
I will speak to him in this distress.  
Where art thou, my Goods and riches?

GOODS. [*within*] Who calleth me? Everyman? What, hast thou  
haste?

I lie here in corners, trussed and piled so high,  
395 And in chests I am locked so fast—  
Also sacked in bags—thou mayst see with thine eye  
I cannot stir, in packs low where I lie.

What would ye have? Lightly<sup>o</sup> me say. *quickly*

EVERYMAN. Come hither, Good, in all the haste thou may,  
400 For of counsel I must desire thee.

[Enter GOODS.]

GOODS. Sir, and<sup>o</sup> ye in the world have sorrow or adversity, *if*  
That can I help you to remedy shortly.

EVERYMAN. It is another disease<sup>o</sup> that grieveth me: *distress*  
In this world it is not, I tell thee so.

405 I am sent for another way to go,  
To give a strait count general  
Before the highest Jupiter<sup>o</sup> of all.  
And all my life I have had joy and pleasure in thee:

- Therefore I pray thee go with me,  
 410 For, peradventure, thou mayst before God Almighty  
 My reckoning help to clean and purify.  
 For it is said ever among<sup>7</sup>  
 That money maketh all right that is wrong.
- COODS. Nay, Everyman, I sing another song:  
 415 I follow no man in such voyages.  
 For, and I went with thee,  
 Thou shouldest fare much the worse for me;  
 For because on me thou did set thy mind,  
 Thy reckoning I have made blotted and blind,<sup>o</sup> *illegible*
- 420 That thine account thou cannot make truly—  
 And that hast thou for the love of me.
- EVERYMAN. That would grieve me full sore,  
 When I should come to that fearful answer.  
 Up, let us go thither together.
- 425 COODS. Nay, not so, I am too brittle, I may not endure.  
 I will follow no man one foot, be ye sure.
- EVERYMAN. Alas, I have thee loved and had great pleasure  
 All my life-days on good and treasure.
- COODS. That is to thy damnation, without leasing,<sup>o</sup> *lie*  
 430 For my love is contrary to the love everlasting.  
 But if thou had me loved moderately  
 during,<sup>o</sup> *in the meanwhile*
- As to the poor to give part of me,  
 Then shouldest thou not in this dolor be,  
 Nor in this great sorrow and care.
- 435 EVERYMAN. Lo, now was I deceived ere I was ware,  
 And all I may wite<sup>o</sup> misspending of time. *blame on*  
 COODS. What, weenest<sup>o</sup> thou that I am thine? *suppose*
- EVERYMAN. I had weened so.
- COODS. Nay, Everyman, I say no.
- 440 As for a while I was lent thee;  
 A season thou hast had me in prosperity.  
 My condition<sup>o</sup> is man's soul to kill; *disposition*  
 If I save one, a thousand I do spill.<sup>o</sup> *ruin*  
 Weenest thou that I will follow thee?
- 445 Nay, from this world, not verily.
- EVERYMAN. I had weened otherwise. *supposed*
- COODS. Therefore to thy soul Good is a thief;  
 For when thou art dead, this is my guise<sup>o</sup>— *custom*  
 Another to deceive in the same wise
- 450 As I have done thee, and all to his soul's reproof.<sup>o</sup> *shame*
- EVERYMAN. O false Good, cursed thou be,  
 Thou traitor to God, that hast deceived me  
 And caught me in thy snare!
- COODS. Marry, thou brought thyself in care,<sup>o</sup> *sorrow*  
 455 Whereof I am glad:

I must needs laugh, I cannot be sad.

EVERYMAN. Ah, Good, thou hast had long my heartly<sup>o</sup>  
love;

*sincere*

I gave thee that which should be the Lord's above.

But wilt thou not go with me, indeed?

460 I pray thee truth to say.

GOODS. No, so God me speed!

Therefore farewell and have good day.

[Exit GOODS.]

EVERYMAN. Oh, to whom shall I make my moan

For to go with me in that heavy<sup>o</sup> journey?

*sorrowful*

465 First Fellowship said he would with me gone:<sup>o</sup>

*go*

His words were very pleasant and gay,

But afterward he left me alone.

Then spake I to my kinsmen, all in despair,

And also they gave me words fair—

470 They lacked no fair speaking,

But all forsake me in the ending.

Then went I to my Goods that I loved best,

In hope to have comfort; but there had I least,

For my Goods sharply did me tell

475 That he bringeth many into hell.

Then of myself I was ashamed,

And so I am worthy to be blamed:

Thus may I well myself hate.

Of whom shall I now counsel take?

480 I think that I shall never speed

Till that I go to my Good Deed.

But alas, she is so weak

That she can neither go<sup>o</sup> nor speak.

*walk*

Yet will I venture<sup>o</sup> on her now.

*gamble*

485 My Good Deeds, where be you?

GOOD DEEDS. [*speaking from the ground*] Here I lie, cold in the  
ground:

Thy sins hath me sore bound

That I cannot stear.<sup>o</sup>

*stir*

EVERYMAN. O Good Deeds, I stand in fear:

490 I must you pray of counsel,

For help now should come right well.

GOOD DEEDS. Everyman, I have understanding

That ye be summoned, account to make,

Before Messiah of Jer'salem King.

495 And you do by me,<sup>8</sup> that journey with you will I take.

EVERYMAN. Therefore I come to you my moan to make.

I pray you that ye will go with me.

GOOD DEEDS. I would full fain, but I cannot stand, verily.

EVERYMAN. Why, is there anything on you fall?<sup>o</sup>

*fallen*

500 GOOD DEEDS. Yea, sir, I may thank you of all:

8. I.e., if you do what I say.

If ye had perfectly cheered me,  
Your book of count full ready had be.

[GOOD DEEDS shows him the account book.]

Look, the books of your works and deeds eke,<sup>o</sup> *also*  
As how they lie under the feet,

505 To your soul's heaviness.<sup>o</sup> *distress*

EVERYMAN. Our Lord Jesus help me!  
For one letter here I cannot see.

GOOD DEEDS. There is a blind<sup>o</sup> reckoning in time of  
distress! *illegible*

EVERYMAN. Good Deeds, I pray you help me in this need,  
510 Or else I am forever damned indeed.

Therefore help me to make reckoning  
Before the Redeemer of all thing  
That King is and was and ever shall.

GOOD DEEDS. Everyman, I am sorry of<sup>o</sup> your fall *for*  
515 And fain would help you and I were able.

EVERYMAN. Good Deeds, your counsel I pray you give me.

GOOD DEEDS. That shall I do verily,

520 Though that on my feet I may not go;  
I have a sister that shall with you also,  
Called Knowledge, which shall with you abide  
To help you to make that dreadful reckoning.

[Enter KNOWLEDGE.]

KNOWLEDGE. Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide,  
In thy most need to go by thy side.

EVERYMAN. In good condition I am now in everything,  
525 And am whole content with this good thing,  
Thanked be God my Creator.

GOOD DEEDS. And when she hath brought you there

Where thou shalt heal thee of thy smart,<sup>o</sup> *pain*  
Then go you with your reckoning and your Good Deeds to-  
gether

530 For to make you joyful at heart  
Before the blessed Trinity.

EVERYMAN. My Good Deeds, gramercy!  
I am well content, certainly,  
With your words sweet.

535 KNOWLEDGE. Now go we together lovingly  
To Confession, that cleansing river.

EVERYMAN. For joy I weep—I would we were there!  
But I pray you give me cognition,<sup>o</sup> *knowledge*  
Where dwelleth that holy man Confession?

540 KNOWLEDGE. In the House of Salvation:  
We shall find him in that place  
That shall us comfort, by God's grace.

[KNOWLEDGE leads EVERYMAN to CONFESSION.]

Lo, this is Confession: kneel down and ask mercy,  
For he is in good conceit<sup>o</sup> with God Almighty. *esteem*

545 EVERYMAN. [*kneeling*] O glorious fountain that all uncleanness  
doth clarify,<sup>9</sup>

Wash from me the spots of vice unclean,  
That on me no sin may be seen.

I come with Knowledge for my redemption,  
Redempt<sup>o</sup> with heart and full contrition, *redeemed*  
550 For I am commanded a pilgrimage to take  
And great accounts before God to make.  
Now I pray you, Shrift, mother of Salvation,  
Help my Good Deeds for my piteous exclamation.

CONFESSION. I know your sorrow well, Everyman:

555 Because with Knowledge ye come to me,  
I will you comfort as well as I can,  
And a precious jewel I will give thee,  
Called Penance, voider<sup>o</sup> of adversity. *expeller*  
Therewith shall your body chastised be—

560 With abstinence and perseverance in God's service.  
Here shall you receive that scourge of me,  
Which is penance strong<sup>o</sup> that ye must endure, *harsh*  
To remember thy Saviour was scourged for thee  
With sharp scourges, and suffered it patiently.

565 So must thou ere thou 'scape that painful pilgrimage.  
Knowledge, keep<sup>o</sup> him in this voyage, *guard*  
And by that time Good Deeds will be with thee.

But in any wise be secure<sup>o</sup> of mercy— *certain*  
For your time draweth fast—and ye will saved be.  
570 Ask God mercy and he will grant, truly.

When with the scourge of penance man doth him<sup>o</sup>  
bind, *himself*

The oil of forgiveness then shall he find.

EVERYMAN. Thanked be God for his gracious work,  
For now I will my penance begin.

575 This hath rejoiced and lighted my heart,  
Though the knots<sup>1</sup> be painful and hard within.

KNOWLEDGE. Everyman, look your penance that ye fulfill,  
What pain that ever it to you be;

580 And Knowledge shall give you counsel at will  
How your account ye shall make clearly.

EVERYMAN. O eternal God, O heavenly figure,  
O way of righteousness, O goodly vision,

585 Which descended down in a virgin pure  
Because he would every man redeem,  
Which Adam forfeited by his disobedience;  
O blessed Godhead, elect and high Divine,<sup>o</sup> *divinity*

Forgive my grievous offense!

Here I cry thee mercy in this presence:

O ghostly Treasure, O Ransomer and Redeemer,

9. Purify.

1. I.e., the knots on the scourge (whip) of penance. "Within": i.e., to my senses.

- 530 Of all the world Hope and Conduiter,<sup>o</sup> *guide*  
 Mirror of joy, Founder<sup>o</sup> of mercy, *Founder*  
 Which enlumineth<sup>o</sup> heaven and earth thereby, *lights up*  
 Hear my clamorous complaint, though it late be;  
 Receive my prayers, of thy benignity.
- 595 Though I be a sinner most abominable,  
 Yet let my name be written in Moses' table.<sup>2</sup>  
 O Mary, pray to the Maker of all thing  
 Me for to help at my ending,  
 And save me from the power of my enemy,
- 600 For Death assaileth me strongly.  
 And Lady, that I may by mean of thy prayer  
 Of your Son's glory to be partner—  
 By the means of his passion I it crave.  
 I beseech you help my soul to save.
- 605 Knowledge, give me the scourge of penance:  
 My flesh therewith shall give acquittance.<sup>o</sup> *satisfaction for sins*  
 I will now begin, if God give me grace.
- KNOWLEDGE. Everyman, God give you time and  
 space!<sup>o</sup> *opportunity*
- Thus I bequeath you in the hands of our Saviour:  
 610 Now may you make your reckoning sure.
- EVERYMAN. In the name of the Holy Trinity  
 My body sore punished shall be:  
 Take this, body, for the sin of the flesh!  
 Also<sup>o</sup> thou delightest to go gay and fresh, *as*  
 615 And in the way of damnation thou did me bring,  
 Therefore suffer now strokes of punishing!  
 Now of penance I will wade the water clear,  
 To save me from purgatory, that sharp fire.
- GOOD DEEDS. I thank God, now can I walk and go,  
 620 And am delivered of my sickness and woe.  
 Therefore with Everyman I will go, and not spare:  
 His good works I will help him to declare.
- KNOWLEDGE. Now, Everyman, be merry and glad:  
 Your Good Deeds cometh now, ye may not be sad.
- 625 Now is your Good Deeds whole and sound,  
 Going<sup>o</sup> upright upon the ground. *walking*
- EVERYMAN. My heart is light, and shall be evermore.  
 Now will I smite faster than I did before.
- GOOD DEEDS. Everyman, pilgrim, my special friend,  
 630 Blessed be thou without end!  
 For thee is preparate<sup>o</sup> the eternal glory. *prepared*  
 Ye have me made whole and sound.  
 Therefore I will bide by thee in every stound.<sup>o</sup> *trial*
- EVERYMAN. Welcome, my Good Deeds! Now I hear thy voice,  
 635 I weep for very sweetness of love.

2. "Moses' table" is here the tablet on which are recorded those who have been baptized and have done penance.

- KNOWLEDGE. Be no more sad, but ever rejoice:  
 God seeth thy living in his throne above.  
 Put on this garment to thy behove,<sup>o</sup> *advantage*  
 Which is wet with your tears—  
 640 Or else before God you may it miss  
 When ye to your journey's end come shall.
- EVERYMAN. Gentle Knowledge, what do ye it call?  
 KNOWLEDGE. It is a garment of sorrow;  
 From pain it will you borrow:<sup>o</sup> *redeem*  
 645 Contrition it is  
 That getteth forgiveness;  
 It pleaseth God passing<sup>o</sup> well. *surpassingly*
- GOOD DEEDS. Everyman, will you wear it for your heal?<sup>o</sup> *welfare*  
 EVERYMAN. Now blessed be Jesu, Mary's son,  
 650 For now have I on true contrition.  
 And let us go now without tarrying.  
 Good Deeds, have we clear our reckoning?
- GOOD DEEDS. Yea, indeed, I have it here.  
 EVERYMAN. Then I trust we need not fear.  
 655 Now friends, let us not part in twain.
- KNOWLEDGE. Nay, Everyman, that will we not, certain.  
 GOOD DEEDS. Yet must thou lead with thee  
 Three persons of great might.  
 EVERYMAN. Who should they be?
- 660 GOOD DEEDS. Discretion and Strength they hight,<sup>o</sup> *are called*  
 And thy Beauty may not abide behind.  
 KNOWLEDGE. Also ye must call to mind  
 Your Five-Wits<sup>o</sup> as for your counselors. *senses*
- GOOD DEEDS. You must have them ready at all hours.  
 665 EVERYMAN. How shall I get them hither?  
 KNOWLEDGE. You must call them all together,  
 And they will be here incontinent.<sup>o</sup> *at once*
- EVERYMAN. My friends, come hither and be present,  
 Discretion, Strength, my Five-Wits, and Beauty!  
 [*They enter.*]
- 670 BEAUTY. Here at your will we be all ready.  
 What will ye that we should do?  
 GOOD DEEDS. That ye would with Everyman go  
 And help him in his pilgrimage.  
 Advise you:<sup>3</sup> will ye with him or not in that voyage?
- 675 STRENGTH. We will bring him all thither,  
 To his help and comfort, ye may believe me.  
 DISCRETION. So will we go with him all together.
- EVERYMAN. Almighty God, loved<sup>o</sup> might thou be! *praised*  
 I give thee laud that I have hither brought  
 680 Strength, Discretion, Beauty, and Five-Wits—lack I  
 nought—  
 And my Good Deeds, with Knowledge clear,

3. Take thought.



All be in my company at my will here:

I desire no more to my business.

685 **STRENGTH.** And I, Strength, will by you stand in distress,  
Though thou would in battle fight on the ground.

**FIVE-WITS.** And though it were through the world round,  
We will not depart for sweet ne sour.

**BEAUTY.** No more will I, until death's hour,  
Whatsoever thereof befall.

690 **DISCRETION.** Everyman, advise you first of all:  
Go with a good advisement° and deliberation. *preparation*  
We all give you virtuous° monition° *confident / prediction*  
That all shall be well.

**EVERYMAN.** My friends, hearken what I will tell;  
695 I pray God reward you in his heaven-sphere;  
Now hearken all that be here,  
For I will make my testament,  
Here before you all present:  
700 In alms half my good° I will give with my hands twain, *goods*  
In the way of charity with good intent;  
And the other half, still<sup>4</sup> shall remain,  
I 'queath° to be returned there it ought to be. *bequeath*  
This I do in despite of the fiend of hell,  
To go quit out of his perel,<sup>5</sup>  
705 Ever after and this day.

**KNOWLEDGE.** Everyman, hearken what I say:  
Go to Priesthood, I you advise,  
And receive of him, in any wise,<sup>6</sup>  
The holy sacrament and ointment° together; *extreme unction*  
710 Then shortly see ye turn again hither:  
We will all abide you here.

**FIVE-WITS.** Yea, Everyman, hie you that ye ready were.  
There is no emperor, king, duke, ne baron,  
That of God hath commission  
715 As hath the least priest in the world being:  
For of the blessed sacraments pure and bening° *benign*  
He beareth the keys, and thereof hath the cure° *care*  
For man's redemption—it is ever sure—  
Which God for our souls' medicine  
720 Gave us out of his heart with great pine,° *torment*  
Here in this transitory life for thee and me.  
The blessed sacraments seven there be:  
Baptism, confirmation, with priesthood° good, *ordination*  
And the sacrament of God's precious flesh and blood,  
725 Marriage, the holy extreme unction, and penance:  
These seven be good to have in remembrance,  
Gracious sacraments of high divinity.

**EVERYMAN.** Fain° would I receive that holy body, *gladly*

4. I.e., which still.

5. In order to go free of danger from

him.

6. At all costs.

- And meekly to my ghostly<sup>o</sup> father I will go. *spiritual*
- 730 FIVE-WITS. Everyman, that is the best that ye can do:  
 God will you to salvation bring.  
 For priesthood exceedeth all other thing:  
 To us Holy Scripture they do teach,  
 And converteth man from sin, heaven to reach;  
 735 God hath to them more power given  
 Than to any angel that is in heaven.  
 With five words<sup>7</sup> he may consecrate  
 God's body in flesh and blood to make,  
 And handleth his Maker between his hands.  
 740 The priest bindeth and unbindeth all bands,<sup>8</sup>  
 Both in earth and in heaven.  
 Thou ministers<sup>o</sup> all the sacraments seven; *administer*  
 Though we kiss thy feet, thou were worthy;  
 Thou art surgeon that cureth sin deadly;  
 745 No remedy we find under God  
 But all only priesthood.<sup>9</sup>  
 Everyman, God gave priests that dignity  
 And setteth them in his stead among us to be.  
 Thus be they above angels in degree. *Unbiblical.*  
 [Exit EVERYMAN.]
- 750 KNOWLEDGE. If priests be good, it is so, surely.  
 But when Jesu hanged on the cross with great smart,<sup>o</sup> *pain*  
 There he gave out of his blessed heart  
 The same sacrament in great torment,  
 He sold them not to us, that Lord omnipotent:  
 755 Therefore Saint Peter the Apostle doth say  
 That Jesu's curse hath all they  
 Which God their Saviour do buy or sell,<sup>1</sup>  
 Or they for any money do take or tell.<sup>2</sup>  
 Sinful priests giveth the sinners example bad:  
 760 Their children sitteth by other men's fires, I have heard;  
 And some haunteth women's company  
 With unclean life, as lusts of lechery.  
 These be with sin made blind.
- FIVE-WITS. I trust to God no such may we find.  
 765 Therefore let us priesthood honor,  
 And follow their doctrine for our souls' succor.  
 We be their sheep and they shepherds be  
 By whom we all be kept in surety.  
 Peace, for yonder I see Everyman come,  
 770 Which hath made true satisfaction.

7. The five words ("For this is my body") spoken by the priest when he offers the wafer at communion.

8. A reference to the power of the keys, inherited by the priesthood from St. Peter, who received it from Christ (Matthew xvi.19) with the promise that whatever St. Peter bound or loosed on earth would be bound or loosed in

heaven.

9. Except from priesthood alone.

1. To give or receive money for the sacraments is simony, named after Simon, who wished to buy the gift of the Holy Ghost and was cursed by St. Peter.

2. Or who, for any sacrament, take or count out money.

GOOD DEEDS. Methink it is he indeed.

[*Re-enter EVERYMAN.*]

EVERYMAN. Now Jesu be your alder speed!<sup>3</sup>

I have received the sacrament for my redemption,  
And then mine extreme unction.

775 Blessed be all they that counseled me to take it!  
And now, friends, let us go without longer respite.  
I thank God that ye have tarried so long.

Now set each of you on this rood<sup>o</sup> your hond *cross*  
And shortly follow me:

780 I go before there<sup>o</sup> I would be. God be our guide! *where*

STRENGTH. Everyman, we will not from you go  
Till ye have done this voyage long.

DISCRETION. I, Discretion, will bide by you also.

KNOWLEDGE. And though this pilgrimage be never so  
strong,<sup>o</sup> *harsh*

785 I will never part you fro.

STRENGTH. Everyman, I will be as sure by thee  
As ever I did by Judas Maccabee.<sup>4</sup>

EVERYMAN. Alas, I am so faint I may not stand—  
My limbs under me doth fold!

790 Friends, let us not turn again to this land,  
Not for all the world's gold.

For into this cave must I creep  
And turn to earth, and there to sleep.

BEAUTY. What, into this grave, alas?

795 EVERYMAN. Yea, there shall ye consume,<sup>o</sup> more and lass.<sup>5</sup> *decay*

BEAUTY. And what, should I smother here?

EVERYMAN. Yea, by my faith, and nevermore appear.

In this world live no more we shall,  
But in heaven before the highest Lord of all.

800 BEAUTY. I cross out all this! Adieu, by Saint John—  
I take my tape in my lap and am gone.<sup>6</sup>

EVERYMAN. What, Beauty, whither will ye?

BEAUTY. Peace, I am deaf—I look not behind me,  
Not and thou wouldest give me all the gold in thy chest.

[*Exit BEAUTY.*]

805 EVERYMAN. Alas, whereto may I trust?

Beauty goeth fast away fro me—  
She promised with me to live and die!

STRENGTH. Everyman, I will thee also forsake and deny.

Thy game liketh<sup>o</sup> me not at all. *pleases*

810 EVERYMAN. Why then, ye will forsake me all?

Sweet Strength, tarry a little space.

STRENGTH. Nay, sir, by the rood of grace,

I will hie me from thee fast,

3. The prosperer of you all.

4. Judas Maccabaeus was an enormously powerful warrior in the defense of Israel against the Syrians in

late Old Testament times.

5. More and less (i.e., all of you).

6. I tuck my skirts in my belt and am off.

- Though thou weep till thy heart tobrast.<sup>o</sup> *break*
- 815 EVERYMAN. Ye would ever bide by me, ye said.  
 STRENGTH. Yea, I have you far enough conveyed!<sup>o</sup> *escorted*  
 Ye be old enough, I understand,  
 Your pilgrimage to take on hand:  
 I repent me that I hither came.
- 820 EVERYMAN. Strength, you to displease I am to blame,<sup>7</sup>  
 Yet promise is debt, this ye well wot.<sup>o</sup> *know*  
 STRENGTH. In faith, I care not:  
 Thou art but a fool to complain;  
 You spend your speech and waste your brain.
- 825 Go, thrust thee into the ground.  
 [*Exit STRENGTH.*]  
 EVERYMAN. I had weened<sup>o</sup> surer I should you have  
 found. *supposed*  
 He that trusteth in his Strength  
 She him deceiveth at the length.  
 Both Strength and Beauty forsaketh me—
- 830 Yet they promised me fair and lovingly.  
 DISCRETION. Everyman, I will after Strength be gone:  
 As for me, I will leave you alone.  
 EVERYMAN. Why Discretion, will ye forsake me?  
 DISCRETION. Yea, in faith, I will go from thee.
- 835 For when Strength goeth before,  
 I follow after evermore.  
 EVERYMAN. Yet I pray thee, for the love of the Trinity,  
 Look in my grave once piteously.  
 DISCRETION. Nay, so nigh will I not come.
- 840 Farewell everyone!  
 [*Exit DISCRETION.*]  
 EVERYMAN. O all thing faileth save God alone—  
 Beauty, Strength, and Discretion.  
 For when Death bloweth his blast  
 They all run fro me full fast.
- 845 FIVE-WITS. Everyman, my leave now of thee I take.  
 I will follow the other, for here I thee forsake.  
 EVERYMAN. Alas, then may I wail and weep,  
 For I took you for my best friend.  
 FIVE-WITS. I will no longer thee keep.<sup>o</sup> *watch over*
- 850 Now farewell, and there an end!  
 [*Exit FIVE-WITS.*]  
 EVERYMAN. O Jesu, help, all hath forsaken me!  
 GOOD DEEDS. Nay, Everyman, I will bide with thee:  
 I will not forsake thee indeed;  
 Thou shalt find me a good friend at need.
- 855 EVERYMAN. Gramercy, Good Deeds! Now may I true friends  
 see.  
 They have forsaken me every one—

7. I'm to blame for displeasing you.

I loved them better than my Good Deeds alone.

