**The Merchant’s Prologue**

1 Of weeping and wailing, care and other sorrow

2 I know enough, at eventide and morrow,

3 The merchant said, and so do many more

4 Of married folk, I think, who this deplore,

5 For well I know that it is so with me.

6 I have a wife, the worst one that can be;

7 For though the foul Fiend to her wedded were,

8 She'd overmatch him, this I dare to swear.

9 How could I tell you anything special

10 Of her great malice? She is shrew in all.

11 There is a long and a large difference

12 Between Griselda's good and great patience

13 And my wife's more than common cruelty.

14 Were I unbound, as may I prosperous be!

15 I'd never another time fall in the snare.

16 We wedded men in sorrow live, and care;

17 Try it who will, and he shall truly find

18 I tell the truth, by Saint Thomas of Ind,

19 As for the greater part, I say not all.

20 Nay, God forbid that it should so befall!

21 Ah, good sir host! I have been married, lad,

22 These past two months, and no day more, by gad;

23 And yet I think that he whose days alive

24 Have been all wifeless, although men should rive

25 Him to the heart, he could in no wise clear

26 Tell you so much of sorrow as I here

27 Could tell you of my spouse's cursedness.

28 Now, said our host, merchant, so God you bless,

29 Since you're so very learned in that art,

30 Full heartily, I pray you, tell us part.

31 Gladly, said he, but of my own fresh sore,

32 For grief of heart I may not tell you more.

**The Merchant’s Tale**

1 Once on a time there dwelt in Lombardy

2 One born in Pavia, a knight worthy,

3 And there he lived in great prosperity;

4 And sixty years a wifeless man was he,

5 And followed ever his bodily delight

6 In women, whereof was his appetite,

7 As these fool laymen will, so it appears.

8 And when he had so passed his sixty years,

9 Were it for piety or for dotage

10 I cannot say, but such a rapturous rage

11 Had this knight to become a wedded man

12 That day and night he did his best to scan

13 And spy a place where he might wedded be;

14 Praying Our Lord to grant to him that he

15 Might once know something of that blissful life

16 That is between a husband and his wife;

17 And so to live within that holy band

18 Wherein God first made man and woman stand.

19 No other life, said he, is worth a bean;

20 For wedlock is so easy and so clean

21 That in this world it is a paradise.

22 Thus said this ancient knight, who was so wise.

23 And certainly, as sure as God is King,

24 To take a wife, it is a glorious thing,

25 Especially when a man is old and hoary;

26 Then is a wife the fruit of wealth and glory.

27 Then should he take a young wife and a fair,

28 On whom he may beget himself an heir,

29 And lead his life in joy and in solace,

30 Whereas these bachelors do but sing Alas!'

31 When they fall into some adversity

32 In love, which is but childish vanity.

33 And truly, it is well that it is so

34 That bachelors have often pain and woe;

35 On shifting ground they build, and shiftiness

36 They find when they suppose they've certainness.

37 They live but as a bird does, or a beast,

38 In liberty and under no arrest,

39 Whereas a wedded man in his high state

40 Lives a life blissful, ordered, moderate,

41 Under the yoke of happy marriage bound;

42 Well may his heart in joy and bliss abound.

43 For who can be so docile as a wife?

44 Who is so true as she whose aim in life

45 Is comfort for him, sick or well, to make?

46 For weal or woe she will not him forsake.

47 She's ne'er too tired to love and serve, say I,

48 Though he may lie bedridden till he die.

49 And yet some writers say it is not so,

50 And Theophrastus is one such, I know.

51 What odds though Theophrastus chose to lie?

52 Take not a wife, said he, for husbandry,

53 If you would spare in household your expense;

54 A faithful servant does more diligence

55 To keep your goods than your own wedded wife.

56 For she will claim a half part all her life;

57 And if you should be sick, so God me save,

58 Your true friends or an honest serving knave

59 Will keep you better than she that waits, I say,

60 After your wealth, and has done, many a day.

61 And if you take a wife to have and hold,

62 Right easily may you become cuckold.

63 This judgment and a hundred such things worse

64 Did this man write, may God his dead bones curse!

65 But take no heed of all such vanity.

66 Defy old Theophrastus and hear me.

67 A wife is God's own gift, aye verily;

68 All other kinds of gifts, most certainly,

69 As lands, rents, pasture, rights in common land,

70 Or moveables, in gift of Fortune stand,

71 And pass away like shadows on the wall.

72 But, without doubt, if plainly speak I shall,

73 A wife will last, and in your house endure

74 Longer than you would like, peradventure.

75 But marriage is a solemn sacrament;