Knowledge, will ye forsake me also?

KNOWLEDGE. Yea, Everyman, when ye to Death shall go,

860 But not yet, for no manner of danger.

EVERYMAN. Gramercy, Knowledge, with all my heart!

KNOWLEDGE. Nay, yet will I not from hence depart

Till I see where ye shall become.<sup>8</sup>

EVERYMAN. Methink, alas, that I must be gone

865 To make my reckoning and my debts pay,

For I see my time is nigh spent away.

Take example, all ye that this do hear or see,

How they that I best loved do forsake me,

Except my Good Deeds that bideth truly.

870 GOOD DEEDS. All earthly things is but vanity.

Beauty, Strength, and Discretion do man forsake,

Foolish friends and kinsmen that fair spake—

All fleeth save Good Deeds, and that am I.

EVERYMAN. Have mercy on me, God most mighty,

875 And stand by me, thou mother and maid, holy Mary!

GOOD DEEDS. Fear not: I will speak for thee.

EVERYMAN. Here I cry God mercy!

GOOD DEEDS. Short our end, and 'minish our pain.<sup>9</sup>

Let us go, and never come again.

880 EVERYMAN. Into thy hands, Lord, my soul I commend:

Receive it, Lord, that it be not lost.

As thou me boughtest,<sup>o</sup> so me defend,

*redeemed*

And save me from the fiend's boast,

That I may appear with that blessed host

885 That shall be saved at the day of doom.

*In manus tuas*, of mights most,

Forever *commendo spiritum meum*.<sup>1</sup>

[EVERYMAN and GOOD DEEDS descend into the grave.]

KNOWLEDGE. Now hath he suffered that we all shall endure,

The Good Deeds shall make all sure.

890 Now hath he made ending,

Methinketh that I hear angels sing

And make great joy and melody

Where Everyman's soul received shall be.

ANGEL. [*within*] Come, excellent elect<sup>o</sup> spouse to Jesu!<sup>2</sup> *chosen*

895 Here above thou shalt go

Because of thy singular virtue.

Now the soul is taken the body fro,

Thy reckoning is crystal clear:

Now shalt thou into the heavenly sphere—

900 Unto the which all ye shall come

That liveth well before the day of doom.

8. Till I see what shall become of you.

9. I.e., make our dying quick and diminish our pain.

1. "Into thy hands, O greatest of pow-

ers, I commend my spirit forever."

2. Man's soul is often referred to as the

bride of Jesus.

[Enter DOCTOR.<sup>3</sup>]DOCTOR. This memorial<sup>o</sup> men may have in mind: reminderYe hearers, take it of worth,<sup>4</sup> old and young,  
And forsake Pride, for he deceiveth you in the end.

905 And remember Beauty, Five-Wits, Strength, and Discretion,

They all at the last do Everyman forsake,  
Save his Good Deeds there doth he take—But beware, for and they be small,  
Before God he hath no help at all—

910 None excuse may be there for Everyman.

Alas, how shall he do than?<sup>o</sup>

For after death amends may no man make,

For then mercy and pity doth him forsake.

If his reckoning be not clear when he doth come,

915 God will say, "*Ite, maledicti, in ignem eternum!*"<sup>5</sup>

And he that hath his account whole and sound,

High in heaven he shall be crowned,

Unto which place God bring us all thither,

That we may live body and soul together.

920 Thereto help, the Trinity!

Amen say ye, for saint charity.

3. The Doctor is the learned theologian  
who explains the meaning of the play.5. "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting  
fire."

4. Prize it.

## POPULAR BALLADS

Ballads are anonymous narrative songs that have been preserved by oral transmission. Although any stage of a given culture may produce ballads, they are most characteristic of primitive societies such as that of the American frontier in the 18th and 19th centuries or that of the English-Scottish border region in the later Middle Ages. These northern English songs, even divorced from the tunes to which they were once sung, are narrative poems of great literary interest.

The origins of the popular (or folk) ballad are much disputed. The theory that they were first composed by communal effort, taking shape as the songs with which primitive people accompanied ritual dances, no longer seems plausible. On the other hand, the forms in which the ballads have come down to us show that they have been subjected to a continuing process of revision, both conscious and unconscious, by those through whose lips and memories they passed. Though the English ballads were probably composed during the 500 year period from 1200 to 1700, few of them were printed before the 18th century and some not until the 19th. Bishop Thomas Percy (1729-1811) was among the first to take a literary interest in ballads, stimulated by his chance discovery of a 17th-century manuscript in which a number of them had been copied down among a great welter of Middle English verse. Percy's publication of this material in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* inspired others, notably

Sir Walter Scott, to go to the living source of the ballads and to set them down on paper at the dictation of the border people among whom the old songs were still being sung. These collectors often found that one ballad was remembered differently by different people: for instance, when one speaks of *Sir Patrick Spens* one is actually speaking of a number of poems that tell the same story in slightly or widely different words. If a single original form by a single author lies behind this diversity, it is too far back in the mists of time to be recovered.

A work that is the product of a consciously artistic mind will not ordinarily be improved by the revision that most ballads have been subjected to, but some of the ballads are probably better in their revised form than they were in their original form. The distinctive quality that popular ballads share is spareness: they are apt to deal only with the culminating incident or climax of a plot, to describe that event with intense compression, to put the burden of narration on allusive monologue or dialogue, and to avoid editorial comment. This concentration upon the bare essential is precisely that quality that the fallible human memory is likely not only to preserve but also to enhance, for the effort of remembering causes a sloughing-off of what is not strictly relevant. Some of the best of the ballads may have thus been refined in their transmission through men's minds, gaining rather than losing artistic stature.

The fact that ballads were originally songs is important to their development. The simplicity of the tunes to which they were sung not only influenced the distinctive verse form—normally a quatrain with four stresses per line—but also encouraged a corresponding simplicity in the narrative itself, and made individualizing flourishes impossible. Furthermore, the choral practice of using refrains and other kinds of repetitions probably lent the ballad one of its most impressive qualities, for while the actual narratives are tightly compressed, ballads rarely develop in an unbroken line. The reader—originally, the hearer—is constantly made to pause by a repeated phrase, or even by nonsense syllables, which provide suspense in a very primitive and effective form. The progress to a foreknown, foredoomed conclusion is paradoxically made to seem more inevitable, more urgent, by such relaxations of narrative tension. The use of repetition and refrain also imparts to the ballads something of the quality of incantation, of ritual, of liturgy—all of which are, of course, themselves closely allied with music.

Most of the best ballads have as their subject a tragic incident, often a murder or accidental death, generally involving supernatural elements. These motifs are a part of the common legacy of European folklore, and many of the English ballads have counterparts in other languages. To this class belong, among the selections chosen for inclusion here, *Lord Randall*, *Edward*, *Barbara Allan*, *the Wife of Usher's Well*, *the Three Ravens*, and—though not in its present form—*Sir Patrick Spens*. Not all the ballads with folklore motifs are tragic, however, for *Thomas Rhymer* has a happy ending. This ballad has gone through an added stage of evolution, for it is a shortening—a reduction to ballad form—of a romance which is preserved in a longer and more sophisticated form; but the romance itself had its origin in some ancient folk tale, and there may have

been an earlier ballad on the same theme, with, perhaps, a less happy conclusion.

Some ballads have as their subject actual historical incidents. Two late songs, the *Bonny Earl of Murray* and *Bonny George Campbell*, lament the political murders of two popular 16th-century Scots nobles. The presumably much older ballad *Sir Patrick Spens* may be based on a historical incident of the end of the 13th century. Yet all three of these achieve that mood of sadness that is characteristic of the best of the tragic stories derived from ancient folklore. The quasi-historical Robin Hood ballads, which form a large class by themselves, are less impressive. Most of them seem to have been composed relatively late and hence not to have gone through many stages of oral transmission; they lack the better ballads' intensity, often exhibiting an expansive development that is not free from chattiness. They are probably the work of minstrels who exploited the old folklore figure of Robin Hood by making him a symbol of that rebellion against authority that their own hearers perhaps longed for but did not dare to undertake. In the ballads Robin Hood is placed in a kind of never-never land of English history, where he can strike down tyrants with impunity, but often with far too much gloating: the attractive folklore figure of a natural, freedom-loving man has been burdened with too many political and social implications.

*St. Steven and King Herod* is hardly a ballad in the same sense as the other poems discussed here. It was probably not transmitted orally, for it contains Latin, and it shows none of the characteristic signs of having passed through more than a single stage of composition. Its author was probably a learned cleric who was exploiting the ballad form for religious purposes—an exploitation so successful as to earn the poem classification as a true ballad despite its evident artificiality.

The great collection of English ballads is that of F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, first published in 1882. The numbers under which Child lists the various versions of each of the ballads printed here are given in footnotes to the individual titles. The versions chosen for this anthology are those which the editor considers the most effective as poetry. Spelling has been modernized; the majority of the northernisms in the originals have been retained.

### Lord Randall<sup>1</sup>

"Oh where ha'e ye been, Lord Randall my son?  
O where ha'e ye been, my handsome young man?"

"I ha'e been to the wild wood: mother, make my bed soon,  
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain° wald° lie  
down."

*gladly / would*

5 "Where gat ye your dinner, Lord Randall my son?  
Where gat ye your dinner, my handsome young man?"

"I dined wi' my true love; mother, make my bed soon,  
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

1. Child, No. 12.



“What gat ye to your dinner, Lord Randall my son?

10 “What gat ye to your dinner, my handsome young man?”

“I gat eels boiled in broo:° mother, make my bed  
soon,

*broth*

For I'm weary wi' hunting and fain wald lie down.”

“What became of your bloodhounds, Lord Randall my son?

What became of your bloodhounds, my handsome young man?”

15 “O they swelled and they died: mother, make my bed soon,

For I'm weary wi' hunting and fain wald lie down.”

“O I fear ye are poisoned, Lord Randall my son!

O I fear ye are poisoned, my handsome young man!”

“O yes, I am poisoned: mother, make my bed soon,

20 For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wald lie down.”

## Edward<sup>2</sup>

“Why does your brand sae drap wi' bluid,<sup>3</sup>

Edward, Edward?

Why does your brand sae drap wi' bluid,

And why sae sad gang° ye, O?”

*go*

5 “O I ha'e killed my hawk sae guid,

Mither, mither,

O I ha'e killed my hawk sae guid,

And I had nae mair° but he, O.”

*more*

“Your hawkes bluid was never sae reid,°

*red*

10 Edward, Edward.

Your hawkes bluid was never sae reid,

My dear son I tell thee, O.”

“O I ha'e killed my reid-roan° steed,

*chestnut*

Mither, mither,

15 O I ha'e killed my reid-roan steed,

That erst° was sae fair and free, O.”

*before*

“Your steed was auld° and ye ha'e gat mair,

*old*

Edward, Edward.

Your steed was auld and ye ha'e gat mair:

20 Som other dule° ye dree,° O.”

*grief / suffer*

“O I ha'e killed my fader dear,

Mither, mither,

O I ha'e killed my fader dear,

Alas and wae° is me, O!”

*woe*

25 “And whatten° penance wul ye dree for that,

*what sort of*

Edward, Edward?

And whatten penance wul ye dree for that,

My dear son, now tell me, O?”

2. Child, No. 13.

3. I.e., why does your sword so drip with blood?

- "I'll set my feet in yonder boat,  
 30 Mither, mither,  
 I'll set my feet in yonder boat,  
 And I'll fare over the sea, O."
- "And what wul ye do wi' your towers and your ha',  
 Edward, Edward?  
 35 And what wul ye do wi' your towers and your ha',  
 That were sae fair to see, O?"  
 "I'll let thame stand til they down fa',  
 Mither, mither,  
 I'll let thame stand til they down fa',  
 40 For here never mair maun° I be, O." *must*
- "And what wul ye leave to your bairns° and your wife, *children*  
 Edward, Edward,  
 And what wul ye leave to your bairns and your wife,  
 Whan ye gang over the sea, O?"  
 45 "The warldes room<sup>4</sup> late° them beg thrae° life, *let / through*  
 Mither, mither,  
 The warldes room late them beg thrae life,  
 For thame never mair wul I see, O."
- "And what wul ye leave to your ain° mither dear, *own*  
 50 Edward, Edward?  
 And what wul ye leave to your ain mither dear,  
 My dear son, now tell me, O?"  
 "The curse of hell frae° me sal° ye bear, *from / shall*  
 Mither, mither,  
 55 The curse of hell frac me sal ye bear,  
 Sic° counseils ye gave to me, O." *such*

### Barbara Allan<sup>1</sup>

- It was in and about the Martinmas<sup>2</sup> time,  
 When the green leaves were a-fallin',  
 That Sir John Graeme in the West Country  
 Fell in love with Barbara Allan.
- 5 He sent his man down through the town  
 To the place where she was dwellin':  
 "O haste and come to my master dear,  
 Gin° ye be Barbara Allan." *if*
- O slowly, slowly rase° she up, *rose*  
 10 To the place where he was lyin',  
 And when she drew the curtain by:  
 "Young man, I think you're dyin'."

4. The world's space.  
 1. Child, No. 84.

2. November 11.

"O it's I'm sick, and very, very sick,  
And 'tis a' for Barbara Allan."

15 "O the better for me ye sal° never be,  
Though your heart's blood were a-spillin'." *shall*

"O dinna ye mind,<sup>3</sup> young man," said she,  
"When ye the cups were fillin',  
That ye made the healths gae° round and round,  
20 And slighted Barbara Allan?" *go*

He turned his face unto the wall,  
And death with him was dealin':  
"Adieu, adieu, my dear friends all,  
And be kind to Barbara Allan."

25 And slowly, slowly, rase she up,  
And slowly, slowly left him;  
And sighing said she could not stay,  
Since death of life had reft° him. *deprived*

She had not gane° a mile but twa,<sup>o</sup> *gone / two*  
30 When she heard the dead-bell knellin',  
And every jow° that the dead-bell ga'ed<sup>4</sup> *stroke*  
It cried, "Woe to Barbara Allan!"

"O mother, mother, make my bed,  
O make it soft and narrow:  
35 Since my love died for me today,  
I'll die for him tomorrow."

### The Wife of Usher's Well<sup>1</sup>

There lived a wife at Usher's Well,  
And a wealthy wife was she;  
She had three stout and stalwart sons,  
And sent them o'er the sea.

5 They hadna' been a week from her,  
A week but barely ane,<sup>o</sup> *one*  
When word came to the carlin° wife *old*  
That her three sons were gane.<sup>o</sup> *gone*

10 They hadna' been a week from her,  
A week but barely three,  
When word came to the carlin wife  
That her sons she'd never see.

"I wish the wind may never cease,  
Nor fashes° in the flood," *disturbances*

3. Don't you remember.

1. Child, No. 79.

4. I.e., made.

- 15 Till my three sons come hame<sup>o</sup> to me,  
In earthly flesh and blood." *home*
- It fell about the Martinmas,<sup>2</sup>  
When nights are long and mirk,<sup>o</sup>  
The carlin wife's three sons came hame,  
20 And their hats were o' the birk.<sup>3</sup> *dark*
- It neither grew in sike<sup>o</sup> nor ditch,  
Nor yet in ony sheugh,<sup>o</sup>  
But at the gates o' Paradise  
That birk grew fair cneugh. *field  
furrow*
- 25 "Blow up the fire, my maidens,  
Bring water from the well:  
For a' my house shall feast this night,  
Since my three sons are well."
- And she has made to them a bed,  
30 She's made it large and wide,  
And she's ta'en her mantle her about,  
Sat down at the bedside.
- Up then crew the red, red cock,  
And up and crew the gray.  
35 The eldest to the youngest said,  
" 'Tis time we were away."<sup>4</sup>
- The cock he hadna' crawled but once,  
And clapped his wings at a',  
When the youngest to the eldest said,  
40 "Brother, we must awa'." *away*
- "The cock doth crawl, the day doth daw,<sup>o</sup>  
The channerin'<sup>o</sup> worm doth chide:  
Gin<sup>o</sup> we be missed out o' our place,  
A sair pain we maun bide."<sup>5</sup> *down  
fretting  
if*
- 45 "Fare ye weel,<sup>o</sup> my mother dear,  
Fareweel to barn and byre.<sup>o</sup>  
And fare ye weel, the bonny lass  
That kindles my mother's fire." *well  
cow house*

### The Three Ravens<sup>1</sup>

There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
Down a down, hay down, hay down,  
There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
With a down,

2. November 11.

3. Birch: those returning from the dead were thought to wear vegetation on their heads.

4. Dead men must return to their graves at cockcrow.

5. A sore pain we must abide.

1. Child, No. 26.

5 There were three ravens sat on a tree,  
 They were as black as they might be,  
 With a down, derry, derry, derry, down, down.

The one of them said to his mate,  
 "Where shall we our breakfast take?

10 "Down in yonder green field  
 There lies a knight slain under his shield.

"His hounds they lie down at his feet,  
 So well they can their master keep.

"His hawks they fly so eagerly,<sup>o</sup>  
 15 There's no fowl<sup>o</sup> dare him come nigh."  
*fiercely*  
*bird*

Down there comes a fallow<sup>o</sup> doe,  
 As great with young as she might go.<sup>o</sup>  
*red-brown*  
*walk*

She lifted up his bloody head,  
 And kissed his wounds that were so red.

20 She got him up upon her back,  
 And carried him to earthen lake.<sup>o</sup>  
*pit*

She buried him before the prime;<sup>2</sup>  
 She was dead herself ere evensong time.  
 God send every gentleman

25 Such hawks, such hounds, and such a lemman.<sup>o</sup>  
*mistress*

### Bonny George Campbell<sup>3</sup>

High upon Highlands  
 And low upon Tay,  
 Bonny George Campbell  
 Rade<sup>o</sup> out on a day.  
*rode*

5 Saddled and bridled  
 And gallant rade he:  
 Hame<sup>o</sup> cam his guid horse,  
 But never cam he.  
*home*

Out cam his auld mither,  
 10 Greeting fu' sair,<sup>4</sup>  
 And out cam his bonny bride,  
 Riving<sup>o</sup> her hair.  
*tearing*

Saddled and bridled  
 And booted rade he:  
 15 Toom<sup>o</sup> hame cam the saddle,  
 But never cam he.  
*empty*

2. The first hour of the morning.

3. Child, No. 210. The form printed here is a composite, made up from

several variant versions by the ballad-collector Motherwell.

4. Weeping full sore.

“My meadow lies green,  
 And my corn is unshorn,  
 My barn is to build,  
 20 And my babe is unborn.”

Saddled and bridled  
 And bootied rade he;  
 Toom hame cam the saddle,  
 But never cam he.

### Sir Patrick Spens<sup>1</sup>

The king sits in Dumferline town,  
 Drinking the blude-reid° wine: *blood-red*  
 “O whar will I get a guid sailor  
 To sail this ship of mine?”

5 Up and spak an eldern° knicht, *ancient*  
 Sat at the king’s richt knee:  
 “Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor  
 That sails upon the sea.”

The king has written a braid° letter *broad*  
 10 And signed it wi’ his hand,  
 And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,  
 Was walking on the sand.

The first line that Sir Patrick read,  
 A loud lauch° lauched he; *laugh*  
 15 The next line that Sir Patrick read,  
 The tear blinded his ee.° *eye*

“O wha° is this has done this deed,  
 This ill deed done to me,  
 To send me out this time o’ the year,  
 20 To sail upon the sea? *who*

“Make haste, make haste, my mirry men all,  
 Our guid ship sails the morn.”  
 “O say na° sac,° my master dear, *not / so*  
 For I fear a deadly storm.

25 “Late late yestre°en I saw the new moon  
 Wi’ the auld° moon in her arm, *old*  
 And I fear, I fear, my dear master,  
 That we will come to harm.”

O our Scots nobles were richt laith° *loath*  
 30 To weet° their cork-heeled shoon,° *wet / shoes*  
 But lang owre° a’ the play were played *ere*  
 Their hats they swam aboon.° *above*

1. Child, No. 58.

O lang, lang may their ladies sit,  
 Wi' their fans into their hand,  
 35 Or e'er they see Sir Patrick Spens  
 Come sailing to the land.

O lang, lang may the ladies stand,  
 Wi' their gold kembs<sup>o</sup> in their hair, combs  
 Waiting for their ain<sup>o</sup> dear lords, own  
 40 For they'll see thame na mair.<sup>o</sup> more

Half o'er,<sup>2</sup> half o'er to Aberdour  
 It's fifty fadom<sup>o</sup> deep, fathoms  
 And there lies guid Sir Patrick Spens,  
 Wi' the Scots lords at his feet.

### The Bonny Earl of Murray<sup>1</sup>

Ye Highlands and ye Lawlands,<sup>o</sup> Lowlands  
 O where have you been?  
 They have slain the Earl of Murray,  
 And they laid him on the green.

5 "Now wae<sup>o</sup> be to thee, Huntly,<sup>2</sup> woe  
 And wherefore did you sae?<sup>o</sup> so  
 I bade you bring him wi' you,  
 But forbade you him to slay."

He was a braw<sup>o</sup> gallant, brave  
 10 And he rid<sup>3</sup> at the ring;  
 And the bonny Earl of Murray,  
 O he might have been a king.

He was a braw gallant,  
 And he played at the ba';<sup>o</sup> ball  
 15 And the bonny Earl of Murray  
 Was the flower amang them a'.

He was a braw gallant,  
 And he played at the glove;<sup>4</sup>  
 And the bonny Earl of Murray,  
 20 O he was the queen's love.

O lang will his lady  
 Look o'er the Castle Down,  
 Ere she see the Earl of Murray  
 Come sounding<sup>5</sup> through the town.

2. Halfway over.

1. Child, No. 181.

2. Huntly, who slew Murray in 1592, had been ordered by King James VI of Scotland (the speaker of this stanza) to arrest the earl.

3. Rode. "The ring" was a hanging ring which mounted knights tried to impale on their spears.

4. Either the goal in a race or else a lady's favor.

5. Blowing horns.

Thomas Rhymer<sup>1</sup>

True Thomas lay on Huntly bank;  
 A ferly° he spied wi' his ee;° *wonder / eye*  
 And there he saw a lady bright  
 Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.<sup>2</sup>

5 Her shirt was o' the grass-green silk,  
 Her mantle o' the velvet fine;  
 At ilka° tett° of her horse's mane *every / braid*  
 Hung fifty sil'er bells and nine.

True Thomas he pulled off his cap  
 10 And louted° low down to his knee: *bowed*  
 "All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!  
 For thy peer on earth I never did see."

"O no, O no, Thomas," she said,  
 "That name does not belang to me;  
 15 I am but the Queen of fair Elfland,  
 That am hither come to visit thee.

"Harp° and carp,° Thomas," she said, *play / speak*  
 "Harp and carp along wi' me;  
 And if ye dare to kiss my lips,  
 20 Sure of your body I will be."

"Betide me weal, betide me woe,  
 That weird° shall never daunten me." *fate*  
 Sine° he has kissed her rosy lips, *then*  
 All underneath the Eildon Tree.

25 "Now ye maun° go wi' me," she said, *must*  
 "True Thomas, ye maun go wi' me;  
 And ye maun serve me seven years  
 Through weal or woe, as may chance to be."

She mounted on her milk-white steed;  
 30 She's ta'en True Thomas up behind;  
 And ay whene'er her bridle rung,  
 The steed flew swifter than the wind.

O they rade° on and farther on; *rode*  
 The steed gaed° swifter than the wind, *went*  
 35 Until they reached a desert wide,  
 And living land was left behind.

"Light down, light down now, True Thomas,  
 And lean your head upon my knee.

1. I.e., Thomas the Minstrel. Child, No. 37.

2. Trees in folklore are often frequented by supernatural beings.



Abide and rest a little space,

40 And I will show you ferlies three.

“O see ye not yon narrow road,  
So thick beset with thorns and briars?  
That is the path of righteousness,  
Though after it but few inquire.

45 “And see ye not that braid,° braid road *broad*  
That lies across that lily leven?°  
That is the path of wickedness,  
Though some call it the road to heaven.

50 “And see not ye that bonny road *hillside*  
That winds about the ferny brae?°  
That is the road to fair Elfland,  
Where thou and I this night maun gae.° *go*

“But Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue,  
Whatever ye may hear or see;  
55 For if you speak word in Elfenland,  
Ye’ll ne’er get back to your ain° country.” *own*

O they rade on and farther on,  
And they waded through rivers aboon° the knee, *above*  
And they saw neither sun nor moon,  
60 But they heard the roaring of the sea.

It was mirk,° mirk night, and there was nae stern-light,<sup>4</sup> *dark*  
And they waded through red blude to the knee,  
For a’ the blude that’s shed on earth  
Rins° through the springs o’ that country. *runs*

65 Sine they came onto a garden green,  
And she pulled an apple frae° a tree. *from*

“Take this for thy wages, True Thomas,  
It will give thee the tongue that never can lee.”° *lie*

70 “My tongue is mine ain,” True Thomas said;  
“A gudely° gift ye wad° gi’e to me! *goodly / would*  
I neither dought° to buy nor sell *feared*  
At fair or tryst° where I may be. *meeting place*

“I dought neither speak to prince or peer,  
Nor ask of grace frae fair lady.”

75 “Now hold thy peace,” the lady said,  
“For as I say, so must it be.”

He has gotten a coat of the even° cloth, *smooth*  
And a pair of shoes of velvet green;  
And till seven years were gane and past,  
80 True Thomas on earth was never seen.

3. Probably “lawn.”

4. No starlight.

Robin Hood and the Three Squires<sup>1</sup>

There are twelve months in all the year,  
 As I hear many men say,  
 But the merriest month in all the year  
 Is the merry month of May.

5 Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,  
*With a link-a-down and a-day,*  
 And there he met a silly<sup>o</sup> old woman, *poor, innocent*  
 Was weeping on the way.

“What news? what news, thou silly old woman?  
 10 What news hast thou for me?”  
 Said she, “There’s three squires in Nottingham town,  
 Today is condemned to dee.”<sup>o</sup> *die*

“O have they parishes burnt?” he said,  
 “Or have they ministers slain?  
 15 Or have they robbed any virgin,  
 Or with other men’s wives have lain?”

“They have no parishes burnt, good sir,  
 Nor yet have ministers slain,  
 Nor have they robbed any virgin,  
 20 Nor with other men’s wives have lain.”

“O what have they done?” said bold Robin Hood,  
 “I pray thee tell to me.”  
 “It’s for slaying of the king’s fallow<sup>o</sup> deer, *brown-red*  
 Bearing their longbows with thee.”

25 “Dost thou not mind,<sup>o</sup> old woman,” he said, *remember*  
 “Since thou made me sup and dine?  
 By the truth of my body,” quoth bold Robin Hood,  
 “You could not tell it in better time.”

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,  
 30 *With a link-a-down and a-day,*  
 And there he met with a silly old palmer,<sup>2</sup>  
 Was walking along the highway.

“What news? what news, thou silly old man?  
 What news, I do thee pray?”  
 35 Said he, “Three squires in Nottingham town  
 Are condemned to die this day.”

“Come change thine apparel with me, old man,  
 Come change thine apparel for mine.

1. Child, No. 140.

2. A poor old palmer: a palmer was one

who had made the pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Here is forty shillings in good silver,

40 Go drink it in beer or wine."

"O thine apparel is good," he said,

"And mine is ragged and torn.

Wherever you go, wherever you ride,

Laugh ne'er an old man to scorn."

45 "Come change thine apparel with me, old churl,

Come change thine apparel with mine:

Here are twenty pieces of good broad gold,

Go feast thy brethren with wine."

Then he put on the old man's hat,

50 It stood full high on the crown:

"The first bold bargain that I come at,

It shall make thee come down."

Then he put on the old man's cloak,

Was patched black, blue, and red:

55 He thought it no shame all the day long

To wear the bags of bread.

Then he put on the old man's breeks,<sup>o</sup>

*underbreeches*

Was patched from ballup<sup>3</sup> to side:

"By the truth of my body," bold Robin can<sup>o</sup> say,

*did*

60 "This man loved little pride."

Then he put on the old man's hose,<sup>o</sup>

*tights*

Were patched from knee to wrist:

"By the truth of my body," said bold Robin Hood,

"I'd laugh if I had any list."<sup>o</sup>

*desire*

65 Then he put on the old man's shoes,

Were patched both beneath and aboon:<sup>o</sup>

*above*

Then Robin Hood swore a solemn oath,

"It's good habit<sup>o</sup> that makes a man."

*clothing*

Now Robin Hood is to Nottingham gone,

70 *With a link-a-down and a-down,*

And there he met with the proud sheriff,

Was walking along the town.

"O Christ you save, O sheriff," he said,

"O Christ you save and see:

75 And what will you give to a silly old man

Today will your hangman be?"

"Some suits, some suits," the sheriff he said,

"Some suits I'll give to thee;

Some suits, some suits, and pence thirtcen,

80 Today's a hangman's fee."

Then Robin he turns him round about,  
 And jumps from stock<sup>o</sup> to stone: *stump*  
 "By the truth of my body," the sheriff he said,  
 "That's well jumped, thou nimble old man."

85 "I was ne'er a hangman in all my life,  
 Nor yet intends to trade.  
 But cursed be he," said bold Robin,  
 "That first a hangman was made.

90 "I've a bag for meal, and a bag for malt,  
 And a bag for barley and corn,  
 A bag for bread, and a bag for beef,  
 And a bag for my little small horn.

"I have a horn in my pocket:  
 I got it from Robin Hood;  
 95 And still when I set it to my mouth,  
 For thee it blows little good."

"O wind<sup>o</sup> thy horn, thou proud fellow:  
 Of thee I have no doubt:<sup>o</sup>  
 I wish that thou give such a blast  
 100 Till both thy eyes fall out."

*blow*  
*fear*

The first loud blast that he did blow,  
 He blew both loud and shrill.  
 A hundred and fifty of Robin Hood's men  
 Came riding over the hill.

105 The next loud blast that he did give,  
 He blew both loud and amain,  
 And quickly sixty of Robin Hood's men  
 Came shining<sup>4</sup> over the plain.

"O who are those," the sheriff he said,  
 110 "Come tripping over the lea?"<sup>o</sup>  
 "They're my attendants," brave Robin did say,  
 "They'll pay a visit to thee."

*meadow*

They took the gallows from the slack,<sup>o</sup>  
 They set it in the glen;  
 115 They hanged the proud sheriff on that,  
 Released their own three men.

*hollow*

## St. Steven and King Herod<sup>1</sup>

Saint Steven was a clerk  
 In King Herodes hall,  
 And served him of bread and cloth  
 As every king befall.<sup>2</sup>

4. I.e., making a brave show.  
 1. Child, No. 22.

2. As is appropriate to every king.

5 Steven out of kitchen came  
 With boar's head on hand;  
 He saw a star was fair and bright  
 Over Bedlem° stand.

Bethlehem

He cast adown the boar's head  
 10 And went into the hall:  
 "I forsake thee, King Herodes,  
 And thy works all.

"I forsake thee, King Herodes,  
 And thy works all:  
 15 There is a child in Bedlem born  
 Is better than we all."

"What aileth thee, Steven?  
 What is thee befall?  
 Lacketh thee either meat or drink  
 20 In King Herodes hall?"

"Lacketh me neither meat ne drink  
 In King Herodes hall:  
 There is a child in Bedlem born  
 Is better than we all."

25 "What aileth thee, Steven?  
 Art thou wood, or ginneſt weede?<sup>3</sup>  
 Lacketh thee either gold or fee°  
 Or any rich weed?"°

property  
 clothing

"Lacketh me neither gold ne fee  
 30 Ne none rich weed:  
 There is a child in Bedlem born  
 Shall help us at our need."

"That is also° sooth,° Steven,  
 Also sooth, ywis,°  
 35 As this capon crow shal  
 That lith° here in my dish."

as / true  
 indeed

That word was not so soon said,  
 That word in that hall,  
 The capon crew *Christus natus est*<sup>4</sup>  
 40 Among the lords all.

"Riseth up, my tormentors,  
 By two and all by one,  
 And leadeth Steven out of this town,  
 And stoneth him with stone."

45 Tooken they Steven,  
 And stoned him in the way;  
 And therefore is his even<sup>5</sup>  
 Christ's own day.

3. Art thou insane or beginning to go mad?

4. Christ is born.

5. Eve: the day before his feast day.

## SIR THOMAS MALORY

(ca. 1405–1471)

- 1451: First of a long series of arrests and imprisonments.  
 ca. 1469–70: *Morte Darthur* completed in prison.  
 1485: *Morte Darthur* printed by William Caxton.

The little that we know of Malory (and that the Malory discussed here was indeed the Malory who wrote the *Morte Darthur* is an assumption that has recently been challenged severely though by no means fatally) suggests a man of violent temperament much given to lawless action. He seems to have been a respectable enough person in his youth, but in 1451 he got into difficulties with the law that lasted the rest of his life. In that year he was arrested in order to prevent his doing injury—presumably further injury—to a priory in Lincolnshire, and shortly thereafter he was accused of a number of criminal acts. These included escaping from prison after his first arrest, twice breaking into and plundering the Abbey of Coombe, extorting money from various persons, and committing rape. Malory pleaded innocent of all charges, and it is indeed possible that he was less guilty of (or had more provocation for) the crimes than the records make it appear. The years of the Wars of the Roses were violent ones, when a supporter of the party out of power was apt to be subjected to much persecution by the ruling group; such a man might at times feel himself justified in taking the law into his own hands in order to recover what had wrongfully been taken from him. But one suspects that Malory took the law into his own hands with unnecessary enthusiasm.

How much time Malory passed in prison is not known, but he was surely a prisoner in 1468 after he had supported an unsuccessful Lancastrian revolt against the Yorkist king, Edward IV, who specifically excluded Malory from two amnesties granted to the Lancastrians. It was probably in prison that he became engaged on the *Morte Darthur*; he was still in prison when he completed it, and may have died there. The book was printed (and edited) in 1485 by William Caxton, the first English printer. A manuscript of it that has recently come to light helps us to a better text than Caxton's.

Arthurian romance, of which Malory's book is a compilation, is a body of highly diverse narrative materials which originated at various times among various peoples and which only gradually became associated with the name of Arthur. Arthur himself was probably a British or Roman-British king who resisted the Anglo-Saxon invasions of England in the 6th century, but his historical reality is less important than the legendary role he played as the great figure around whom the medieval ideal of chivalry flourished. At its simplest, chivalry is the code that governs the actions of the knight-adventurer who rides out in search of wrongs that he may right—typically in search of ladies whom he may rescue from monsters, churls, and wicked (non-Arthurian) knights. The ideal was invented

and given a local habitation in the brilliantly imaginative and idealistic 12th century. History had, of course, never witnessed such knights, such ladies, nor such a landscape as that on which their adventures took place, and when chivalry was first invented it was already placed in the past. Man's urge to devise an idealized past seems to be recurrent, for the Camelot of Arthur has its counterpart in the Sherwood Forest of Robin Hood and in the American West. All three of these fictions have the same ideal: that of maintaining order in an essentially lawless land by the efforts of the individual, who fights for the right against seemingly overwhelming odds. Naïve as the practice of this ideal may seem in the Arthurian fiction, the ideal itself has made an important contribution to civilization—though if one imitates literally the Arthurian practice of enforcing the right by violence, as Malory's life suggests that he did, one will find oneself not maintaining order, but disrupting it.

The Arthurian milieu attracted to itself all sorts of diverse motifs, such as the remnants of primitive pagan religious rites, heavily moralized Christianity, an elaborate and in general flagrantly immoral code of romantic love, and others equally miscellaneous. In 13th-century France the amorphous Arthurian material was given a kind of order in a series of prose narratives. Long and often rather vaguely told, these formed the chief material which Malory further edited and ordered while translating it into English.

His book is attractive, however, not only because it is the best and most complete treatment of the story of Arthur and his knights, but also because it is one of the greatest pieces of prose in English. Malory was the first English writer to make prose as sensitive an instrument of narrative as English poetry had always been. One has only to turn from a page of Chaucer's prose to a page of Malory's to be struck by the naturalness and lack of self-consciousness of the later writer. Indeed, Malory achieves in his prose that wonderful impression of simplicity that Chaucer achieves only in his poetry. No matter how extravagant the adventure Malory is recounting, he always manages to give it a hard base of realism. He is in particular a master of naturalistic dialogue, with which he keeps his narrative close to earth. And both he and the majority of his characters are masters of understatement who express themselves, in moments of great emotional tension, with a bare minimum of words. The result is highly provocative to the reader's imagination, which is made, in a sense, to do the writer's work for him. This appeal to the reader's creative imagination probably explains why the *Morte Darthur* brings forth such widely differing responses from its readers, who agree, perhaps, only in their affection for the work.

"The Death of Arthur"—the incident that gives the book its title, though the book itself concerns the whole life of Arthur—is one of Malory's finest passages, and the one on which Tennyson based a famous *Idyll*. Largely at the insistence of his nephew Gawain, Arthur has been in France, futilely besieging his friend Lancelot in a halfhearted attempt to punish him for having been Queen Guinevere's lover. Word comes to the King that his bastard son Mordred has seized the kingdom, and Arthur leads his forces back to England. Mordred attacks them upon their landing, and Gawain is mortally wounded and dies, though not before he has repented for having insisted that Arthur fight Lancelot and has written Lancelot to come to the aid of his former lord.

From Morte Darthur<sup>1</sup>

[The Death of Arthur]

So upon Trinity Sunday at night King Arthur dreamed a wonderful dream, and in his dream him seemed<sup>2</sup> that he saw upon a chafflet a chair, and the chair was fast to a wheel, and thereupon sat King Arthur in the richest cloth of gold that might be made. And the King thought there was under him, far from him, an hideous deep black water, and therein was all manner of serpents, and worms, and wild beasts, foul and horrible. And suddenly the King thought that the wheel turned upside down, and he fell among the serpents, and every beast took him by a limb. And then the King cried as he lay in his bed, "Help, help!"

And then knights, squires, and yeomen awaked the king, and then he was so amazed that he wist<sup>3</sup> not where he was. And then so he awaked<sup>4</sup> until it was nigh day, and then he fell on slumbering again, not sleeping nor thoroughly waking. So the King seemed<sup>5</sup> verily that there came Sir Gawain unto him with a number of fair ladies with him. So when King Arthur saw him, he said, "Welcome, my sister's son. I weened ye had been dead. And now I see thee on-live, much am I beholden unto Almighty Jesu. Ah, fair nephew and my sister's son, what been these ladies that hither be come with you?"

"Sir," said Sir Gawain, "all these be ladies for whom I have foughten for when I was man living. And all these are tho<sup>6</sup> that I did battle for in righteous quarrels, and God hath given them that grace, at their great prayer, because I did battle for them for their right, that they should bring me hither unto you. Thus much hath given me leave God, for to warn you of your death. For and ye fight as tomorn<sup>7</sup> with Sir Mordred, as ye both have assigned,<sup>8</sup> doubt ye not ye must be slain, and the most party of your people on both parties. And for the great grace and goodness that Almighty Jesu hath unto you, and for pity of you and many mo<sup>9</sup> other good men there shall be slain, God hath sent me to you of his special grace to give you warning that in no wise ye do battle as tomorn, but that ye take a treatise<sup>1</sup> for a month-day. And proffer you largely,<sup>2</sup> so that tomorn

1. The selection here given is from the section of the book that Caxton called Book XXI, Chaps. 3-7, with omissions. The text has been based on the Winchester MS., with some readings introduced from the Caxton edition; spelling has been modernized and modern punctuation added.

2. It seemed to him. "Chafflet": scaffold.

3. Knew.

4. Lay awake.

5. It seemed to the King.

6. Those.

7. If you fight tomorrow.

8. Decided.

9. More. "There": i.e., who there.

1. Treaty, truce. "For a month-day": for a month from today.

2. Make generous offers.



ye put in a delay. For within a month shall come Sir Lancelot with all his noble knights and rescue you worshipfully and slay Sir Mordred and all that ever will hold with him."

Then Sir Gawain and all the ladies vanished. And anon the King called upon his knights, squires, and yeomen, and charged them wightly<sup>3</sup> to fetch his noble lords and wise bishops unto him. And when they were come the King told them of his avision,<sup>4</sup> that Sir Gawain had told him and warned him that, and he fought on the morn, he should be slain. Then the King commanded Sir Lucan the Butler<sup>5</sup> and his brother Sir Bedivere the Bold, with two bishops with them, and charged them in any wise to take a treatise for a month-day with Sir Mordred. "And spare not: proffer him lands and goods as much as ye think reasonable."

So then they departed and came to Sir Mordred where he had a grim host of an hundred thousand, and there they entreated<sup>6</sup> Sir Mordred long time. And at the last Sir Mordred was agreed for to have Cornwall and Kent by King Arthur's days,<sup>7</sup> and after that, all England, after the days of King Arthur.

Then were they condescended<sup>8</sup> that King Arthur and Sir Mordred should meet betwixt both their hosts, and everich<sup>9</sup> of them should bring fourteen persons. And so they came with this word unto Arthur. Then said he, "I am glad that this is done," and so he went into the field.

And when King Arthur should depart, he warned all his host that, and they see any sword drawn, "Look ye come on fiercely and slay that traitor Sir Mordred, for I in no wise trust him." In like wise Sir Mordred warned his host that "And ye see any manner of sword drawn, look that ye come on fiercely, and so slay all that ever before you standeth, for in no wise I will not trust for this treatise." And in the same wise said Sir Mordred unto his host, "For I know well my father will be avenged upon me."

And so they met as their pointment<sup>1</sup> was and were agreed and accorded thoroughly. And wine was fetched and they drank together. Right so came an adder out of a little heath-bush, and it stung a knight in the foot. And so when the knight felt him so stung, he looked down and saw the adder. And anon he drew his sword to slay the adder, and thought<sup>2</sup> none other harm. And when the host on both parties saw that sword drawn, then they blew beams,<sup>3</sup> trumpets, and horns, and shouted grimly. And so both hosts dressed them<sup>4</sup> together. And King Arthur took his horse and

3. Quickly.

4. Dream.

5. "Butler" here is probably only a title of high rank, although it was originally used to designate the officer who had charge of wine for the king's table.

6. Dealt with.

7. During King Arthur's lifetime.

8. Agreed.

9. Each.

1. Arrangement.

2. Meant.

3. Trumpets.

4. Prepared to come.

said, "Alas, this unhappy day!" and so rode to his party, and Sir Mordred in like wise.

And never since was there never seen a more dolefuller battle in no Christian land, for there was but rushing and riding, foining<sup>5</sup> and striking; and many a grim word was there spoken of either to other, and many a deadly stroke. But ever King Arthur rode throughout the battle<sup>6</sup> of Sir Mordred many times and did full nobly, as a noble king should do, and at all times he fainted never. And Sir Mordred did his devoir<sup>7</sup> that day and put himself in great peril.

And thus they fought all the long day, and never stunted<sup>8</sup> till the noble knights were laid to the cold earth. And ever they fought still till it was near night, and by then was there an hundred thousand laid dead upon the down. Then was King Arthur wood-wroth<sup>9</sup> out of measure when he saw his people so slain from him. And so he looked about him and could see no mo<sup>1</sup> of all his host, and good knights left no mo on-live, but two knights: the t'one<sup>2</sup> was Sir Lucan the Butler and [the other] his brother Sir Bedivere. And yet they were full sore wounded.

"Jesu, mercy," said the King, "where are all my noble knights become?<sup>3</sup> Alas that ever I should see this doleful day! For now," said King Arthur, "I am come to mine end. But would to God," said he, "that I wist<sup>4</sup> now where were that traitor Sir Mordred that has caused all this mischief."

Then King Arthur looked about and was ware where stood Sir Mordred leaning upon his sword among a great heap of dead men.

"Now give me my spear," said King Arthur unto Sir Lucan, "for yonder I have espied the traitor that all this woe hath wrought."

"Sir, let him be," said Sir Lucan, "for he is unhappy.<sup>5</sup> And if ye pass this unhappy day ye shall be right well revenged upon him. And, good lord, remember ye of your night's dream, and what the spirit of Sir Gawain told you tonight, and yet God of his great goodness hath preserved you hitherto. And for God's sake, my lord, leave off by this,<sup>6</sup> for, blessed be God, ye have won the field: for yet we been here three on-live, and with Sir Mordred is not one on-live. And therefore if ye leave off now, this wicked day of destiny is past."

"Now, tide<sup>7</sup> me death, tide me life," said the King, "now I see him yonder alone, he shall never escape mine hands. For at a better avail<sup>8</sup> shall I never have him."

"God speed you well!" said Sir Bedivere.

5. Lunging.

6. Battalion.

7. Knightly duty.

8. Stopped.

9. Mad with rage.

1. Others.

2. That one, i.e., the first.

3. What has become of all my noble knights?

4. Knew.

5. I.e., unlucky for you.

6. I.e., with this much accomplished.

7. Betide.

8. Advantage.

Then the King got his spear in both his hands and ran toward Sir Mordred, crying and saying, "Traitor, now is thy deathday come!"

And when Sir Mordred saw King Arthur he ran until him with his sword drawn in his hand, and there King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield, with a foin<sup>9</sup> of his spear, throughout the body more than a fathom.<sup>1</sup> And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death's wound, he thrust himself with the might that he had up to the burr<sup>2</sup> of King Arthur's spear, and right so he smote his father King Arthur with his sword holden in both his hands, upon the side of the head, that the sword pierced the helmet and the tay<sup>3</sup> of the brain. And therewith Sir Mordred dashed down stark dead to the earth.

And noble King Arthur fell in a swough<sup>4</sup> to the earth, and there he swooned oftentimes, and Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere oftentimes heaved him up. And so, weakly betwixt them, they led him to a little chapel not far from the seaside, and when the King was there, him thought him reasonably eased. Then heard they people cry in the field. "Now go thou, Sir Lucan," said the King, "and do me to wit<sup>5</sup> what betokens that noise in the field."

So Sir Lucan departed, for he was grievously wounded in many places. And so as he yede<sup>6</sup> he saw and harkened by the moonlight how that pillers<sup>7</sup> and robbers were come into the field to pill and to rob many a full noble knight of brooches and bees<sup>8</sup> and of many a good ring and many a rich jewel. And who that were not dead all out<sup>9</sup> there they slew them for their harness and their riches. When Sir Lucan understood this work, he came to the King as soon as he might and told him all what he had heard and seen. "Therefore by my read,"<sup>1</sup> said Sir Lucan, "it is best that we bring you to some town."

"I would it were so," said the King, "but I may not stand, my head works<sup>2</sup> so. Ah, Sir Lancelot," said King Arthur, "this day have I sore missed thee. And alas that ever I was against thee, for now have I my death, whereof Sir Gawain me warned in my dream."

Then Sir Lucan took up the King the t'one party<sup>3</sup> and Sir Bedivere the other party; and in the lifting up the King swooned and in the lifting Sir Lucan fell in a swoon that part of his guts fell out of his body, and therewith the noble knight's heart burst. And when the King awoke he beheld Sir Lucan how he lay foaming at the mouth and part of his guts lay at his feet.

9. Thrust.

1. Six feet.

2. Hand guard.

3. Edge.

4. Swoon.

5. Let me know.

6. Walked.

7. Plunderers.

8. Bracelets.

9. Entirely. "Harness": armor.

1. Advice.

2. Aches.

3. On one side.

"Alas," said the King, "this is to me a full heavy<sup>4</sup> sight to see this noble duke so die for my sake, for he would have holpen<sup>5</sup> me that had more need of help than I. Alas that he would not complain him for<sup>6</sup> his heart was so set to help me. Now Jesu have mercy upon his soul."

Then Sir Bedivere wept for the death of his brother.

"Now leave this mourning and weeping, gentle knight," said the King, "for all this will not avail me. For wit thou well, and<sup>7</sup> I might live myself, the death of Sir Lucan would grieve me evermore. But my time passeth on fast," said the King. "Therefore," said King Arthur unto Sir Bedivere, "take thou here Excalibur<sup>8</sup> my good sword and go with it to yonder water's side; and when thou comest there I charge thee throw my sword in that water and come again and tell me what thou sawest there."

"My lord," said Sir Bedivere, "your commandment shall be done, and [I shall] lightly<sup>9</sup> bring you word again."

So Sir Bedivere departed. And by the way he beheld that noble sword, that the pommel<sup>1</sup> and the haft was all precious stones. And then he said to himself, "If I throw this rich sword in the water, thereof shall never come good, but harm and loss." And then Sir Bedivere hid Excalibur under a tree. And so, as soon as he might, he came again unto the King and said he had been at the water and had thrown the sword into the water.

"What saw thou there?" said the King.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waves and winds."

"That is untruly said of thee," said the King. "And therefore go thou lightly again and do my commandment; as thou art to me lief<sup>2</sup> and dear, spare not, but throw it in."

Then Sir Bedivere returned again and took the sword in his hand. And yet him thought<sup>3</sup> sin and shame to throw away that noble sword. And so eft<sup>4</sup> he hid the sword and returned again and told the King that he had been at the water and done his commandment.

"What sawest thou there?" said the King.

"Sir," he said, "I saw nothing but waters wap and waves wan."<sup>5</sup>

"Ah, traitor unto me and untrue," said King Arthur, "now hast thou betrayed me twice. Who would have weened that thou that hast been to me so lief and dear, and thou art named a noble knight, and would betray me for the riches of this sword. But now go again

4. Sorrowful.

5. Helped.

6. Because.

7. If.

8. The sword which Arthur had received as a young man from the Lady of the Lake; it is presumably she who catches it when Bedivere finally throws it into the water.

9. Quickly.

1. Rounded knob on the hilt; "haft": handle.

2. Beloved.

3. It seemed to him.

4. Again.

5. The phrase seems to mean "waters wash the shore and waves grow dark."

lightly, for thy long tarrying putteth me in great jeopardy of my life, for I have taken cold. And but if thou do now as I bid thee, if ever I may see thee I shall slay thee mine<sup>6</sup> own hands, for thou wouldest for my rich sword see me dead."

Then Sir Bedivere departed and went to the sword and lightly took it up, and so he went to the water's side; and there he bound the girdle<sup>7</sup> about the hilts, and threw the sword as far into the water as he might. And there came an arm and an hand above the water and took it and clutched it, and shook it thrice and brandished; and then vanished away the hand with the sword into the water. So Sir Bedivere came again to the King and told him what he saw.

"Alas," said the King, "help me hence, for I dread me I have tarried overlong."

Then Sir Bedivere took the King upon his back and so went with him to that water's side. And when they were at the water's side, even fast<sup>8</sup> by the bank hove<sup>9</sup> a little barge with many fair ladies in it; and among them all was a queen; and all they had black hoods, and all they wept and shrieked when they saw King Arthur.

"Now put me into that barge," said the King; and so he did softly. And there received him three ladies with great mourning, and so they set them<sup>1</sup> down. And in one of their laps King Arthur laid his head, and then the queen said, "Ah, my dear brother, why have ye tarried so long from me? Alas, this wound on your head hath caught overmuch cold." And anon they rowed fromward the land, and Sir Bedivere beheld all tho ladies go froward him.

Then Sir Bedivere cried and said, "Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now ye go from me and leave me here alone among mine enemies?"

"Comfort thyself," said the King, "and do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in. For I must into the vale of Avilion<sup>2</sup> to heal me of my grievous wound. And if thou hear nevermore of me, pray for my soul."

But ever the queen and ladies wept and shrieked that it was pity to hear. And as soon as Sir Bedivere had lost the sight of the barge he wept and wailed and so took<sup>3</sup> the forest, and went all that night. And in the morning he was ware betwixt two holts hoar<sup>4</sup> of a chapel and an hermitage.<sup>5</sup> \* \* \*

6. I.e., with mine.

7. Sword belt.

8. Close.

9. Waited.

1. I.e., they sat.

2. A legendary island, sometimes identified with the earthly paradise.

3. Took to. "Went": walked.

4. Ancient copses.

5. In the passage here omitted, Sir

Bedivere meets the former Bishop of Canterbury, now a hermit, who describes how on the previous night a company of ladies had brought to the chapel a dead body, asking that it be buried. Sir Bedivere exclaims that the dead man must have been King Arthur, and vows to spend the rest of his life there in the chapel as a hermit.

Thus of Arthur I find no more written in books that been authorized,<sup>6</sup> neither more of the very certainty of his death heard I never read,<sup>7</sup> but thus was he led away in a ship wherein were three queens: that one was King Arthur's sister, Queen Morgan la Fée, the t'other<sup>8</sup> was the Queen of North Wales, and the third was the Queen of the Waste Lands. \* \* \*

Now more of the death of King Arthur could I never find but that these ladies brought him to his burials,<sup>9</sup> and such one was buried there that the hermit bore witness that sometime was Bishop of Canterbury.<sup>1</sup> But yet the hermit knew not in certain that he was verily the body of King Arthur, for this tale Sir Bedivere, a Knight of the Table Round, made it to be written. Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place. And men say that he shall come again and he shall win the Holy Cross. Yet I will not say that it shall be so, but rather I will say, Here in this world he changed his life. And many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: *Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus.*<sup>2</sup>

1469-70

1485

6. That have authority.

7. Tell.

8. The second.

9. Grave.

1. Of whom the hermit, who was for-

merly Bishop of Canterbury, bore witness.

2. "Here lies Arthur, who was once king and king will be again."

## WILLIAM CAXTON

(ca. 1422-1491)

In his early years Caxton was a prosperous merchant who traded mostly in the low countries. In 1470, at the command of his patroness, Margaret of Burgundy, he completed a translation into English of the French *Recueil des Histoires de Troie* (i.e., collection of the stories of Troy), which he had begun earlier in his leisure time. This work, circulated in manuscript, became so popular that the demand for it exceeded the number of copies that could be readily produced by scribes. Caxton thereupon went to Cologne, where he studied the newly developed art of printing, and subsequently set up a press at Bruges in Belgium. In 1475 he printed his translation of the Troy book (the first book printed in English), and in the next year returned to England, where he established England's first printing press, in London. Among his first publications were Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1478; second edition about 1484). In 1485 he printed Malory's work, with the Preface reproduced here.

A shrewd publisher and practiced writer, as well as a pioneer printer,

Caxton gives a most astute and inviting account of Malory's work and the personage after whom it was named. Caxton himself evidently put small credence in the historicity of Arthur, but by appearing—in all modesty—to have been overwhelmed by the faith that eminent people had in Arthur's existence, as well as by the survival of certain relics that seemed to support such faith, he encourages the reader to lay aside his own skepticism (although the warning remains: "ye are at your liberty" to accept or reject the truth of Malory's narrative). In describing the work itself, Caxton is careful to emphasize its exemplary qualities, "the noble acts of chivalry" that knights performed in the old days, from which one may learn virtuous conduct; but he is also careful not to suppress the fact—though he presents it in tantalizing subordination—that the book contains much that is exemplary only in the negative sense: "cowardice, murder, hate, \* \* \* and sin," which for some might, perhaps, enhance the book's appeal.

### Preface to Morte Darthur

After that I had accomplished and finished divers histories as well of contemplation as of other historial and worldly acts of great conquerors and princes, and also certain books of ensamples<sup>1</sup> and doctrine, many noble and divers gentlemen of this royalme of England camen and demanded me many and oftentimes wherefore that I have not do<sup>2</sup> made and imprint the noble history of the Saint Grail and of the most renommed<sup>3</sup> Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christian, and worthy,<sup>4</sup> king Arthur, which ought most to be remembered among us Englishmen tofore all other Christian kings.

For it is notoirly<sup>5</sup> known through the universal world that there been nine worthy and the best that ever were, that is to wit, three Paynims,<sup>6</sup> three Jews, and three Christian men. As for the Paynims, they were tofore the Incarnation of Christ, which were named, the first Hector of Troy, of whom th'istory is common both in ballad and in prose, the second Alexander the Great, and the third Julius Caesar, Emperor of Rome, of whom th'istories been well known and had.<sup>7</sup> And as for the three which also were tofore th'Incarnation of our Lord, of whom the first was Duke Joshua which brought the children of Israel into the land of behest,<sup>8</sup> the second David, king of Jerusalem, and the third Judas Maccabeus, of these three the Bible rehearseth all their noble histories and acts. And sith<sup>9</sup> the said Incarnation have been three noble Christian men stalled<sup>1</sup> and admitted through the universal world into the number of the nine best and worthy, of whom was first the noble Arthur, whose noble acts I

1. Exemplary stories.

2. Caused to be.

3. Renowned.

4. I.e., one of the Nine Worthies

5. Notoriously.

6. Pagans.

7. Available.

8. Promised Land.

9. Since.

1. Assigned.

purpose to write in this present book here following. The second was Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, of whom th'istory is had in many places, both in French and English; and the third and last was Godefroy of Bouillon, of whose acts and life I made a book unto th'excellent prince and king of noble memory, King Edward the Fourth.

The said noble gentlemen instantly required<sup>2</sup> me t'imprint th'istory of the said noble king and conqueror king Arthur and of his knights, with th'istory of the Saint Grail and of the death and ending of the said Arthur, affirming that I ought rather t'imprint his acts and noble feats than of Godefroy of Bouillon or any of the other eight, considering that he was a man born within this royalm and king and emperor of the same, and that there been in French divers and many noble volumes of his acts, and also of his knights.

To whom I answered that divers men hold opinion that there was no such Arthur and that all such books as been made of him been but feigned and fables, because that some chronicles make of him no mention ne remember him nothing, ne of his knights.

Whereto they answered, and one in special said, that in him that should say or think that there was never such a king called Arthur might well be aretted<sup>3</sup> great folly and blindness, for he said that there were many evidences of the contrary. First, ye may see his sepulture<sup>4</sup> in the monastery of Glastonbury; and also in *Polychronicon*,<sup>5</sup> in the fifth book, the sixth chapter, and in the seventh book, the twenty-third chapter, where his body was buried, and after founden and translated<sup>6</sup> into the said monastery. Ye shall see also in th'istory of Bochas,<sup>7</sup> in his book *De Casu Principum*, part of his noble acts, and also of his fall. Also Galfridus, in his British book,<sup>8</sup> recounteth his life. And in divers places of England many remembrances been yet of him and shall remain perpetually, and also of his knights: first, in the abbey of Westminster, at Saint Edward's shrine, remaineth the print of his seal in red wax, closed in beryl, in which is written PATRICIUS ARTHURUS BRITANNIE CALLIE GERMANIE DACIE IMPERATOR;<sup>9</sup> item, in the castle of Dover ye may see Gawain's skull and Cradok's mantle; at Winchester, the Round Table; in other places Lancelot's sword and many other things.

Then, all these things considered, there can no man reasonably

2. Urgently requested.

3. Imputed.

4. Burial place.

5. A Latin history by Ranulph Higden (d. 1364), an English translation of which was printed by Caxton in 1482.

6. Carried.

7. The Italian Giovanni Boccaccio (d. 1375), whose book *Concerning the Falls of Illustrious Men* ("Concerning the Fall of Princes," according to Caxton) was a

favorite of the later Middle Ages.

8. Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose *History of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1136), begins with the story of the founding of Britain by Brutus, Aeneas' great-grandson, who was believed to have given his name to Britain: hence Caxton's "British."

9. The Noble Arthur, Emperor of Britain, Gaul, Germany, and Dacia.



gainsay but there was a king of this land named Arthur. For in all places, Christian and heathen, he is reputed and taken for one of the nine worthy, and the first of the three Christian men. And also he is more spoken of beyond the sea, mo<sup>1</sup> books made of his noble acts, than there be in England; as well in Dutch, Italian, Spanish, and Greekish, as in French. And yet of record remain in witness of him in Wales, in the town of Camelot, the great stones and marvelous works of iron lying under the ground, and royal vaults, which divers now living hath seen. Wherefore it is a marvel why he is no more renommed in his own country, save only it accordeth to the word of God, which saith that no man is accept for a prophet in his own country.

Then, all these things foresaid alleged,<sup>2</sup> I could not well deny but that there was such a noble king named Arthur, and reputed one of the nine worthy, and first and chief of the Christian men. And many noble volumes be made of him and of his noble knights in French, which I have seen and read beyond the sea, which been not had in our maternal tongue. But in Welsh been many, and also in French, and some in English, but nowhere nigh all. Wherefore, such as have late been drawn out briefly into English, I have, after the simple cunning that God hath sent to me, under the favor and correction of all noble lords and gentlemen, emprised<sup>3</sup> to imprint a book of the noble histories of the said king Arthur and of certain of his knights, after a copy unto me delivered, which copy sir Thomas Malory did take out of certain books of French and reduced it into English.

And I, according to my copy, have done set it<sup>4</sup> in imprint to the intent that noble men may see and learn the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and virtuous deeds that some knights used in tho<sup>5</sup> days, by which they came to honor, and how they that were vicious were punished and oft put to shame and rebuke; humbly beseeching all noble lords and ladies with all other estates, of what estate or degree they been of, that shall see and read in this said book and work, that they take the good and honest acts in their remembrance, and to follow the same; wherein they shall find many joyous and pleasant histories and noble and renommed acts of humanity, gentleness, and chivalries. For herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue, and sin. Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renomnee.<sup>6</sup>

And for to pass the time this book shall be pleasant to read in, but for to give faith and belief that all is true that is contained herein, ye be at your liberty. But all is written for our doctrine, and for to

1. More.

2. Having been cited.

3. Undertaken.

4. Have caused it to be set.

5. Those.

6. Renown.

beware that we fall not to vice ne sin, but t'exercise and follow virtue, by which we may come and attain to good fame and renommee in this life, and after this short and transitory life to come unto everlasting bliss in heaven; the which He grant us that reigneth in heaven, the Blessed Trinity. AMEN.

Then, to proceed forth in this said book, which I direct unto all noble princes, lords and ladies, gentlemen or gentlewomen, that desire to read or hear read of the noble and joyous history of the great conqueror and excellent king, king Arthur, sometime king of this noble royalme then called Britain, I, William Caxton, simple person, present this book following which I have emprised t'imprint: and treateth of the noble acts, feats of arms of chivalry, prowess, hardiness, humanity, love, courtesy, and very<sup>7</sup> gentleness, with many wonderful histories and adventures.



# The Sixteenth Century

(1485-1603)



- 1485: Accession of Henry VII inaugurates age of the Tudor sovereigns.
- 1509: Accession of Henry VIII.
- 1517: Martin Luther's Wittenberg Theses; beginning of the Reformation.
- 1534: Henry VIII acknowledged "Supreme Head on Earth" of the English church.
- 1557: Publication of *Tottel's Miscellany*, containing poems by Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard Earl of Surrey, and others.
- 1558: Accession of Queen Elizabeth I.
- 1576: The Theatre, the first permanent structure in England for the presentation of plays, is built.
- 1588: Defeat of the Spanish Armada.
- 1603: Death of Elizabeth I; accession of James I, first of the Stuart line.

## ENGLAND UNDER HENRY VII

The 16th century in England is the age of the Tudor sovereigns. There were three generations of them; they ruled England from 1485 to 1603. Before the first Tudor, the Earl of Richmond who became Henry VII, won his crown by defeating Richard III at Bosworth field, the country had for more than thirty years been torn by a dynastic strife between the houses of York and Lancaster. Henry VII was Lancastrian, but he married Elizabeth of the house of York, sister of Edward V and niece of the Yorkist king he defeated, Richard III. The barons, impoverished and divided by the dynastic wars, could not effectively oppose the power of the crown, and the church, the other great force in society, was closer to alliance with royal power than to opposition. So Tudor government meant, in comparison with what had gone before and with other conceivable alternatives, a government of strong central authority, of order, and of practical solutions to problems.

About a decade before Henry VII won his throne, the art of printing from movable type, a German invention, had been introduced into England by William Caxton (ca. 1422-91), who had learned and practiced

it in the Low Countries. Literacy had been increasing during the 15th century, so that many more people could read than in Chaucer's time. It is estimated that some 30 per cent of the people could read English in the early 15th century and some 60 per cent by 1530. Printing of course made books cheaper and more plentiful, and accordingly there were more opportunities to read and more incentive to learn to read.

Seven years after Henry VII became king, Columbus discovered America, and a few years later Vasco da Gama reached the Orient by sailing around the Cape of Good Hope. The English were not pioneers in the discovery and exploration of the western hemisphere, but the consequences of new discoveries were to affect their place in the world profoundly, for in the next century they became great colonizers and merchant-adventurers.

Significant changes in trade and in the arts of war also marked the early years of the Tudor regime. Henry VII made commercial treaties with European countries; England, which had always been a sheep-raising country, was by now manufacturing and exporting significant amounts of cloth. As lands were enclosed to permit grazing on a larger scale, people were driven off the land to the cities, and London grew into a metropolitan market, with more sophisticated commercial institutions. At the same time the feudal order continued its decline, partly because the introduction of firearms had made obsolete the old armored knight on horseback, as well as the English bowman who had won such famous victories in France under King Henry V. The "new men" who supported the Tudors and profited from their favor could adapt themselves more easily to a changed society than could the survivors of the great families of the feudal 15th century.

Yet it would be a mistake to visualize these changes as sudden and dramatic. Although Caxton introduced printed books, and was an author and translator as well as a printer, his publications consisted of long prose romances translated from the French, collections of moral sayings, and other works—such as Malory's *Morte Darthur*—that were medieval rather than modern. And even though the armored knight was obsolete, for a century jousts and tournaments took place at court and the approved code of behavior was the traditional code of chivalry. As often in an age of spectacular novelty, full of significance for the future, men's minds looked back instead of forward. Confronted with innovation, they dreamed of an idealized past instead of looking forward to an uncertain future. The best writers of the time of Henry VII were imitators of Chaucer, who had died about a century before. They were Scottish rather than English: William Dunbar (ca. 1460–ca. 1520), Gavin Douglas (1475–1522), and Sir David Lindsay (1485–1555). Even the English writers looked back; a typical one is Stephen Hawes (1474–1523), who imitated not Chaucer but John Lydgate, monk of Bury.

#### HUMANISM

During the 15th century a few English clerics and government officials had journeyed to Italy and had seen something of the extraordinary cultural and intellectual movement flourishing in the city-states there. But it was only near the end of the century that Italian influence came to be important, and it was not until the accession of Henry VIII to the throne in 1509 that a notable renaissance took place in England.

A great leader of the intellectual movement known as humanism was

Sir Thomas More, Henry's Lord Chancellor, who gave up his life rather than bow to Henry as head of the English church. More's masterpiece, *Utopia*, was written in Latin, and was an appeal to all of Europe to reconsider social institutions in the light of reason and to achieve economic equality and peace. His English writings were largely on controversial subjects; his most ambitious one was a history of Richard III. More's friend Erasmus of Rotterdam spent some time in England, and his influence was strong, especially in the field of education. In the humanists' view, education was based upon the classics and the Bible, was to be liberal in the modern sense, yet extremely practical. It was designed to prepare able people for the duties of government. Queen Elizabeth herself, with her command of languages and her practical sense of the problems of diplomacy, was a fine example of the humanistically educated ruler.

Elizabethan education was based upon the medieval *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). Grammar was of course Latin grammar, and the rhetoric that went with it was a rigorous discipline in all the stylistic devices used by classical authors. The purpose was a utilitarian one—to train the student to speak and write good Latin, the language of diplomacy, of the professions, and of all higher learning. But the books read and studied rhetorically were not considered mere exhibitions of literary style: from the *Sententiae Pueriles* for beginners, on up through Terence, Virgil, Horace, and Cicero's *De Officiis*, the works were studied for the moral, political, and philosophical content they offered. Elizabethan schoolmasters might use the system of double translation, from English into Latin and then from Latin back into English, to develop facility and rhetorical elegance, but they well knew that the rapid development from child into man (so much more rapid than we consider either feasible or desirable) required moral instruction, and this was to be found in the Latin classics. It was a mission of the English humanists like Colet, Elyot, and Ascham to persuade the English gentry that their sons should be bred to this kind of learning as the most suitable preparation for public service.

Although Sir Thomas More had turned naturally to Latin in writing his *Utopia*, the choice was not as easy for succeeding generations. In fact, the question of whether to write in English or in Latin became a question of great seriousness. The vernaculars seemed relatively new and unstable to learned men, and with their great desire for eternal fame it was natural that they should concern themselves about the durability of their medium. Furthermore, the age of the humanists had emphasized the value of the classical languages; Cicero and the other masters of rhetoric were imitated in their own tongues. But in Italy, France, and England alike, there came to be a revolt against this sterile and slavish imitation of the classics. It is the contention of Joachim Du Bellay's *Déffense et Illustration de la Langue Française* (1549) that the value of a language is not inherent in the language itself, but depends upon what great and fine works are written in that language; furthermore, and this is even more important, the feeling of nationality itself dictates that the vernacular should be used. If the tongue of the people is not so refined and polished as the Greek or Latin, all the more reason why men of learning should improve it by studying it and writing their most ambitious works in it. Roger Ascham (1515-

68), tutor to Princess Elizabeth, included in his book on archery called *Toxophilus* (1545) a defense of writing in English, though he said it would be easier for him to write in Latin or Greek. He dedicated the book to King Henry, and his patriotic motives are expressed in verses addressed to England:

Stick to the truth, and evermore thou shall

Through Christ, King Henry, the book and the bow,

All manner of enemies quite overthrow.

Richard Mulcaster (ca. 1530-1611), principal of the Merchant Taylors' School and teacher of Edmund Spenser, said:

I do write in my natural English tongue, because though I make the learned my judges, which understand Latin, yet I mean good to the unlearned, which understand but English. \* \* \* For is it not indeed a marvelous bondage, to become servants to one tongue for learning's sake the most of our time, with loss of most time, whereas we may have the very same treasure in our own tongue, with the gain of most time? our own bearing the joyful title of our liberty and freedom, the Latin tongue remembering us of our thralldom and bondage? I love Rome, but London better; I favor Italy, but England more; I honor the Latin, but I worship the English.

#### THE REFORMATION—HENRY VIII, EDWARD VI, AND MARY

Humanists like Erasmus advocated and practiced a scholarly and critical study of the Scriptures; humanists like More were opposed to corrupt and ignorant clergy and such abuses as the sale of papal indulgences and pardons. But when, after Martin Luther nailed his famous Theses to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517, the Reformation itself gathered force, Erasmus and More drew back. Humanism and Reformation for a while seemed to be hostile forces.

What was the Reformation? From the point of view of those who supported it, it was a return to pure Christianity—cleansing the church of all the filth and idolatry that had accumulated over the centuries. From a less partisan point of view it was the break-up of western Christendom, the secularization of society, the establishment of princely ascendancy over the church, and consequently the identification of religious feelings with patriotic, nationalistic ones. From the point of view of the Catholic Church it was, of course, damnable heresy.

In England, one cannot say that the Reformation had an ideological basis. In the time of Chaucer there had been John Wycliffe and the Lollard movement, a grass-roots challenge to the practices and doctrines of the church, and some elements lasted on into the 16th century. But the split with the Church of Rome was caused by a man who considered himself a Catholic champion against Luther and his opinions: Henry VIII, who for writing a book against Luther had been given the title "Defender of the Faith" by Pope Leo X. Henry's motives were dynastic, not religious; he needed a legitimate son and he could not get one without the divorce which Rome refused him. He insisted upon being Supreme Head of the English church and requiring oaths of allegiance to him in that role; Sir Thomas More, his Lord Chancellor, resigned and finally gave up his life rather than sign such an oath. Thomas Cromwell, the powerful secretary of state, dissolved the monasteries and distributed the property to a group of

people who thereafter would not side with Rome. And though under Henry the great English translator of the Bible, William Tyndale, was persecuted, driven out of England, and finally martyred in 1536, it was also in Henry's reign that the Scriptures in English were made available in *The Great Bible* of 1538 to anyone who could read.

Under Henry's son, the child king Edward VI (b. 1537; reigned 1547-53), the English Reformation, which had taken place for political reasons, acquired a strong religious and spiritual force. Protestant theologians from the Continent swarmed to England, the Book of Common Prayer was published in 1549 and 1552, and by 1553, the year of the boy king's death, the 42 Articles which officially defined the beliefs of the English church were thoroughly Protestant.

The successor to the young Protestant king was his older sister Mary, half-Spanish and devoutly Catholic, who married her cousin, Philip II of Spain. The leading Protestants either fled to the Continent or were burned at the stake as heretics; ideologically the Reformation could be reversed, but some of its practical consequences, like the distribution of monastery lands, could not. A Spaniard on the throne of England was not popular, and Mary, whose accession had been opposed by the Council which had proclaimed Lady Jane Grey queen, and whose throne was challenged by a rebellion led by Sir Thomas Wyatt the Younger, son of the poet, dared not press her people too far. She could maintain her Roman allegiance but she could not undo the work of her father and brother. The most necessary thing to do was something she could not do—produce an heir. (Had she done so, England and the United States would probably be Catholic countries today.) Her reign was short, and the Protestant exiles swarmed back at her death to be a potent force in English society during the long reign of Mary's half sister, Elizabeth.

#### NATIONALISM—ELIZABETH I

Elizabeth Tudor, who ascended the throne in 1558 and ruled until 1603, was one of the most remarkable political geniuses ever produced by a people which has not been barren of political geniuses. Vain, difficult, and headstrong, she nevertheless had a very shrewd instinct about her country's strengths and weaknesses, and she identified herself with her country as no previous ruler had done. Although she was susceptible to the flattery of her courtiers and favorites, she nevertheless entrusted power to such solid men as William Cecil and Francis Walsingham. Cecil (1520-98) was her chief and most trusted Secretary. He devoted his great talents with unswerving loyalty to the service of the queen in domestic affairs as well as in the complex relations with the governments of Europe. He sought also, with limited success, to raise money from Parliament to pay for the increasing cost of government. Walsingham (ca. 1530-90) was a radical Protestant, who tried to introduce a more ideologically committed foreign policy than the queen and Cecil were prepared to support.

England's strength lay in its middle position in the balance of power in Europe—it could throw its weight either way in the power contest between Spain and France; it could support or fail to support the Protestant uprising in the Low Countries. Moreover the queen was unmarried, and the general assumption was that of course she would marry, since as her

father had undoubtedly taught her, one of a monarch's major duties is to provide an unquestioned, strong, legitimate heir to the throne. As long as she was capable of bearing children, Elizabeth's possible marriage was an important factor in European diplomacy. By the time it was too late to marry, England was strong and united, capable of shaking off (in 1588) the attempt of the Spanish king, Philip II, to invade the country. What unified England more than anything else was the papal bull of 1570, excommunicating Elizabeth and relieving her subjects of their loyalty to her. This bull, had it taken effect, would have brought to the throne Mary Queen of Scots, Catholic by faith and French by culture—an insupportable thought; Englishmen rallied to their queen and she became a symbol of Englishness and nationalism. The adulation of her, in the face of trouble on the Scottish border, near-chaos in Ireland, and varying threats from the Continent, grew to almost religious heights; her beauty (which was exaggerated), her wisdom (which generally did not need exaggeration), and her divine mission to guide England became articles of faith. In 1588 the defeat of the great Spanish Armada, the mightiest invasion fleet ever mounted against England, seemed to justify that faith.

England's weakness was its politico-religious division. The Catholics, who had never been reformed and who adhered to the pro-Spanish faction of the previous reign, and the Protestant exiles, whose sojourn on the Continent had only sharpened their zeal for the eradication of papistry everywhere in Europe, were the extremes. Between them were the majority of Englishmen whose main desire was for order (remembering the civil conflicts of the previous century), and for these Englishmen Elizabeth, in her person and her policy, became the symbol and the cause.

In matters of religion Elizabeth chose a middle way which satisfied neither the Catholics nor the Puritans. She imposed a form of service, compelled her subjects to attend it, and left their consciences to themselves. The effect was again nationalistic; in the settled and established Elizabethan church, Christians looked toward neither Rome nor Geneva as the prime source of authority, but to the throne of their own sovereign.

The desire for commercial profit also strengthened nationalistic feelings. In 1493 the Pope had divided the new world between the Spanish and the Portuguese by drawing a line from pole to pole (hence Brazil speaks Portuguese today and the rest of Latin America speaks Spanish): the English were not in the picture. But by the end of Edward VI's reign the Company of Merchant Adventurers was founded and Englishmen had become interested in Asia and North America. In order to maintain a vigorous shipping fleet, Cecil introduced "fish days" on Wednesdays and Fridays (popularly known as "Cecil's fast"), and there is reason to believe that shipping was at least maintained at its old level, in the days when Catholic rules against eating meat were an encouragement to fishermen. Some seagoing men, however, found a more profitable crop than fish and turned to piracy, preying on Spanish ships which were returning laden with wealth from the New World. This business soon became a private undeclared war, with the queen and her courtiers investing in these raids privately but accepting no responsibility for them. The greatest of many dazzling exploits was the voyage of Francis Drake in 1577-80: he sailed through the Straits of Magellan, pillaged Spanish towns on the Pacific, reached as far north as San



Francisco, crossed to the Philippines and returned around the Cape of Good Hope; he came back with £1,000,000 in treasure, and his investors earned a dividend of 5,000 per cent. Queen Elizabeth knighted him on the deck of his ship, *The Golden Hind*.

More than anything else, the mere survival of Elizabeth for so long provided the opportunity for nationalistic consciousness and feeling to become established. When she came to the throne in 1558 she was 25 years old; her sister had reigned only five years and her brother only six, but she would remain queen for almost 45 years. The second half of the 16th century is very appropriately called the Elizabethan age.

#### DRAMATIC LITERATURE

If the morality play *Everyman* at the end of the 15th century marks the end of the Middle Ages, we must look for the beginnings of modern drama to the household of John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of England under Henry VII, where young Thomas More served as a page. There at Christmastime plays or revels were put on, and the story goes that young More would sometimes improvise a part and step in with the players. Cardinal Morton even maintained a chaplain on his staff, Henry Medwall, to write plays for his princely entertainment; two of them have survived, called *Nature* and *Fulgens and Lucrece*. These plays were short, given in the great hall at Lambeth Palace, and were called "interludes." Some of these interludes, especially those by John Heywood, are heavily dependent upon French farce.

Interludes and morality plays continued to be popular down to Shakespeare's lifetime, but the development of the drama into a sophisticated art form required another influence—the classics. In the middle of the century we find a schoolmaster, Nicholas Udall, writing a classical comedy in English, based upon the Latin comedies his students had been reading. He called it *Ralph Roister Doister*. About the same time another comedy, classical in form but English in content, was amusing the students at Cambridge. It was called *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. Lively, vivid, native English material put into the regular form of the Latin comedies of Plautus and Terence: this is the fortunate combination that looked forward to the comedies of Shakespeare. *Ralph Roister Doister* contains a classical *miles gloriosus* (cowardly braggart soldier) who is the remote ancestor of Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff in *I Henry IV*.

The Latin tragedies of Seneca had a similar influence. They were constructed in five acts and had violent and bloody plots, resounding rhetorical speeches, and ghosts among the cast of characters. Moreover Seneca is full of references to Fortune, a Roman goddess who turned her wheel and brought those who had reached the top down to the bottom. The precarious position of men in high estate formed a basis for Elizabethan tragedy, as it had for medieval. The mid-16th century contribution to the type of literature represented by Boccaccio's *Falls of Illustrious Men*, Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*, and Lydgate's *Falls of Princes* was a collection of verse complaints called *The Mirror for Magistrates*. A "mirror" in the old sense was a warning, and a "magistrate" was anyone in a position of power or authority. The first regular English tragedy was called *Gorboduc* or *Ferrex and Porrex*; it was written by two lawyers, Thomas Sackville and

Thomas Norton. It was first produced at the Inner Temple (a law school) in 1561 and later acted before the queen. The play is set in the legendary very early period of English history shared by Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and, like *Lear*, its hero divides his kingdom among his children with disastrous results. It is important also that *Gorboduc* is in blank verse rather than in one of the awkward verse forms characteristic of much midcentury writing.

The fusion of classical form with English content brought about the possibility of a mature and artistic drama. But such drama must have an audience, a theater, and professional actors. The earliest English drama had been acted by members of the clergy in the church; medieval miracle and mystery plays had been acted by amateurs—members of the local trade guilds—ordinarily on wagons in the streets of the towns. Moralities and interludes were produced by semi-amateur groups who traveled about, or by the servants of a lord in the hall of his castle. Much dramatic activity took place at winter and midsummer festivals, and it should be remembered that before the Reformation there were many more holidays than there were later. The drama of the Elizabethan age retained much of the festive atmosphere of its infancy.

The actors who traveled about giving their performances wherever they could were not men of respectable status; they tended to be classified with jugglers, acrobats, mountebanks, and other persons of dubious character. In 1545 they were classified by statute as idle rogues and vagabonds; as such, they were subject to arrest. Some noblemen maintained a company of actors as their personal servants, wearing livery and the badge of their masters. They could travel and practice their craft when not needed by their lords, and they were of course exempt from the statute. So it came about that the professional acting companies of Shakespeare's time, including Shakespeare's own, attached themselves to a nobleman and were technically his servants, even though virtually all of their time was devoted to, and their income came from, the public. The rise in social status of actors during Shakespeare's lifetime is illustrated by the fact that he and his fellows were made officers of the royal household when James came to the throne and were sworn as Grooms of the Chamber in ordinary without fee.

The earliest successful acting companies, if success is measured by acceptance at court, were companies of boys. Richard Edwards, Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal in the 1560's, wrote plays for them, and for almost twenty years the rival company, the Children of Paul's (the choir school of St. Paul's cathedral) regularly presented plays at court.

The adult actors played in various places—great houses, the hall of an Inn of Court, on makeshift stages, or in London inn-yards. In 1576 James Burbage, one of the Earl of Leicester's players, built a structure to house their performances and called it *The Theatre*. It was in Shoreditch, outside the limits of the City of London and accordingly beyond the jurisdiction of the city authorities, who were generally hostile to dramatic spectacles. Other public theaters were erected, and before long enclosed private theaters were secured, under conditions which would allow them freedom from municipal control.

The public theaters were usually oval in shape, with an unroofed yard in the center where the groundlings stood, covered seats in three rising tiers

around the yard, and a platform stage jutting out into the yard and surrounded on three sides by spectators. Plays were given in the afternoon and of course were dependent on fair weather. The private theaters were indoors, artificially lighted, and patronized by a more select audience. After 1608 Shakespeare's company had its regular public theater, the Globe, and a private theater, the Blackfriars.

The companies were what would now be called "repertory companies"—that is, they filled the roles of each play from members of their own group, not employing outsiders, and they performed a number of different plays on consecutive days, not continuing a single play for a "run." The principal actors were shareholders in the profits of the company. Boys were apprenticed to actors just as they had been apprenticed to master craftsmen in the guilds; they took the women's parts in plays until their voices changed. The plays might be bought for the company from hack writers; or, as in Shakespeare's company, the group might include an actor-playwright who could supply it with some (but by no means all) of its plays. The text remained the property of the company, but a popular play was eagerly sought by the printers, and the company sometimes had trouble achieving effective control over its rights to the play. The editors of the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays, the First Folio (1623) said that up until then the readers had been "abused with divers stolen and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors." This is true of the so-called "bad quartos," such as the first quarto of *Hamlet* (1603) but the second quarto of that play (1604) was probably printed from Shakespeare's manuscript.

#### POET, PATRON, AND PUBLISHER

In the court the greatest opportunities existed, but there also were the greatest disappointments to be found. "It was overrun with place-seekers," writes M. St. Clare Byrne in *Elizabethan Life in Town and Country*, "but it was also undeniably the focus of the national life. It drew to it the clever mountebanks, but also the real vigor and talent. It captured and stimulated men's imaginations, even if eventually it disheartened and disgusted them." Men like Sir Christopher Hatton and Sir Walter Raleigh leaped from obscurity to great power and prominence as a result of their success as courtiers, but it must not be forgotten that they had other abilities than the gallantry and dancing which have made them famous in anecdote. The security of the courtier was always precarious, and there was scarcely one of Queen Elizabeth's courtiers who did not know, at some time or other, the harshness of the sovereign's disapproval. The great guide and conduct book for the courtier was Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528, translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561), and according to its theses the function of the courtier was to give good and honest advice to the prince. But, as Sir Philip Sidney found out when he tried to advise the queen against a French marriage, advice is not always relished by a monarch whose powers over any individual subject are almost absolute. As a result there was a long tradition of literature against court life, comparing it unfavorably to the country life of the retired and obscure man. Sir Thomas Wyatt's verse epistles to Sir Francis Bryan and John Pains are early examples of this attitude, and it runs all through the period. Of course the fact that there was a "tradition" means

that everything unfavorable said about the court should not be taken at its face value. But enough evidence exists to show that there was a definite feeling that court life was too precarious, too superficial, too corrupt, too hypocritical. From the time of Wyatt to the time of Raleigh the bitter tone is consistent.

For literary men like Edmund Spenser and Lyly, men who by birth were not in a position to be real courtiers, the court offered a faint hope of livelihood, notice, and encouragement. But for these two, at any rate, it was a source of bitter disappointment. Lyly's long wait for the office of the Revels and Spenser's disillusionment after hoping for court favor (reflected in *Mother Hubberds Tale* and *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*) tell the story. Much of the satire of the period is directed against the superficiality and treachery of the court atmosphere. "A thousand hopes, but all nothing," wailed Lyly, "a hundred promises, but yet nothing."

Although most of the literature which is still considered worth reading shows the predominant influences of the court, it would be a mistake to underestimate the influence of the City of London on the literary taste and production of the period. London had grown tremendously since the time of Chaucer. Instead of a population of about 50,000 it had 93,276 in 1563 and 224,275 in 1605. It was by far the most important city in the realm, and the political history of the 17th century is understandable only if one recognizes the great power the City had, even as against the Crown. The printing presses were located in London, the publishers were located in London, and the mass of the middle-class population which set the style for literature written for the ordinary man lived in London. The middle class found among the university men some writers who catered to them: Thomas Heywood is a good example. And although Thomas Nashe scornfully rejects the claim of the bourgeois to have any literary taste at all or to have any ability at producing literature, still the class had its own writers, like Thomas Deloney, and it knew what it liked—books of instruction, romances, religious tracts, and sensational ballads. Whether the aristocrats admitted it or not, the standards and tastes of the middle class affected all writing, all publishing, and all literary success. For finally the writer saw his work exhibited on the stalls of St. Paul's churchyard, and the customers who frequented that center of the book trade were more often members of the middle class than of the court circle. Louis B. Wright has shown (in his *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England*) how extensive and profound was the influence of the citizenry upon the writing and publication of books, and how bourgeois standards of edification and utility dictated to most of the authors of the time.

Next to the Court and the City, the most important sources of literature were of course the two universities. Before Elizabeth's time the universities were mainly devoted to educating the clergy, and of course that remained an important part of their function. But in the second half of the century the sons of the gentry and the aristocracy were going in increasing numbers to the universities and the Inns of Court (where law was studied), though often they did not take degrees or get called to the bar. Their residence in these places was simply an educational preparation for public service or managing their estates. The career of a professional man of letters as such did not exist: literature was regarded as an adjunct, not a primary occupation.

Literary  
30 → 1606

The university graduate who came to London to make a literary career for himself faced a very difficult situation. It is best pictured, perhaps, in the Cambridge trilogy of *Parnassus* plays, performed at the end of the century but fairly faithfully reflecting conditions which held good during the whole period. It was the university wits, to be sure, who gave to the drama some of the classical form it needed, and who inaugurated the great literary vogue of the 90's. But the lives of Nashe and Marlowe, of Robert Greene and George Peele, do not suggest that the path was easy. The diary of Philip Henslowe, a leading theatrical manager, has entry after entry showing university graduates in prison or in debt or even at best miserably eking out an existence patching plays.

Financial rewards for writing and publishing prose or poetry came mostly in the form of gifts from patrons—in reality the old system of master and servant which had come down from the Middle Ages and had not changed much with the invention of printing. The writer by a dedication hoped for a suitable reward, and in an age when honor and vanity were motives much more sharply defined or observed than they are today, this procedure sometimes worked. Yet the patron whose vanity was amply satisfied by his own conceit and would not reward an author for a dedication remained a constant irritation to the writers of the time, and we hear many complaints that the age is degenerate because patrons are not more munificent. There were some generous and literary-minded patrons, notably Sir Philip Sidney and his sister Mary, the Countess of Pembroke. Shakespeare's relations with his patron, the Earl of Southampton, little as we know about them, were apparently satisfactory, as the dedication to *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) is much warmer and more personal than the earlier one, to *Venus and Adonis* (1593). But the experience of Robert Greene is perhaps more typical than that of Shakespeare in this respect. He had sixteen different patrons for seventeen books; this suggests that he was not fortunate in finding favor or support from any one. A fraudulent practice grew up of printing the book and then printing off separate dedications, so that an impecunious author could deceive several patrons each into thinking that he was the one to be honored by the volume. Two or three pounds seems to have been the usual reward for the dedication of a pamphlet or small volume of verse. Ben Jonson, who fared much better than most of his contemporaries, sums up the matter, for poets at least, when he says: "Poetry in this latter age hath proved but a mean mistress to such as have wholly addicted themselves to her, or given their names up to her family. Those who have but saluted her on the way, and now and then tendered their visits, she hath done much for, and advanced in the way of their own professions (both the law and the gospel) beyond all they could have hoped or done for themselves without her favor."

The other possible source of reward, besides the patron, was the publisher. And rewards from the publisher in the 16th century were nothing at all like the rewards from that source now. In the first place there was no such thing as copyright, and no such thing, in the ordinary way, as royalties paid according to the sale of the book. An author sold his manuscript to the publisher outright, for what seems now like a ridiculously low price—for a pamphlet or small book of poetry, usually forty shillings.

The writer's troubles were not over when he had written his book, gone through the difficulty of finding a publisher, and finally come to terms

with him for the sale of it. He still had to face the many and stringent regulations of the press by political and ecclesiastical authorities, and the fact that he had sold the manuscript did not exempt him from responsibility for what was in it. The authorities were, first, the Privy Council, the highest political authority in the realm below the queen; then the Court of Star Chamber, which punished breaches of censorship; then the Court of High Commission, the supreme ecclesiastical authority, which sometimes supervised matters which had only the slightest connection with religion; then the Stationers' Company, with whom a book had to be registered but who supervised and protected the publisher and printer rather than the author.

The principal rules governing the publication of books were that the number of printers (not publishers) was strictly limited; that nothing could be printed except in the City of London and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge; that everything printed must receive the imprimatur of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London or their representatives; and that everything published in London must be entered in the registers of the Stationers' Company, if any kind of property protection were desired for it. An example of the regulation which reached back of the publisher to the author himself can be seen in the history of John Stubbs, who protested against Elizabeth's projected French marriage in a pamphlet called *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf* (1579). For writing this pamphlet, Stubbs was condemned to have his right hand cut off with one stroke of a butcher's cleaver. When the execution had taken place, Stubbs took off his hat with his left hand and cried "God save the queen!"

Almost every writer of the period got into some sort of trouble for publishing a book. It might be prison, it might be merely a reprimand, it might be an investigation by the Star Chamber. It was dangerous to put pen to paper, and it was so unprofitable that it is a wonder that any original writing was published at all. Yet the Elizabethan age is an extremely prolific one in writing and publishing. The *Short Title Catalogue* of the Bibliographical Society, which lists works and editions published between 1475 and 1640, includes over 26,000 items, and it does not include all that were published.

To suppose that poetry, or even prose, circulated only in printed form would be a mistake. The 16th century was the first century of the printed book, and the older way, of circulating in manuscript, lingered on into the 17th century. This was particularly true of poets of gentle or noble rank. Sidney is the most prominent example. Sir John Harington, in his translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* in 1591, mentions a sonnet of Sidney's "which many I am sure have read"; that particular sonnet was not published until seven years later. Many people kept commonplace books in which they would copy down poems from borrowed manuscript copies. Professional scribes made a living by copying manuscripts, for authors or for readers. There are even complaints by printers of the hoarding of literary manuscripts by "their grand possessors." There is a difference, which has not always been appreciated, between the poetry of the professional poets who wrote for print and the gentle or noble poets who wrote for circulation in manuscript among their cultivated friends.

## ART, NATURE, AND POETRY

Elizabethan taste had some very definite and particular characteristics of its own, and the student who wishes to read Elizabethan literature in the spirit of its own time must adjust his mind to the differences between the aesthetic principles of the 16th century and those of our own day. In the 16th century there still remained much of the medieval awareness of the arts as *crafts*, and every writer of the period shows an amazing knowledge of the techniques of many crafts or "mysteries" now unfamiliar. Shakespeare is not an isolated example, and it has been often noticed that his works show an intimate knowledge of such matters as gardening, hawking, dressmaking, archery, building, and so on. Managing the great horse in the tournament was an art. Sailing was an art. Planting a kitchen garden was an art. What they had in common was that they all used the materials of nature but exploited the ingenuity of man's mind. The same fundamental characteristic was thought to apply to the art or craft of writing.

We have been taught by the Romantic movement to glorify nature and to regard the works of art as attempts, usually unsuccessful, to emulate nature. This conception would have seemed strange indeed to the Elizabethans. They recognized, of course, that nature was the cause and basis of all; but that seemed to them no reason why the ingenuity of man should not be used in enabling nature to outdo herself. In *The Winter's Tale* Polixenes is amused at the naïveté of Perdita, who protests that she will have no streaked carnations or gillyflowers in her garden because

I have heard it said  
There is an art which in their piedness shares  
With great creating nature.

"Say there be," replies Polixenes,

Yet nature is made better by no mean  
But nature makes that mean. So, over that art  
Which you say adds to nature, is an art  
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry  
A gentler scion to the wildest stock  
And make conceive a bark of baser kind  
By bud of nobler race. This is an art  
Which does mend nature—change it rather; but  
The art itself is nature.

There was no uneasiness in the Elizabethan mind about a possible conflict between art and nature, for the reason that Polixenes gives. And the improvement by device, by arrangement, by art, of something naturally beautiful extended to all aspects of life, so that there was felt to be no great gulf between literature and the sports of the field or the arts of the kitchen.

The Elizabethan garden was designed as a square, filled with elaborate and intricate, but perfectly regular, design. Francis Bacon protests at gardens which include plots of different colored earths, so arranged as to form a design even without the flowers planted in them; he says he sees enough of this kind of thing in confections and tarts. Yet the very protest

shows that his taste was perhaps not typical, and a contemporary might well have asked him why a garden should not look like a confection from the baker's—they were both samples of the art of design. Some Elizabethans had their houses built in the shape of an E, out of honor to the queen, and one man, John Thorpe, designed his house in the form of his own initials. These instances were extreme, of course, but they show the tendency.

Contrapuntal music (composed of several independent melodies joined together), which was sung by the Elizabethans in an accomplished amateur manner, was an intricate kind of music, with elaborate patterns and complex harmonies. The composer Thomas Morley (ca. 1557-1603) says of the madrigal:

As for the music, it is, next unto the motet, the most artificial and to men of understanding most delightful. If therefore you will compose in this kind you must possess yourself with an amorous humor \* \* \* so that you must in your music be wavering like the wind, sometime wanton, sometime grave and staid, otherwise effeminate; you may maintain points and revert them, use triplaes and show the very uttermost of your variety, and the more variety you show the better shall you please.

But a rigid form was to control all of this extravagance, just as the square border of a garden and the regularity of the pattern controlled the exuberance of the curves in the "knot" or design.

The verse forms used by the Elizabethans range from the extremely simple four-line ballad stanza through the rather complicated form of the sonnet to the elaborate and beautiful 18-line stanza of Spenser's *Epithalamion*. A stanza such as

The man of life upright  
Whose guileless heart is free  
From all dishonest deeds  
Or thought of vanity

might have been written by any one of many poets at almost any time in the 16th century; it happened to have been written by a fine craftsman, Thomas Campion, near the end of it. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who introduced blank verse into English and helped introduce the sonnet in the reign of Henry VIII, was also a practitioner of a form of iambic couplet in which the first line had twelve syllables and the second fourteen:

The young man eke that feels his bones with pains oppressed,  
How he would be a rich old man, to live and lie at rest.

This verse form, called "poulter's measure" (because a poulter's dozen was supposed to be sometimes twelve and sometimes fourteen), was the most common verse form in the 60's and 70's. Its dreary monotony in long stretches is matched only by the "fourteener" couplet of fourteen syllables in a line. We still have examples of these forms in our hymnbooks; when each line of poulter's measure is printed as two lines, the hymnbooks call it "short meter"; when they so divide fourteeners they call it "common meter."



Sonnets, which the Elizabethans often called "quatorzains," using the term "sonnet" loosely for any short poem, are fourteen-line poems in iambic pentameter with elaborate rhyme schemes. The most common Italian form, which Wyatt, Sidney, and others imitated, was divided structurally into the octave (first eight lines) and the sestet (last six). A typical rhyme scheme was *abba abba cddc ee*. The so-called English sonnet, introduced by Surrey and practiced by Shakespeare, is structurally three quatrains and a couplet: *abab cdcd efef gg*. Spenser, the most experimental and the most gifted prosodist of the century, preferred a form that is harder to write and richer in rhymes: *abab bcbc cdcd ee*.

The six-line and the seven-line rhyme royal stanza, both practiced by Chaucer, survived into the 16th century. Shakespeare used the former in *Venus and Adonis* and the latter in *The Rape of Lucrece*; the popular collection of historical poems, *The Mirror for Magistrates*, features rhyme royal.

An innovation was Spenser's nine-line stanza, called after him the "Spenserian stanza," which added to the eight-line stanza of iambic pentameter (rhyming *ababbcbc*) an additional line of twelve syllables, an Alexandrine, rhyming with the preceding line. This is the stanza form which serves so well the large descriptive and narrative requirements of *The Faerie Queene*. The elaborate scheme of the stanza Spenser devised for his *Epithalamion* perhaps illustrates the height of Elizabethan craftsmanship in verse. Its eighteen lines rhyme *ababcc*, then various combinations in the second six, and finally three couplets. Lines 6, 11, and 16 are short, having only six syllables contrasted to the pentameter's ten, and the last line is an Alexandrine, as in the Spenserian stanza.

#### GENRES AND CONVENTIONS IN POETRY

A literary convention is a pattern that has become habitual and arouses certain expectations in the reader. For the Elizabethan poet available conventions enabled him to assume particular responses from his audience and to show his learning by his exploitation of these well-known patterns and his virtuosity by his ingenious elaborations of them. It must not be supposed that these conventions were lifeless forms, so stale with use that they no longer carried meaning or conviction. They were charged with values, with associations. They related writer and reader to other times, other languages, other cultures.

The ~~pastoral convention~~ presented a simple and idealized world, inhabited by shepherds and shepherdesses, concerned not at all with war or politics or commerce. Its business consisted of tending the flocks, friendly poetic contests among shepherds, love, and the pursuit of contentment rather than fame or fortune.

Pastoral lyrics expressed the joys of pastoral life or disappointment in love. Pastoral eclogues were dialogues between shepherds in which a poetic contest was staged, or there was serious, satirical comment on abuses in the great world concealed in the disguise of the homely local concerns of country folk. There were also, of course, pastoral dramas and pastoral romances (prose fiction) which embodied the same values of *otium* (leisure), freedom from pride and ambition, and the pursuit of humble contentment.

Another popular convention was that of the ~~mythological-erotic poem~~.

derived from Ovid mainly but influenced by Italian imitations of him. In the middle ages Ovid's poetry had been allegorized and interpreted morally—the same process that has overtaken the love songs in the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament. This process continued on into the 17th century, but a newer treatment of the convention returned to the frank sensuality of the Latin amatory poets and allowed for elaborate mythological decoration of the narrative without worrying about moral propriety or allegorical interpretation. Such poems appealed to a courtly taste; they validated the senses and they asserted the primacy of physical beauty and the imagination. Shakespeare in *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe in *Hero and Leander* were among the poets who practiced in this convention.

Sometimes related to the Ovidian tradition but separate from it in origin was the convention of the complaint poem. This goes back to a medieval genre represented by works of the Italian Boccaccio and his English imitators, Lydgate and the authors of *The Mirror for Magistrates*. The complaint poem is essentially tragic and moral. In it the ghost of someone who fell from high place bemoans his fate and warns others. If the ghost is a woman, like Daniel's Rosamund, her fall was caused by the frailty of her sex and the poem may be related to the Ovidian tradition. Another kind of poem, which came both from Ovid and the *Mirror for Magistrates* tradition, was the heroical epistle, practised notably by Drayton.

The Elizabethan sonnet, which reached the height of its vogue in the last decade of the 16th century, depended upon a convention established by Petrarch and followed by his many imitators in Italy and France. In this tradition the poet complains of his lady's coldness; he describes the contrary states of feeling the lover experiences; and he writes sonnets on the conventional themes of sleep, absence, originality, renunciation, and others. The purposes of the love sonneteers differed, of course, but what they had in common might be described as an ambition to give dignity and power to the theme of love by the elaborate rhetorical and stylistic devices available in the Petrarchan tradition. Lesser poets often produced nothing but standard conceits served up in fourteen-line helpings, but major poets such as Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare wrote sonnets of power and originality that stand out as major poetic products of the Elizabethan Age.

The conventional forms for satire were less well fixed in the 16th century than in some later periods, though there is a good deal of Elizabethan satirical verse. Some examples belong to a medieval tradition coming down from *Piers Plowman*, which was believed to be the only English masterpiece in satire until satires by the "university wits" in the tradition of the Latin satirists Persius and Juvenal began to appear, and some were written by young John Donne and circulated only in manuscript until after the poet's death in 1631. The epigram was a form that flourished, both in the classical tradition of Martial and in the lyric form of words for a madrigal; the famous *The Silver Swan* is an example.

Poetry for music also followed some conventions: the dance song of course had its definite rhythms and refrains, and many well-known tunes provided the formula by which poet after poet composed new words. In the polyphonic madrigal, the same phrases tend to be repeated again and again, while the words often get lost in the music because various voices sing different words at the same time. As a result, the poem written as a madrigal

is usually short and simple both in language and ideas. The "ayre," however, is a song written for a single voice to a lute accompaniment and is usually sung straight through. Since the words are much more intelligible, the thought can be more complex. While the poem is often a good deal longer than the madrigal (since the same melody is repeated over and over), the poem is divided into repetitive stanzas.

There were conventions as well for the heroic poem, of which Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is the prime example. The classical epics of Homer and Virgil had their influence, but so did the romantic Italian epics of Ariosto and Tasso. Chapman's Homer and Harington's Ariosto were regarded by contemporaries as something more than translation, having much of the interest and significance of original poems.

The major conventions in poetry did not stifle originality; they served as both an ordering device and a challenge that stimulated the poet to something fresh and new. When these conventions were alive for writers and readers, they had significance in themselves, which was an essential part of the total significance of the poem. Knowledge of the more important Elizabethan conventions is not simply of scholarly interest; it is essential to the experience of the poem as a poem.

#### ELIZABETHAN MOODS AND ATTITUDES

The English Renaissance was no sharp break with the past. Attitudes and feelings which had been characteristic of the 15th or 14th centuries persisted well down into the era of humanism and Reformation. George Gascoigne, the leading writer of the 1570's, has in many ways a medieval point of view, and the popular collection of verse tales of the fall of princes called *The Mirror for Magistrates* (first published in 1559, and reprinted with additions in 1563, 1587, and 1610) derives from Lydgate and Boccaccio. Even a lyric by that flamboyant and "modern" Elizabethan, Sir Walter Raleigh, may embody a sentiment of the vanity and transitoriness of all earthly ambitions and achievements. The Dance of Death and related images were still living symbols to the Elizabethan imagination; witness Shakespeare's *Richard II* (III.ii.152-70):

And nothing can we call our own but death  
 And that small model of the barren earth  
 Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.  
 For God's sake let us sit upon the ground  
 And tell sad stories of the death of kings!  
 How some have been deposed; some slain in war;  
 Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;  
 Some poisoned by their wives; some sleeping killed—  
 All murdercd; for within the hollow crown  
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
 Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits,  
 Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp;  
 Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
 To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks;  
 Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
 As if this flesh which walls about our life  
 Were brass impregnable: and humored thus,  
 Comes at the last, and with a little pin  
 Bores through the castle wall, and farewell king!

\* Stupid self-contradiction.

Yet there was at the same time a spirit of joy and gaiety, of innocence and lightheartedness, that future ages were to look back on as "merry England." This spirit is popular, it comes from the folk and from the persistent love of Englishmen for their countryside; it is spontaneous, yet it seems somehow stable and permanent. Perhaps its best expression is in the songs of Shakespeare's plays:

When daffodils begin to peer,  
With heigh! the doxy over the dale,  
Why, then comes in the sweet o' the year;  
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.

or

When daisies pied and violets blue  
And lady-smocks all silver-white  
And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue  
Do paint the meadows with delight.

The mood of pastoral, as we have already seen in our notice of that convention, is generally one of quiet contentment, of reflective leisure, of the enjoyment of a simple, idealized world. Marlowe's *Passionate Shepherd to His Love* beautifully invokes this world.

There was of course also among the Elizabethans the opposite mood: the burning desire for conquest, for achievement, for surmounting all obstacles. The Elizabethans called it "the aspiring mind." The great projector of this mood is Christopher Marlowe, who has his heroes fling themselves into the pursuit of power—

Is it not passing brave to be a king  
And ride in triumph through Persepolis?—

or into the lust for gold—

Infinite riches in a little room—

or into the search for knowledge—

All things that move between the quiet poles  
Shall be at my command; emperors and kings  
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,  
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;  
But his dominion that excels in this  
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.

Marlowe's heroes are defeated finally, all of them, but their fiery spirit in assaulting the limits of the possible echoes after they are gone.

The Elizabethan spirit has been described as "sensuous, comprehensive, extravagant, disorderly, thirsty for beauty, abounding in the zest for life." This is part of the truth, but not all of it. Fundamentally, the thought and feeling of Shakespeare's contemporaries was far more deeply affected by Christian humanism than by the extravagances of Marlowe. We need to remember Ben Jonson, with his classical principles of structure and decorum and his ideal of the balanced man. Jonson was in every respect more typical of his age than Shakespeare. His emphasis upon learning, his reconciliation

of ancient models and English content, and his critical responsibility truly represent the ideal English poet of his time, as Sidney would have visualized him. Because his major work was done after 1603, he is represented in the 17th-century section of this anthology.

The second generation of English humanists—men like Roger Ascham (1515–68, tutor to Queen Elizabeth), Sir John Cheke (1514–57, professor of Greek at Cambridge), and Thomas Wilson (1525–81, rhetorician and translator)—combined an earnest Protestant Christianity with their classical learning, and Ascham vigorously opposed the more secular, pagan humanism that was coming out of Italy. These men shaped the University of Cambridge, which in turn shaped many men. It was an Oxford man, however—Richard Hooker—who provided in his great work, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593 and later), the supreme masterpiece of English Christian humanism. In so far as his doctrine is concerned, Spenser is a Christian humanist, and the label can justly be applied to John Milton, both in content and in form.

If the beginning of the Tudor era showed more links with the past than with the future, it is equally true that the end of Elizabeth's reign prefigured some of the conflict and uncertainty of the time to come. "The disenchantment of the Elizabethans" is a phrase that has been used to describe it. In 1599, the year of Spenser's death, the headstrong Earl of Essex returned from Ireland, inaugurating a course of events that would lead to his rebellion and execution in 1601. Elizabeth was old, a peaceful succession was by no means assured, and the rifts in society which were to mean civil war in the midcentury were already present. An outbreak of satire and epigrams had to be stopped by the authorities. Some of the cynical undercurrent in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* reflects the spirit of the time. John Donne was already writing his poems, and a very different age, the 17th century, was in the offing. In 1603 Elizabeth, the last of the Tudors, died, and to the immense relief of anxious Englishmen, the succession took place peacefully. The new monarch was the Protestant James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England.

## SIR THOMAS MORE

(1478-1535)

1514-16: Writing *Utopia*.

1532: Resigns as Lord Chancellor after refusing to take oath to support Act of Succession and Supremacy.

More's famous philosophical romance *Utopia* (the name means "nowhere") is the father of a whole class of writings, from Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626), through Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), and Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), to the "science fiction" stories of the present. But More's book has its own ancestry. It derives in part from Plato's *Republic* (and hence is philosophical) and in part from the accounts of travelers like Amerigo Vespucci (1507) and hence is romantic. It is a major monument of the great Christian humanist awakening of which Pico della Mirandola (1463-94), Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466-1536), and More himself were the most brilliant figures. Since the first of these was Italian, the second Dutch, and the third English, the movement was obviously international; *Utopia* was written in Latin, the international language.

*Utopia* represents itself as a traveler's tale, told by a veteran mariner (who is also a philosopher) to a group of somewhat skeptical companions as they sit in a garden one afternoon in Antwerp, in Holland. It is divided into two books. In the first, written in dialogue form, the corruption of European civil life is criticized. In the second, the traveler Raphael Hythloday describes the institutions of Utopia, with many ironic references to the real world with which the listeners are familiar.

*Utopia* is thus not presented as a mere dream or impractical fancy, as the modern use of the word "utopian" sometimes suggests. It is the fruit of More's serious thought—though he was never wholly serious—on the great social problems of his time. More felt, very strongly, the value of the ideals embodied in the rules of the monastic orders. Yet he was himself a man of the world, a lawyer and negotiator; he saw how far from realization in practice were the social ideals he admired. Central to his thought is the idea of community of property, for which he had a precedent in Plato as well as in the rules of the monastic orders; no fundamental reform in society is possible until private property is abolished. Yet it is typical of More's carefully balanced method that a standard defense of private property is put into the mouth of More as a character in the dialogue, against the position of the main speaker, Hythloday.

More's life was even more remarkable than his writings. He was born in London, the son of a prominent lawyer; as a boy he served in Archbishop Morton's household, then proceeded to Oxford and the Inns of Court. He became a friend of Erasmus, the great humanist, scholar, and editor of the New Testament; it was to More that Erasmus dedicated his satire *The Praise of Folly*. Soon after he wrote *Utopia* More rose to positions of great responsibility under King Henry VIII: Master of Requests, Privy Councillor, Speaker of the House of Commons, and finally Lord Chancellor. In 1532, after the king's marriage to Anne Boleyn, More refused to take the oath for the Act of Succession and Supremacy. Although he had compromised

before, as any successful administrator must, his conscience would not permit him to assert that any temporal lord, even Henry, could or ought to be head of that spiritual body, the church. From the point of view of the government, his refusal was treason, and he was condemned to death; efforts, including those of his wife, to reconcile him with Henry failed, and in 1535 he was executed. No death in English history is more famous: as he mounted the shaky steps to the scaffold, he said to the sheriff's officer, "I pray you, Master Lieutenant, see me safe up, and for my coming down let me shift for myself"; as he put his head on the block he moved his beard aside, remarking that his beard had done the king no offense. He was of course certain that he was not dying for treason, but in and for the faith of the Catholic Church. Four hundred years later he was canonized by the church as St. Thomas More.

## From Utopia<sup>1</sup>

### From Book I

#### [MORE MEETS A RETURNED TRAVELER]

The most invincible King of England, Henry the Eighth of that name, a prince adorned with the royal virtues beyond any other, had recently some differences of no slight import with Charles, the most serene Prince of Castille,<sup>2</sup> and sent me into Flanders as his spokesman to discuss and settle them. I was companion and associate to that incomparable man Cuthbert Tunstall,<sup>3</sup> whom the King has recently created Master of the Rolls, to everyone's great satisfaction. I will say nothing in praise of this man, not because I fear the judgment of a friend might be questioned, but because his learning and integrity are greater than I can describe and too well-known everywhere to need my commendation—unless I would, according to the proverb, "Show the sun with a lantern."

Those appointed by the prince to deal with us, all excellent men, met us at Bruges by prearrangement. Their head man and leader was the Margrave, so called, of Bruges, a most distinguished person. But their main speaker and guiding spirit was Georges de Themsecke, the Provost of Cassel, a man eloquent by nature as well as by training, very learned in the law, and most skillful in diplomatic affairs through his ability and long practice. After we had met several times, certain points remained on which we could not come to agreement; so they adjourned the meetings and went to Brussels for some days to consult their prince in person.

Meanwhile, since my business permitted it, I went to Antwerp. Of those who visited me while I was there, Peter Giles<sup>4</sup> was more

1. The translation from which these selections are taken is by Robert M. Adams (1975).

2. Later Charles V (1500–58), King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor. The differences had to do with the wool trade.

3. Later Bishop of London and of Durham, one of More's closest friends (1474–1599).

4. Peter Giles (Petrus Aegidius), pupil and friend of Erasmus, town clerk of Antwerp. He arranged for the first printing, in Latin, of *Utopia* (1516).

welcome to me than any of the others. He was a native of Antwerp, a man of high reputation, already appointed to a good position and worthy of the very best: a young man distinguished equally by learning and character. Apart from being cultured, virtuous, and courteous to all, with his intimates he is so open, trustworthy, loyal, and affectionate that it would be hard to find another friend like him anywhere. No man is more modest or more frank; none better combines simplicity with wisdom. His conversation is so merry, and so witty without malice, that the ardent desire I felt to see my native country, my wife and my children (from whom I had been separated more than four months) was much eased by his agreeable company and pleasant talk.

One day after I had heard mass at Nôtre Dame, the most beautiful and most popular church in Antwerp, I was about to return to my quarters when I happened to see him talking with a stranger, a man of quite advanced years. The stranger had a sunburned face, a long beard, and a cloak hanging loosely from his shoulders; from his appearance and dress, I took him to be a ship's captain. When Peter saw me, he approached and greeted me. As I was about to return his greeting, he drew me aside, and, indicating the stranger, said, "Do you see that man? I was just on the point of bringing him to you."

"He would have been very welcome on your behalf," I answered.

"And on his own too, if you knew him," said Peter, "for there is no man alive today can tell you so much about unknown peoples and lands; and I know that you're always greedy for such information."

"In that case," said I, "my guess wasn't a bad one, for at first glance I supposed he was a skipper."

"Then you're not quite right," he replied, "for his sailing has not been like that of Palinurus, but more that of Ulysses, or rather of Plato.<sup>5</sup> This man, who is named Raphael—his family name is Hythloday—knows a good deal of Latin, and is particularly learned in Greek. He studied Greek more than Latin because his main interest is philosophy, and in that field he found that the Romans have left us nothing very valuable except certain works of Seneca and Cicero. Being eager to see the world, he left his patri-mony to his brothers (he is Portuguese by birth) and took service with Amerigo Vespucci.<sup>6</sup> He accompanied Vespucci on the last three of his four voyages, accounts of which are now common read-

5. Palinurus, Aeneas's pilot, fell asleep, fell overboard and drowned. Ulysses, by contrast, was a wily, alert traveler. Plato is cited as the profound philosopher; his *Republic* strongly influenced *Utopia*. Raphael Hythloday is an invented character. His last name is

coined from Greek words meaning "a skilled conveyor of nonsense."

6. Vespucci's last two voyages were made for the King of Portugal (hence Hythloday's birthplace). His account of his voyages, published in 1507, made him more famous than Columbus.



ing everywhere; but on the last voyage, he did not return home with the commander. After much persuasion and expostulation he got Amerigo's permission to be one of the twenty-four men who were left in a fort at the farthest point of the last voyage. Being marooned in this way was altogether agreeable to him, as he was more anxious to pursue his travels than afraid of death. He would often say, "The man who has no grave is covered by the sky," and "The road to heaven is equally short from all places." Yet this frame of mind would have cost him dear, if God had not been gracious to him. After Vespucci's departure, he traveled through many countries with five companions from the fort. At last, by strange good fortune, he got, via Ceylon, to Calcutta, where by good luck he found some Portuguese ships; and so, beyond anyone's expectation, he returned to his own own country."

When Peter had told me this, I thanked him for his kindness in wishing to introduce me to a man whose conversation he hoped I would enjoy, and then I turned toward Raphael. After greeting one another and exchanging the usual civilities of strangers upon their first meeting, we all went to my house. There in the garden we sat down on a bench covered with turf to talk together.

He told us that when Vespucci sailed away, he and his companion who had stayed behind in the fort often met with the people of the countryside, and by ingratiating speeches gradually won their friendship. Before long they came to dwell with them safely and even affectionately. The prince also gave them his favor (I have forgotten his name and that of his country), furnishing Raphael and his five companions not only with ample provisions, but with means for traveling—rafts when they went by water, wagons when they went by land. In addition, he sent with them a most trusty guide who was to introduce and recommend them to such other princes as they desired to visit. After many days' journey, he said, they came to towns and cities, and to commonwealths that were both populous and not badly governed.

To be sure, under the equator and as far on both sides of the line as the sun moves, there lie vast empty deserts, scorched with the perpetual heat. The whole region is desolate and squalid, grim and uncultivated, inhabited by wild beasts, serpents, and also by men no less wild and dangerous than the beasts themselves. But as they went on, conditions gradually grew milder. The heat was less fierce, the earth greener, men and even beasts less savage. At last they reached people, cities, and towns which not only traded among themselves and with their neighbors, but even carried on commerce by sea and land with remote countries. After that, he said, they were able to visit different lands in every direction, for he and his companions were welcome as passengers aboard any ship about to make a journey.

The first vessels that they saw were flat-bottomed, with sails made of papyrus-reeds and wicker, or occasionally of leather. Farther on, they found ships with pointed keels and canvas sails, very much like our own. The seamen were skilled in managing wind and water; but they were most grateful to him, Raphael said, for showing them the use of the compass, of which they had been ignorant. For that reason, they had formerly sailed with great timidity, and only in summer. Now they have such trust in the compass that they no longer fear winter at all, and tend to be overconfident rather than secure. There is some danger that through their imprudence, this discovery, which they thought would be so advantageous to them, may become the cause of much mischief.

It would take too long to repeat all that Raphael told us he had observed, nor would it make altogether for our present purpose. Perhaps in another place we shall tell more about the things that are most profitable, especially the wise and sensible institutions that he observed among the civilized nations. We asked him many questions about such things, and he answered us willingly enough. We made no inquiries, however, about monsters, which are the routine of travelers' tales. Scyllas, ravenous Celaenos, man-eating Lestrygonians<sup>7</sup> and that sort of monstrosity you can hardly avoid, but it is not so easy to find good citizens and wise governments. While he told us of many ill-considered usages in these new-found nations, he also described quite a few other customs from which our own cities, nations, races, and kingdoms might take example in order to correct their errors. These I shall discuss in another place, as I said. Now I intend to relate only what he told us about the manners and laws of Utopians, first explaining the occasion that led him to speak of that commonwealth. Raphael had been talking very wisely about the many errors and also the wise institutions found both in that hemisphere and this (as many of both sorts in one place as in the other), speaking as shrewdly about the manners and governments of each place he had visited briefly as though he had lived there all his life. Peter was amazed.

"My dear Raphael," he said, "I'm surprised that you don't enter some king's service; for I don't know of a single prince who wouldn't be eager to have you. Your learning, and your knowledge of various countries and men would entertain him while your advice and your supply of examples would be very helpful. Thus you might advance your own interest and be useful at the same time to all your relatives and friends."

"I am not much concerned about my relatives and friends," he replied, "because I consider that I have already done my duty by

7. "Scyllas" were fabulous monsters, like the one who lived in a cave in the rock Scylla in the *Odyssey*; Celaeno was leader of the harpies in the *Aeneid*,

large birds with the faces of women, pale with hunger, and provided with long, sharp talons. Lestrygonians were cannibals in the *Odyssey*.

them. While still young and healthy, I distributed among my relatives and friends the possessions that most men do not part with till they are old and sick (and then only reluctantly, because they can no longer keep them). I think they should be content with this gift of mine, and not expect that for their sake I should enslave myself to any king whatever."

"Well said," Peter replied; "but I do not mean that you should be in servitude to any king, only in his service."

"The difference is only a matter of one syllable," Raphael replied.<sup>8</sup>

"All right," said Peter, "but whatever you call it, I do not see any other way in which you can be so useful to your friends or to the general public, apart from making yourself happier."

"Happier indeed!" exclaimed Raphael. "Would a way of life so absolutely repellent to my spirit make my life happier? As it is now, I live as I please, and I fancy very few courtiers, however splendid, can say that. As a matter of fact, there are so many men soliciting favors from the great that it will be no great loss if they have to do without me and a couple of others like me."

Then I said, "It is clear, my dear Raphael, that you want neither wealth nor power, and indeed I value and revere a man of such a disposition as much as I do the greatest men in the world. Yet I think if you would devote your time and energy to public affairs, you would do a thing worthy of a generous and philosophical nature, even if you did not much like it. You could best perform such a service by joining the council of some great prince, whom you would incite to noble and just actions. I am sure you would do this if you held such an office, and your influence would be felt, because a people's welfare or misery flows in a stream from their prince, as from a never-failing spring. Your learning is so full, even if it weren't combined with experience, and your experience is so great, even if you didn't have any learning, that you would be an extraordinary councillor to any king in the world."

"You are twice mistaken, my dear More," he replied, "first in me and then in the situation itself. I don't have the capacity you ascribe to me, and if I had it in the highest degree, the public would not be any better off through the destruction of my peace. In the first place, most princes apply themselves to the arts of war, in which I have neither ability nor interest, instead of to the good arts of peace. They are generally more set on acquiring new kingdoms by hook or by crook than on governing well those that they already have. Moreover, the councillors of kings are all so wise that they need no other knowledge (or at least that's the way they see it). At the same time, they accept and even flatter the most absurd statements of favorites through whose influence they seek to stand

8. The play on words here depends on the Latin original: *servias* and *inservias*.

well with the prince. It is only natural, of course, that each man should think his own opinions best: the old crow loves his fledglings, and the ape his cubs. Now in a court composed of people who envy everyone else and admire only themselves, if a man should suggest something he had read of in other ages or seen in other places, the other councillors would think their reputation for wisdom was endangered, and they would look like simpletons, unless they could find fault with his proposal. If all else failed, they would take refuge in some remark like this: 'The way we're doing it is the way we've always done it, this custom was good enough for our fathers, and I only hope we're as wise as they were.' And with this deep thought they would take their seats, as though they had said the last word on the subject—implying, forsooth, that it would be a very dangerous matter if a man were found to be wiser in any point than his forefathers were. As a matter of fact, we quietly neglect the best examples they have left us; but if something better is proposed, we seize the excuse of reverence for times past and cling to it desperately. Such proud, obstinate, ridiculous judgments I have encountered many times, and once even in England."

\* \* \*

## From *Book II*

### THE GEOGRAPHY OF UTOPIA

The island of the Utopians is two hundred miles across in the middle part where it is widest, and is nowhere much narrower than this except toward the two ends. These ends, drawn toward one another in a five-hundred-mile circle, make the island crescent-shaped like a new moon. Between the horns of the crescent, which are about eleven miles apart, the sea enters and spreads into a broad bay. Being sheltered from the wind by the surrounding land, the bay is never rough, but quiet and smooth instead, like a big lake. Thus, nearly the whole inner coast is one great harbor, across which ships pass in every direction, to the great advantage of the people. What with shallows on one side, and rocks on the other, the entrance into the bay is very dangerous. Near the middle of the channel, there is one rock that rises above the water, and so presents no dangers in itself; on top of it a tower has been built, and there a garrison is kept. Since the other rocks lie under water, they are very dangerous to navigation. The channels are known only to the Utopians, so hardly any strangers enter the bay without one of their pilots; and even they themselves could not enter safely if they did not direct themselves by some landmarks on the coast. If they should shift these landmarks about, they could lure to destruction an enemy fleet coming against them, however big it was.

On the outer side of the island there are likewise occasional har-

bors; but the coast is rugged by nature, and so well fortified that a few defenders could beat off the attack of a strong force. They say (and the appearance of the place confirms this) that their land was not always an island. But Utopus, who conquered the country and gave it his name (it had previously been called Abraxa),<sup>9</sup> brought its rude and uncouth inhabitants to such a high level of culture and humanity that they now excel in that regard almost every other people. After subduing them at his first landing, he cut a channel fifteen miles wide where their land joined the continent, and caused the sea to flow around the country. He put not only the natives to work at this task, but all his own soldiers too, so that the vanquished would not think the labor a disgrace. With the work divided among so many hands, the project was finished quickly, and the neighboring peoples, who at first had laughed at his folly, were struck with wonder and terror at his success.

There are fifty-four cities on the island, all spacious and magnificent, identical in language, customs, institutions, and laws. So far as the location permits, all of them are built on the same plan, and have the same appearance. The nearest are at least twenty-four miles apart, and the farthest are not so remote that a man cannot go on foot from one to the other in a day.

Once a year each city sends three of its old and experienced citizens to Amaurot<sup>1</sup> to consider affairs of common interest to the island. Amaurot is the chief city, lies near the omphalos<sup>2</sup> of the land, so to speak, and convenient to every other district, so it acts as a capital. Every city has enough ground assigned to it so that at least ten miles of farm land are available in every direction, though where the cities are farther apart, they have much more land. No city wants to enlarge its boundaries, for the inhabitants consider themselves good tenants rather than landlords. At proper intervals all over the countryside they have built houses and furnished them with farm equipment. These houses are inhabited by citizens who come to the country by turns to occupy them. No rural house has fewer than forty men and women in it, besides two slaves.<sup>3</sup> A master and mistress, serious and mature persons, are in charge of each household. Over every thirty households is placed a single phylarch.<sup>4</sup> Each year twenty persons from each rural household move back to the city, after completing a two-year stint in the country. In their place, twenty others are sent out from town, to learn farm work from those who have already been in the country for a year, and who are better skilled in farming. They, in turn, will teach

9. From Greek, "not small" or "insignificant."

1. Coined from a Greek adjective meaning "dark, obscure"—a suitable name for the capital of a country whose name means "Nowhere."

2. Navel, umbilicus—the spiritual as

well as physical center of a nation.

3. More provides for a few bondmen or slaves in Utopia, to perform tasks unfit for citizens, such as slaughtering.

4. From Greek words meaning "head of a tribe."

those who come the following year. If all were equally ignorant of farm work, and new to it, they might harm the crops out of ignorance. This custom of alternating farm workers is solemnly established so that no one will have to do such hard work against his will for more than two years; but many of them who take a natural pleasure in farm life ask to stay longer.

The farm workers till the soil, raise cattle, hew wood, and take it to the city by land or water, as is most convenient. They breed an enormous number of chickens by a marvelous method. Men, not hens, hatch the eggs by keeping them in a warm place at an even temperature. As soon as they come out of the shell, the chicks recognize the men, follow them around, and are devoted to them instead of to their real mothers.

They raise very few horses, and these full of mettle, which they keep only to exercise the young men in the art of horsemanship. For the heavy work of plowing and hauling they use oxen, which they agree are inferior to horses over the short haul, but which can hold out longer under heavy burdens, are less subject to disease (as they suppose), and so can be kept with less cost and trouble. Moreover, when oxen are too old for work, they can be used for meat.

Grain they use only to make bread. They drink wine, apple or pear cider, or simple water, which they sometimes mix with honey or licorice, of which they have an abundance. Although they know very well, down to the last detail, how much grain each city and its surrounding district will consume, they produce much more grain and cattle than they need for themselves, and share the surplus with their neighbors. Whatever goods the folk in the country need which cannot be produced there, they request of the town magistrates, and since there is nothing to be paid or exchanged, they get what they want at once, without any haggling. They generally go to town once a month in any case, to observe the holy days. When harvest time approaches, the phylarchs in the country notify the town-magistrates how many hands will be needed. Crews of harvesters come just when they're wanted, and in one day of good weather they can usually get in the whole crop.

#### THEIR GOLD AND SILVER

For these reasons,<sup>5</sup> therefore, they have accumulated a vast treasure, but they do not keep it like a treasure. I'm really quite ashamed to tell you how they do keep it, because you probably won't believe me. I would not have believed it myself if someone had just told me about it; but I was there, and saw it with my own eyes. It is a general rule that the more different anything is from what people

5. More has explained, in a section here omitted, that the Utopians hire mercenary soldiers in time of war and

pay them very highly; enemy soldiers often desert to them.

are used to, the harder it is to accept. But, considering that all their other customs are so unlike ours, a sensible man will not be surprised that they use gold and silver quite differently than we do. After all, they never do use money among themselves, but keep it only for a contingency which may or may not actually arise. So in the meanwhile they take care that no one shall overvalue gold and silver, of which money is made, beyond what the metals themselves deserve. Anyone can see, for example, that iron is far superior to either; men could not live without iron, by heaven, any more than without fire or water. But gold and silver have, by nature, no function that we cannot easily dispense with. Human folly has made them precious because they are rare. Like a most wise and generous mother, nature has placed the best things everywhere and in the open, like air, water, and the earth itself; but she has hidden away in remote places all vain and unprofitable things.

If in Utopia gold and silver were kept locked up in some tower, foolish heads among the common people might well concoct a story that the prince and the senate<sup>6</sup> were out to cheat ordinary folk and get some advantage for themselves. They might indeed put the gold and silver into beautiful plate-ware and rich handiwork, but then in case of necessity the people would not want to give up such articles, on which they had begun to fix their hearts, only to melt them down for soldiers' pay. To avoid all these inconveniences, they thought of a plan which conforms with their institutions as clearly as it contrasts with our own. Unless we've actually seen it working, their plan may seem ridiculous to us, because we prize gold so highly and are so careful about protecting it. With them it's just the other way. While they eat from pottery dishes and drink from glass cups, well made but inexpensive, their chamber pots and stools—all their humblest vessels, for use in the common halls and private homes—are made of gold and silver. The chains and heavy fetters of slaves are also made of these metals. Finally, criminals who are to bear through life the mark of some disgraceful act are forced to wear golden rings on their ears, golden bands on their fingers, golden chains around their necks, and even golden crowns on their heads. Thus they hold gold and silver up to scorn in every conceivable way. As a result, when they have to part with these metals, which other nations give up with as much agony as if they were being disemboweled, the Utopians feel it no more than the loss of a penny.

They find pearls by the seashore, diamonds and rubies in certain cliffs, but never go out of set purpose to look for them. If they

6. The prince, as More has earlier explained, is chosen for life by the senate, whose members are selected by

an assembly, whose members in turn are selected from households.

happen to find some, they polish them, and give them to the children who, when they are small, feel proud and pleased with such gaudy decorations. But after, when they grow a bit older, and notice that only babies like such toys, they lay them aside. Their parents don't have to say anything, they simply put these trifles away out of a shamefaced sense that they're no longer suitable, just as our children when they grow up put away their rattles, marbles, and dolls.

Different customs, different feelings: I never saw the adage better illustrated than in the case of the Anemolian<sup>7</sup> ambassadors, who came to Amaurot while I was there. Because they came to discuss important business, the senate had assembled ahead of time, three citizens from each city. But the ambassadors from nearby nations, who had visited Utopia before and knew something of their customs, realized that fine clothing was not much respected in that land, silk was despised, and gold was a badge of contempt; and therefore they came in the very plainest of their clothes. But the Anemolians, who lived farther off and had had fewer dealings with the Utopians, had heard only that they all dressed alike, and very simply; so they took for granted that their hosts had nothing to wear that they didn't put on. Being themselves rather more proud than wise, they decided to dress as resplendently as the very gods and dazzle the eyes of the poor Utopians by the splendor of their garb.

Consequently the three ambassadors made a grand entry with a suite of a hundred attendants, all in clothing of many colors, and most in silk. Being noblemen at home, the ambassadors were arrayed in cloth of gold, with heavy gold chains on their necks, gold rings on their ears and fingers, and sparkling strings of pearls and gems on their caps. In fact, they were decked out in all the articles which in Utopia are used to punish slaves, shame wrongdoers, or pacify infants. It was a sight to see how they strutted when they compared their finery with the dress of the Utopians who had poured out into the street to see them pass. But it was just as funny to see how wide they fell of the mark, and how far they were from getting the consideration they wanted and expected. Except for a very few Utopians who for some special reason had visited foreign countries, all the onlookers considered this pomp and splendor a mark of disgrace. They therefore bowed to the humblest servants as lords, and took the ambassadors to be slaves because they were wearing golden chains, passing them by without any reverence at all. You might have seen children, who had themselves thrown away their pearls and gems, nudge their mothers when they saw the ambassadors' jeweled caps, and say:

7. From Greek, "windy people."



"Look at that big lummoX, mother, who's still wearing pearls and jewels as if he were a little kid!"

But the mother, in all seriousness, would answer:

"Hush, my boy, I think he is one of the ambassadors' fools."

Others found fault with the golden chains as useless, because they were so flimsy any slave could break them, and so loose that he could easily shake them off and run away whenever he wanted. But after the ambassadors had spent a couple of days among the Utopians, they learned of the immense amounts of gold which were as thoroughly despised there as they were prized at home. They saw too that more gold and silver went into making the chains and fetters of a single runaway slave than into costuming all three of them. Somewhat crestfallen, then, they put away all the finery in which they had strutted so arrogantly; but they saw the wisdom of doing so after they had talked with the Utopians enough to learn their customs and opinions.

#### MARRIAGE CUSTOMS

Women do not marry till they are eighteen, nor men till they are twenty-two. Premarital intercourse by either men or women, if discovered and proved, is severely punished, and the guilty parties are forbidden to marry during their whole lives, unless the prince, by his pardon, alleviates the sentence. In addition both the father and mother of the household where the offense occurred suffer public disgrace for having been remiss in their duty. The reason they punish this offense so severely is that they suppose few people would join in married love—with confinement to a single partner, and all the petty annoyances that married life involves—unless they were strictly restrained from a life of promiscuity.

In choosing marriage partners, they solemnly and seriously follow a custom which seemed to us foolish and absurd in the extreme. Whether she is a widow or a virgin, the bride-to-be is shown naked to the groom by a responsible and respectable matron; and, similarly, some respectable man presents the groom naked to his future bride. We laughed at this custom and called it absurd; but they were just as amazed at the folly of all other nations. When men go to buy a colt, where they are risking only a little money, they are so suspicious that though he is almost bare they won't close the deal until the saddle and blanket have been taken off, lest there be a hidden sore underneath. Yet in the choice of a mate, which may cause either delight or disgust for the rest of their lives, people are completely careless. They leave all the rest of her body covered up with clothes and estimate the attractiveness of a woman from a mere handbreadth of her person, the face, which is all they can see. And so they marry, running great risk of hating one another for

the rest of their lives, if something in either's person should offend the other. Not all people are so wise as to concern themselves solely with character; even the wise appreciate physical beauty, as a supplement to a good disposition. There's no question but that deformity may lurk under clothing, serious enough to make a man hate his wife when it's too late to be separated from her. When deformities are discovered after marriage, each person must bear his own fate, so the Utopians think everyone should be protected by law beforehand.

There is extra reason for them to be careful, because in that part of the world, they are the only people who practice monogamy. Their marriages are seldom terminated except by death, though they do allow divorce for adultery or for intolerably difficult behavior. A husband or wife who is an aggrieved party to such a divorce is granted permission by the senate to remarry, but the guilty party is considered disreputable and permanently forbidden to take another mate. They absolutely forbid a husband to put away his wife against her will because of some bodily misfortune; they think it cruel that a person should be abandoned when most in need of comfort; and they add that old age, since it not only entails disease but is actually a disease itself, needs more than a precarious fidelity.

It happens occasionally that a married couple cannot get along, and have both found other persons with whom they hope to live more harmoniously. After getting the approval of the senate, they may then separate by mutual consent and contract new marriages. But such divorces are allowed only after the senators and their wives have carefully investigated the case. They allow divorce only very reluctantly because they know that husbands and wives will find it hard to settle down together if each has in mind that another new relation is easily available.

They punish adulterers with the strictest form of slavery. If both parties were married, they are both divorced, and the injured parties may marry one another, if they want, or someone else. But if one of the injured parties continues to love such an undeserving spouse, the marriage may go on, providing the innocent person chooses to share in the labor to which every slave is condemned. And sometimes it happens that the repentance of the guilty, and the devotion of the innocent party, move the prince to pity, so that he restores both to freedom. But a second conviction of adultery is punished by death.

#### RELIGIONS

There are different forms of religion throughout the island, and in each particular city as well. Some worship as a god the sun, others the moon, and still others one of the planets. There are

some who worship a man of past ages who was conspicuous either for virtue or glory; they consider him not only a god but the supreme god. Most of the Utopians, however, and among these all the wisest, believe nothing of the sort: they believe in a single power, unknown, eternal, infinite, inexplicable, far beyond the grasp of the human mind, and diffused throughout the universe, not physically, but in influence. Him they call father, and to him alone they attribute the origin, increase, progress, change, and end of all visible things; they do not offer divine honors to any other.

Though the other sects of the Utopians differ from this main group in various particular doctrines, they all agree in this main head, that there is one supreme power, the maker and ruler of the universe, whom they all call in their native language Mithra.<sup>8</sup> Different people define him differently, and each supposes the object of his worship is the special vessel of that great force which all people agree in worshipping. But gradually they are coming to forsake this mixture of superstitions, and to unite in that one religion which seems more reasonable than any of the others. And there is no doubt that the other religions would have disappeared long ago, except for various unlucky accidents which befell certain Utopians who were thinking about changing their religion. All the others immediately construed these events as a sign of heavenly anger, not chance, as if the deity who was being abandoned were avenging an insult against himself.

But after they had heard from us the name of Christ, and learned of his teachings, his life, his miracles, and the no less marvelous devotion of the many martyrs who shed their blood to draw nations far and near into the Christian fellowship, you would not believe how they were impressed. Either through the mysterious inspiration of God, or because Christianity is very like the religion already prevailing among them, they were well disposed toward it from the start. But I think they were also much influenced by the fact that Christ had encouraged his disciples to practice community of goods, and that among the truest groups of Christians, the practice still prevails.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the reason, no small number of them chose to join our communion, and received the holy water of baptism. By that time, two of our group had died, and among us four survivors there was, I am sorry to say, no priest; so, though they received instruction in other matters, they still lack those sacraments which in our religion can be administered only by priests. They do, however, understand what they are and earnestly desire them. In fact, they dispute vigorously among themselves whether a

8. The spirit of light in ancient Persian religion, which More could have learned about from reading Pico della Mirandola.

9. Many monastic orders of More's time abolished private property for their members.

man chosen from among themselves could be considered a priest, even if not ordained by a Christian bishop. Though they seemed on the point of selecting such a person, they had not yet done so when I left.

Those who have not accepted Christianity make no effort to restrain others from it, nor do they criticize new converts to it. While I was there, only one of the Christians got into trouble with the law. As soon as he was baptized, he took on himself to preach the Christian religion publicly, with more zeal than discretion. We warned him not to do so, but he soon worked himself up to a pitch where he not only preferred our religion, but condemned all others as profane in themselves, leading their impious and sacrilegious followers to the hell-flames they richly deserved. After he had been going on in this style for a long time, they arrested him. He was tried, not on a charge of despising their religion, but of creating a public disorder, convicted and sentenced to exile. For it is one of their oldest institutions that no man's religion, as such, shall be held against him.

Even before he came to the island, King Utopus had heard that the inhabitants were continually quarreling over religious matters. In fact, he found it was easy to conquer the country because the different sects were too busy fighting one another to oppose him. As soon as he had gained the victory, therefore, he decreed that every man might cultivate the religion of his choice, and might proselytize for it, provided he did so quietly, modestly, rationally, and without bitterness toward others. If persuasions failed, no man was allowed to resort to abuse or violence, under penalty of exile or enslavement.

Utopus laid down these rules, not simply for the sake of peace, which he saw was in danger of being destroyed by constant quarrels and implacable hatred; but also for the sake of religion itself. In matters of religion, he was not at all quick to dogmatize, because he suspected that God perhaps likes various forms of worship and has therefore deliberately inspired different people with different views. On the other hand, he was quite sure that it was arrogant folly for anyone to enforce conformity with his own beliefs by means of threats or violence. He supposed that if one religion is really true and the rest false, that true one will prevail by its own natural strength, provided only that men consider the matter reasonably and moderately. But if they try to decide these matters by fighting and rioting, since the worst men are always the most headstrong, the best and holiest religion in the world will be crowded out by blind superstitions, like grain choked out of a field by thorns and briars. So he left the whole matter open, allowing each individual man to choose what he would believe. The only exception he made

was a positive and strict law against any person who should sink so far below the dignity of human nature as to think that the soul perishes with the body, or that the universe is ruled by mere chance, rather than divine providence.

Thus the Utopians all believe that after this life vices are to be punished and virtue rewarded; and they consider that anyone who opposes this proposition is hardly a man, since he has degraded the sublimity of his own soul to the base level of a beast's wretched body. They will not even count him as one of their citizens, since he would undoubtedly betray all the laws and customs of society, if not prevented by fear. Who can doubt that a man who has nothing to fear but the law, and no hope of life beyond the grave, will do anything he can to evade his country's laws by craft or break them by violence, in order to gratify his own private greed? Therefore a man who holds such views is offered no honors, entrusted with no offices, and given no public responsibility; he is universally regarded as a low and sordid fellow. Yet they do not afflict him with punishments, because they are persuaded that no man can choose to believe by a mere act of the will. They do not compel him by threats to dissemble his views, nor do they tolerate in the matter any deceit or lying, which they detest as next door to deliberate malice. The man may not argue in the presence of the common people in behalf of his opinion; but in the presence of the priests and other important persons, they not only permit but encourage it. For they are confident that in the end his madness will yield to reason.

There are some others, in fact no small number of them, who err in the opposite direction, in supposing that animals too have immortal souls, though not comparable to ours in excellence, nor destined to equal felicity. These men are not thought to be evil, their opinion is not thought to be wholly unreasonable, and so they are not interfered with.

Almost all the Utopians are absolutely convinced that man's bliss after death will be enormous and eternal; thus they lament every man's sickness, but mourn over a death only if the man was torn from life anxiously and against his will. Such behavior they take to be a very bad sign, as if the soul, being in despair and conscious of guilt, dreaded death through a secret premonition of punishments to come. Besides, they suppose God can hardly be well pleased with the coming of one who, when he is summoned, does not come gladly, but is dragged off reluctantly and against his will. Such a death fills the onlookers with horror, and they carry away the corpse to the cemetery in melancholy silence. There, after begging God to have mercy on his spirit, and pardon his infirmities, they bury the unhappy man. But when a man dies blithely and full

of good hope, they do not mourn for him, but carry the body cheerfully away, singing and commending the dead man's soul to God. They cremate him in a spirit more of reverence than of grief, and erect a tombstone on which the dead man's honors are inscribed. As they go home, they talk of his character and deeds, and no part of his life is mentioned more frequently or more gladly than his joyful death.

They think that recollecting the good qualities of a man helps the living to behave virtuously and is also the most acceptable form of honor to the dead. For they think that dead persons are actually present among us, and hear what we say about them, though through the dullness of human sight they are invisible to our eyes. Given their state of bliss, the dead must be able to travel freely where they please, and they are bound to want to revisit their friends, whom they loved and honored during their lives. Like all other good things, they think that after death freedom of motion is increased rather than decreased in all good men; and thus they believe the dead come frequently among the living, to observe their words and actions. Hence they go about their business the more confidently because of their trust in such protectors; and the belief that their forefathers are physically present keeps men from any secret dishonorable deed.

Fortune-telling and other vain forms of superstitious divination, such as other people take very seriously, they consider ridiculous and contemptible. But they venerate miracles which occur without the help of nature, considering them direct and visible manifestations of the divine power. Indeed, they report that miracles have frequently occurred in their country. Sometimes in great and dangerous crises they pray publicly for a miracle, which they then anticipate with great confidence, and obtain.

They think that the careful investigation of nature, and the sense of reverence arising from it, are acts of worship to God.

\* \* \*

[CONCLUSION]

Now I have described to you as accurately as I could the structure of that commonwealth which I consider not only the best but the only one that can rightfully claim that name. In other places men talk very liberally of the common wealth, but what they mean is simply their own wealth; in Utopia, where there is no private business, every man zealously pursues the public business. And in both places, men are right to act as they do. For among us, even though the state may flourish, each man knows that unless he makes separate provision for himself, he may perfectly well die of hunger. Bitter necessity, then, forces men to look out for themselves

rather than for others, that is, for the people. But in Utopia, where everything belongs to everybody, no man need fear that, so long as the public warehouses are filled, he will ever lack for anything he needs. Distribution is simply not one of their problems; in Utopia no men are poor, no men are beggars. Though no man owns anything, everyone is rich.

For what can be greater riches than for a man to live joyfully and peacefully, free from all anxieties, and without worries about making a living? No man is bothered by his wife's querulous complaints about money, no man fears poverty for his son, or struggles to scrape up a dowry for his daughter. Each man can feel secure of his own livelihood and happiness and of his whole family's as well: wife, sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, great-great-grandsons, and that whole long line of descendants that gentlefolk are so fond of contemplating. Indeed, even those who once worked but can do so no longer are cared for just as well as if they were still productive.

Let me now make bold to compare this justice of the Utopians with the so-called justice that prevails among other nations—among whom let me perish if I can discover the slightest scrap of justice or fairness. What kind of justice is it when a nobleman or a goldsmith<sup>1</sup> or a moneylender, or someone else who makes his living by doing either nothing at all or something completely useless to the public, gets to live a life of luxury and grandeur? In the meantime, a laborer, a carter, a carpenter, or a farmer works so hard and so constantly that even a beast of burden would perish under the load; and this work of theirs is so necessary that no commonwealth could survive a year without it. Yet they earn so meager a living and lead such miserable lives that a beast of burden would really be better off. Beasts do not have to work every minute, and their food is not much worse; in fact they like it better. And, besides, they do not have to worry about their future. But workingmen not only have to sweat and suffer without present reward, but agonize over the prospect of a penniless old age. Their daily wage is inadequate even for their present needs, so there is no possible chance of their saving toward the future.

Now isn't this an unjust and ungrateful commonwealth? It lavishes rich rewards on so-called gentry, bankers and goldsmiths and the rest of that crew, who don't work at all, are mere parasites, or purveyors of empty pleasures. And yet it makes no provision whatever for the welfare of farmers and colliers, laborers, carters, and carpenters, without whom the commonwealth would simply cease to exist. After the state has taken the labor of their best years, when they are worn out by age and sickness and utter destitution, then the thankless state, forgetting all their pains and services, throws

1. Banker.

them out to die a miserable death. What is worse, the rich constantly try to grind out of the poor part of their meager wages, not only by private swindling, but by public tax-laws. It is basically unjust that people who deserve most from the commonwealth should receive least. But now they have distorted and debased the right even further by giving their extortion the color of law; and thus they have palmed injustice off as "legal." When I run over in my mind the various commonwealths flourishing today, so help me God, I can see nothing in them but a conspiracy of the rich, who are fattening up their own interests under the name and title of the commonwealth. They invent ways and means to hang onto whatever they have acquired by sharp practice, and then they scheme to oppress the poor by buying up their toil and labor as cheaply as possible. These devices become law as soon as the rich, speaking through the commonwealth—which, of course, includes the poor as well—say they must be observed.

And yet, when these insatiably greedy and evil men have divided among themselves goods which would have sufficed for the entire people, how far they remain from the happiness of the Utopians, who have abolished not only money but with it greed! What a mass of trouble was uprooted by that one step! What a multitude of crimes was pulled up by the roots! Everyone knows that if money were abolished, fraud, theft, robbery, quarrels, brawls, seditions, murders, treasons, poisonings, and a whole set of crimes which are avenged but not prevented by the hangman would at once die out. If money disappeared, so would fear, anxiety, worry, toil, and sleepless nights. Even poverty, which seems to need money more than anything else for its relief, would vanish if money were entirely done away with.

Consider if you will this example. Take a barren year of failed harvests, when many thousands of men have been carried off by hunger. If at the end of the famine the barns of the rich were searched, I dare say positively enough grain would be found in them to save the lives of all those who died from starvation and disease, if it had been divided equally among them. Nobody really need have suffered from a bad harvest at all. So easily might men get the necessities of life if that cursed money, which is supposed to provide access to them, were not in fact the chief barrier to our getting what we need to live. Even the rich, I'm sure, understand this. They must know that it's better to have enough of what we really need than an abundance of superfluities, much better to escape from our many present troubles than to be burdened with great masses of wealth. And in fact I have no doubt that every man's perception of where his true interest lies, along with the authority of Christ our Saviour (whose wisdom could not fail to recognize the



best, and whose goodness would not fail to counsel it), would long ago have brought the whole world to adopt Utopian laws, if it were not for one single monster, the prime plague and begetter of all others—I mean Pride.

Pride measures her advantages not by what she has but by what other people lack. Pride would not condescend even to be made a goddess, if there were no wretches for her to sneer at and domineer over. Her good fortune is dazzling only by contrast with the miseries of others, her riches are valuable only as they torment and tantalize the poverty of others. Pride is a serpent from hell which twines itself around the hearts of men; and it acts like the suckfish<sup>2</sup> in holding them back from choosing a better way of life.

Pride is too deeply fixed in the hearts of men to be easily plucked out. So I am glad that the Utopians at least have been lucky enough to achieve this commonwealth, which I wish all mankind would imitate. The institutions they have adopted have made their community most happy, and as far as anyone can tell, capable of lasting forever. Now that they have rooted up the seeds of ambition and faction at home, along with most other vices, they are in no danger from internal strife, which at home has been the ruin of many other states that seemed secure. As long as they preserve harmony at home, and keep their institutions healthy, the Utopians can never be overcome or even shaken by their envious neighbors, who have often attempted their ruin, but always in vain.

When Raphael had finished his story, it seemed to me that not a few of the customs and laws he had described as existing among the Utopians were quite absurd. Their methods of waging war, their religious ceremonies, and their social customs were some of these, but my chief objection was to the basis of their whole system, that is, their communal living and their moneyless economy. This one thing alone takes away all the nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty which (in the popular view) are considered the true ornaments of any nation. But I saw Raphael was tired with talking, and I was not sure he could take contradiction in these matters, particularly when I remembered what he had said about certain councillors who were afraid they might not appear wise unless they found out something to criticize in other men's ideas.

So with praise for the Utopian way of life and his account of it, I took him by the hand and led him in to supper. But first I said that we would find some other time for thinking of these matters more deeply, and for talking them over in more detail. And I still hope such an opportunity will present itself some day.

2. The remora, which attaches itself by a suction cup to larger fish or ships. It was fabled to be strong enough to hold back a ship under sail.

Meanwhile, though he is a man of unquestioned learning, and highly experienced in the ways of the world, I cannot agree with everything he said. Yet I confess there are many things in the Commonwealth of Utopia which I wish our own country would imitate—though I don't really expect it will.

1514-16

1516

## JOHN SKELTON (ca. 1460-1529)

According to one of the jest-book tales, John Skelton suddenly interrupted one of his sermons to ask the members of his congregation why they had complained that he kept a fair wench in the rectory. To be sure, he said, he did keep a fair wench; she was fairer than his parishioners' wives and had given him a son. Holding the child up naked before the congregation, he exclaimed, "How say you, neighbors all? Is not this child as fair as is the best of all yours? It hath nose, eyes, hands, and feet, as well as any of yours. It is not like a pig, nor a calf, nor like no foul nor no monstrous beast. If I had brought forth this child without arms or legs, or that it were deformed being a monstrous thing, I would never have blamed you to have complained to the Bishop of me, but to complain without a cause! I say as I said before, in my antetheme, *vos estis*, you be, and have been, and will and shall be knaves to complain of me without a cause reasonable."

Many and colorful were the stories circulated about the mad wag Skelton—who was also the major poet of the first quarter of the century, with the title of Poet Laureate from both Oxford and Cambridge. He was famous as a rhetorician and a translator, and he was also, for a time, tutor to the young Henry VIII. He took orders and, after writing *The Bowge of Court* (1498), a satire on courtiers and court life, retired about 1503, became rector of the parish church at Diss, in Norfolk. By 1512 he had returned to the court, appointed King's Orator. He moved to a house in the sanctuary of Westminster in 1518, and shortly thereafter began his vituperous attacks upon Cardinal Wolsey, the great prelate-statesman, including *Speak, Parrot*, *Colin Clout*, and *Why Come Ye Not To Court?* (1521-22). Wolsey had him imprisoned for a time but later released him.

While in retirement at Diss, he began to write poetry in a "plain style" that rejected ornate rhetorical devices and aureate language. His satires gain some of their most startling effects by mixing high and low styles. These "open satires," as they are called, are written in short rhymed lines that to the modern ear resemble doggerel, although something like this form was probably familiar enough to readers of medieval satire. A Skeltonic line may have from two to five beats, and the lines can keep on rhyming until the resources of the language give out. To many of his poems, particularly the satires, this strange meter is singularly appropriate. *The Tunning of Elinour Rimming* is, for example, a wonderfully disordered, clattering portrait of an alewife that reminds one of Brueghel's paintings in its realism, and the Skeltonics do much to contribute to the effect of disorder. The lines give the voice of the narrator of the satires a breathless urgency much

admired by Robert Graves and W. H. Auden, among other modern poets. Skelton's satires draw upon a long tradition of medieval anti-clerical satire, but he brings a fresh voice to the genre.

Skelton's lyrics also partake of traditional medieval modes which the poet makes his own. To the three-part song *Mannerly Margery*, a traditional ballad of the clerk and the serving-maid, he gives an ironic ending. His rather salacious *Lullay, Lullay* is a parody on traditional lullabies in which the Virgin Mary rocks the Christ child in her lap. In an entirely different mood is the pleasant lyric in praise of Mistress Margaret Hussey. It is one of several which Skelton published in 1523 in *The Garland of Laurel*; in that work the poet is crowned with a laurel wreath by the Countess of Surrey and her ladies, and in gratitude he writes a poem to each of them. In his lyrics as well as his satires we hear a genuine music and find, as always, the impress of the distinctive character of their author.

### From Colin Clout<sup>1</sup>

And if ye stand in doubt  
 Who brought this rhyme about,  
 My name is Colin Clout.  
 I purpose to shake out  
 5 All my conning° bag, *learning*  
 Like a clerly hag.<sup>2</sup>  
 For though my rhyme be ragged,  
 Tattered and jagged,  
 Rudely rain-beaten,  
 10 Rusty and moth-eaten,  
 If ye take well therewith,  
 It hath in it some pith.  
 For, as far as I can see,  
 It is wrong with each degree.  
 15 For the temporality° *laymen*  
 Accuseth the spirituality;  
 The spirituality again  
 Doth grudge and complain  
 Upon the temporal men;  
 20 Thus, each of other blother° *babble*  
 The one against the other.  
 Alas, they make me shudder!  
 For in hugger-mugger° *haste*  
 The Church is put in fault;  
 25 The prelates been so haut,° *haughty*  
 They say, and look so high  
 As though they wouldé fly  
 Above the starry sky.

1519

iambic trimeter

1. These are lines 47-74, comprising part of the introductory matter. Colin Clout, the narrator, here introduces the

theme of the whole long poem, in the characteristically jagged Skeltonic line.  
 2. Old scholar.

## Upon a Dead Man's Head

*That was sent to him from an honorable gentlewoman for a token, Skelton, Laureate, devised this ghostly<sup>3</sup> meditation in English covenable,<sup>4</sup> in sentence, commendable, lamentable, lacrimable, profitable for the soul.*

Your ugly token  
 My mind hath broken  
 From worldly lust;  
 For I have discussed,  
 5 We are but dust  
 And die we must.

It is general  
 To be mortal;  
 I have well espied  
 10 No man may him hide  
 From Death hollow-eyed  
 With sinews wyderéd° *withered*  
 With bones shyderéd° *shattered*  
 With his worm-eaten maw  
 15 And his ghastly jaw  
 Gaping aside,  
 Naked of hide,  
 Neither flesh nor fell.° *skin*

Then, by my counsel  
 20 Look that ye spell° *study*  
 Well this gospel,  
 For whereso we dwell  
 Death will us quell  
 And with us mell.° *mix*

For all our pampered paunches  
 25 There may no franchis° *franchise*  
 Nor worldly bliss  
 Redcem us from this:  
 Our days be dated  
 30 To be checkmated  
 With draughtes of death  
 Stopping our breath;  
 Our eyen° sinking, *eyes*  
 Our bodics stinking,  
 35 Our gummes grinning,  
 Our soules brinning.° *burning*

3. Spiritual.

4. Suitable; "in sentence": in meaning.

To whom, then, shall we sue  
 For to have rescue  
 But to sweet Jesu  
 40 On us then for to rue?  
 O goodly child  
 Of Mary mild  
 Then be our shield,  
 That we be not exiled  
 45 To the dyne° dale *dark*  
 Of bootless bale<sup>5</sup>  
 Nor to the lake  
 Of fiendes° black. *devils*

But grant us grace  
 50 To see thy face  
 And to purchase  
 Thine heavenly place  
 And thy palace  
 Full of solace  
 55 Above the sky  
 That is so high,  
 Eternally  
 To behold and see  
 The Trinity.

Amen.

*Myrres vous y.*<sup>6</sup>

ca. 1498

Mannerly Margery Milk and Ale<sup>7</sup>

Aye, beshrew you, by my fay,<sup>8</sup>  
 These wanton clerks be nice° alway, *foolish*  
 Avaunt, avaunt, my popinjay!  
 "What, will you do nothing but play?"  
 5 Tilly vally straw, let be I say!  
 Gup,<sup>9</sup> Christian Clout, gup, Jack of the Vale!  
 With Mannerly Margery milk and ale.

"By God, ye be a pretty pode,° *toad*  
 And I love you an whole cartload."  
 10 Straw, James Foder, ye play the fode,° *deceiver, seducer*  
 I am no hackney for your rod:° *riding*  
 Go watch a bull, your back is broad!  
 Gup, Christian Clout, gup, Jack of the Vale!  
 With Mannerly Margery milk and ale.

5. Irremediable sorrow.

6. See yourself in it.

7. The clerk's lines are in quotation marks; Margery sings the rest, except the chorus lines, which are sung by a

bass.

8. "Beshrew": curse (not used seriously); "fay": faith.

9. Contracted from "go up."

- 15 Ywis° ye deal uncourteously; *certainly*  
 What, would ye frumple° me? now fie! *rumple, tumble*  
 “What, and ye shall not be my pigsny?”° *darling*  
 By Christ, ye shall not, no hardily:  
 I will not be japped° bodily! *tricked, deceived*
- 20 Gup, Christian Clout, gup, Jack of the Vale!  
 With Mannerly Margery milk and ale.
- “Walk forth your way, ye cost me naught;  
 Now have I found that I have sought:  
 The best cheap flesh that ever I bought.”
- 25 Yet, for his love that hath all wrought,  
 Wed me, or else I die for thought.  
 Gup, Christian Clout, your breath is stale!  
 Go, Mannerly Margery milk and ale!  
 Gup, Christian Clout, gup, Jack of the Vale!
- 30 With Mannerly Margery milk and ale.
- ca. 1510 1523

## Lullay, Lullay, Like a Child

- With lullay, lullay, like a child,  
 Thou sleepest too long, thou art beguiled.° *deceived*
- “My darling dear, my daisy flower,  
 Let me,” quod° he, “lie in your lap.” *quoth*  
 5 “Lie still,” quod she, “my paramour,  
 Lie still, hardily,° and take a nap.” *confidently*  
 His head was heavy, such was his hap,  
 All drowsy dreaming, drowned in sleep,  
 That of his love he took no keep.
- 10 With hey, lullay, lullay, like a child,  
 Thou sleepest too long, thou art beguiled.
- With ba, ba, ba!<sup>1</sup> and bas, bas, bas!  
 She cherished him, both cheek and chin,  
 That he wist never where he was,  
 15 He had forgotten all deadly sin.  
 He wanted wit her love to win,  
 He trusted her payment and lost all his pay;  
 She left him sleeping and stale° away, *stole*  
 With hey, lullay, lullay, like a child,  
 20 Thou sleepest too long, thou art beguiled.
- The rivers rough, the waters wan,  
 She sparéd not to wet her feet;  
 She waded over, she found a man  
 That halséd° her heartily and kissed her sweet— *embraced*  
 25 Thus after her cold she caught a heat.

1. The “by” of *lullaby*; “bas, bas, bas”: kiss, kiss, kiss.

"My lief," she said, "routeth<sup>2</sup> in his bed;  
Ywis<sup>o</sup> he hath an heavy head." *certainly*  
With hev, lullay, lullay, like a child,  
Thou sleepest too long, thou are beguiled.

30 What dreamest thou, drunkard, drowsy pate?  
Thy lust and liking is from thee gone.  
Thou blinkard blowball,<sup>3</sup> thou wakest too late. *sluggard*  
Behold thou liest, luggard,<sup>o</sup> alone!  
Well may thou sigh, well may thou groan,  
35 To deal with her so cowardly.  
Ywis, pole-hatchet,<sup>o</sup> she bleared thine eye. *barfly*

1490-1503

To Mistress Margaret Hussey

Merry Margaret,  
As midsummer flower,  
Gentle as falcon  
Or hawk of the tower;<sup>1</sup>  
5 With solace and gladness,  
Much mirth and no madness,  
All good and no badness;  
So joyously,  
So maidenly,  
10 So womanly  
Her demeaning  
In every thing,  
Far, far passing  
That I can endite,<sup>2</sup>  
15 Or suffice to write  
Of merry Margaret  
As midsummer flower,  
Gentle as falcon  
Or hawk of the tower.  
20 As patient and as still  
And as full of good will  
As fair Isaphill;<sup>3</sup>  
Colyander,  
Sweet pomander,<sup>4</sup>  
25 Good Cassander;<sup>5</sup>

2. My lover snores.

3. Blink-eyed drunkard.

1. "Falcon-gentle" was the term applied to the female and young of the goshawk; a "hawk of the tower" was one that towered aloft, sailing high in the air before swooping on its prey.

2. I.e., surpassing anything that I can compose.

3. Hyppipyle, Queen of Lemnos, famous for her devotion to her father

and to her children.

4. Colyander or coriander was an herb supposed to soothe pain; like sweet pomander, it had a pleasant odor.

5. The beautiful daughter of Priam of Troy; she could prophesy accurately but no one believed her prophecies. This did not discourage her; she is preeminently "steadfast of thought" (line 26).

30

Steadfast of thought,  
 Well made, well wrought,  
 Far may be sought  
 Ere that ye can find  
 So courteous, so kind  
 As merry Margaret,  
 This midsummer flower,  
 Gentle as falcon  
 Or hawk of the tower.

1523

## SIR THOMAS WYATT THE ELDER

(1503-1542)

Wyatt was born at Allington Castle in Kent, and educated at St. John's College, Cambridge. He spent most of his life as a courtier and diplomat, serving King Henry VIII as Clerk of the King's Jewels and as ambassador to Spain and to the Emperor Charles V. He was also a member of various missions to France and Italy. He spent much of his adult life abroad; his interest in foreign literature, especially Italian, is evident from his translations and imitations of poems by the Italian sonneteers Petrarch, Sannazaro, Alamanni, and others. The life of a courtier under Henry VIII was not a calm life: Wyatt was twice arrested and imprisoned, once in 1536, after a quarrel with the Duke of Suffolk, and again in 1541, when he was charged with treason, lodged in the Tower of London, and stripped of all his property. On both occasions he was fortunate enough to regain the king's favor and receive a pardon. His praise of quiet retired life in the country and the cynical comments about foreign courts in his verse epistle to John Poins derive from his own experience.

For all his travel abroad, Wyatt remained essentially an Englishman. His poetry includes not only the sonnets, based upon Italian models, but also many delightful lyrics with short stanzas and refrains in the manner of the native English "ballet" (pronounced to rhyme with *mallet*) or dance-song. Wyatt's own temperament and disposition show more clearly in these English poems than in the sonnets. The lover in the Petrarchan sonnet is usually in a mood of doleful despair; the typical poem is essentially a complaint, though the interest lies in following the elaborately worked out "conceits" or comparisons. The lover is abject, he is the lady's slave; her coldness is a perpetual torture to him. In the ballets, however, a rather gay, manly independence is the characteristic note.

The sonnet, a 14-line poem with a complicated rhyme scheme, was introduced into English by Wyatt. He took his subject matter from Petrarch's sonnets, for the most part, but his rhyme schemes came from other Italian models. The most common rhyme scheme in Wyatt's sonnets is *abba abba cddc ee*; the usual Italian structure of an octave (first eight lines) followed after a turn in the sense by a sestet (last six lines) was already beginning to break down into the "English" structure for the sonnet, three quatrains and a couplet.



Although Wyatt intended to publish a collection of his poems, he never did so. In fact, very little of his verse was published until after his death. In aristocratic circles poems circulated in manuscript and were copied by hand; the general public usually saw courtiers' poems only when some enterprising publisher acquired manuscripts, perhaps already formed into a collection, and printed them as a miscellany. An early volume of this sort, called *The Court of Venus*, published a few Wyatt poems before 1540. A dozen such collections were published during the second half of the 16th century, with titles like *A Paradise of Dainty Devices*, *A Handful of Pleasant Delights*, and *A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions*. By far the most important of these miscellanies was issued by the printer Richard Tottel in 1557 (15 years after Wyatt's death) with the title *Songs and Sonnets written by the Right Honorable Lord Henry Howard late Earl of Surrey and other*. Until modern times it was always called simply *Songs and Sonnets* (Shakespeare has his Master Slender in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* say "I had rather than forty shillings I had my book of Songs and Sonnets here"); but now it is always referred to as *Tottel's Miscellany*. The printer, Richard Tottel, addressed the reader in an interesting epistle:

That to have well written in verse, yea and in small parcels, deserveth great praise, the works of divers Latins, Italians and other do prove sufficiently. That our tongue is able in that kind to do as praiseworthy as the rest, the honorable style of the noble Earl of Surrey and the weightiness of the deep-witted Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder's verse, with several graces in sundry good English writers, do show abundantly. It resteth now, gentle reader, that thou think it not ill done to publish, to the honor of the English tongue, and for profit of the studious of English eloquence, those works which the ungentle hoarders up of such treasure have heretofore envied thee. And for this point, good reader, thine own profit and pleasure in these presently, and moe hereafter, shall answer for my defence. If perhaps some mislike the stateliness of style, removed from the rude skill of common ears, I ask help of the learned to defend their learned friends, the authors of this work. And I exhort the unlearned, by reading to be more skilfull, and to purge that swinelike grossness that maketh the sweet marjoram not to smell to their delight.

The anthology includes 271 poems—97 attributed to Wyatt, 40 to Surrey, 40 to Nicholas Grimald, and 94 to "Uncertain Authors." It is surely one of the most important books in the history of English literature, for it was the channel through which the main currents of European Renaissance poetry flowed into the British Isles. In it the sonnet, blank verse, *terza rima*, *ottava rima*, *rondeau*, and other forms were naturalized into English, and suddenly the ragged, undisciplined, pedestrian verse of the first part of the century became antiquated. When Wyatt was a boy it was possible for Alexander Barclay, an ambitious and by no means uneducated poet, to write verse like this:

The famous poets with the muses nine  
 With wit inspired, fresh, pregnant and divine,  
 Say boldly endite in style substantial;  
 Some in poems high and historical,  
 Some them delight in heavy tragedies  
 And some in wanton or merry comedies.