76 Who has no wife I hold on ruin bent;

77 He lives in helplessness, all desolate,

78 I speak of folk in secular estate.

79 And hearken why, I say not this for naught:

80 It's because woman was for man's help wrought.

81 The High God, when He'd Adam made, all rude,

82 And saw him so alone and belly-nude,

83 God of His goodness thus to speak began:

84 Let us now make a help meet for this man,

85 Like to himself. And then he made him Eve.

86 Here may you see, and here prove, I believe,

87 A wife is a man's help and his comfort,

88 His earthly paradise and means of sport;

89 So docile and so virtuous is she

90 That they must needs live in all harmony.

91 One flesh they are, and one flesh, as I guess,

92 Has but one heart in weal and in distress.

93 A wife! Ah, Holy Mary, ben'cite!

94 How may a man have any adversity

95 Who has a wife? Truly, I cannot say.

96 The bliss that is between such two, for aye,

97 No tongue can tell, nor any heart can think.

98 If he be poor, why, she helps him to swink;

99 She keeps his money and never wastes a deal;

100 All that her husband wishes she likes well;

101 She never once says nay when he says yea.

102 Do this, says he; All ready, sir, she'll say.

103 O blissful state of wedlock, prized and dear,

104 So pleasant and so full of virtue clear,

105 So much approved and praised as fortune's peak,

106 That every man who holds him worth a leek

107 Upon his bare knees ought, through all his life,

108 To give God thanks, Who's sent to him a wife;

109 Or else he should pray God that He will send

110 A wife to him, to last till his life's end.

111 For then his life is set in certainness;

112 He cannot be deceived, as I may guess,

113 So that he act according as she's said;

114 Then may he boldly carry high his head,

115 They are so true and therewithal so wise;

116 Wherefore, if you will do as do the wise,

117 Then aye as women counsel be your deed.

118 Lo, how young Jacob, as these clerics read,

119 About his hairless neck a kid's skin bound,

120 A trick that Dame Rebecca for him found,

121 By which his father's benison he won.

122 Lo, Judith, as the ancient stories run,

123 By her wise counsel she God's people kept,

124 And Holofernes slew, while yet he slept.

125 Lo, Abigail, by good advice how she

126 Did save her husband, Nabal, when that he

127 Should have been slain; and lo, Esther also

128 By good advice delivered out of woe

129 The people of God and got him, Mordecai,

130 By King Ahasuerus lifted high.

131 There is no pleasure so superlative

132 (Says Seneca) as a humble wife can give.

133 Suffer your wife's tongue, Cato bids, as fit;

134 She shall command, and you shall suffer it;

135 And yet she will obey, of courtesy.

136 A wife is keeper of your husbandry;

137 Well may the sick man wail and even weep

138 Who has no wife the house to clean and keep.

139 I warn you now, if wisely you would work,

140 Love well your wife, as Jesus loves His Kirk.

141 For if you love yourself, you love your wife;

142 No man hates his own flesh, but through his life

143 He fosters it, and so I bid you strive

144 To cherish her, or you shall never thrive.

145 Husband and wife, despite men's jape or play,

146 Of all the world's folk hold the safest way;

147 They are so knit there may no harm betide,

148 Especially upon the good wife's side.

149 For which this January, of whom I told,

150 Did well consider in his days grown old,

151 The pleasant life, the virtuous rest complete

152 That are in marriage, always honey-sweet;

153 And for his friends upon a day he sent

154 To tell them the effect of his intent.

155 With sober face his tale to them he's told;

156 He said to them: My friends, I'm hoar and old,

157 And almost, God knows, come to my grave's brink;

158 About my soul, now, somewhat must I think.

159 I have my body foolishly expended;

160 Blessed be God, that thing be amended!

161 For I will be, truly, a wedded man,

162 And that anon, in all the haste I can,

163 Unto some maiden young in age and fair.

164 I pray you for my marriage all prepare,

165 And do so now, for I will not abide;

166 And I will try to find one, on my side,

167 To whom I may be wedded speedily.

168 But for as much as you are more than I,

169 It's better that you have the thing in mind

170 And try a proper mate for me to find.

171 But of one thing I warn you, my friends dear,

172 I will not have an old wife coming here.

173 She shan't have more than twenty years, that's plain;

174 Of old fish and young flesh I am full fain.

175 Better, said he, a pike than pickerel;

176 And better than old beef is tender veal.

177 I'll have no woman thirty years of age,

178 It is but bean-straw and such rough forage.

179 And these old widows, God knows that, afloat,

180 They know so much of spells when on Wade's boat,

181 And do such petty harm, when they think best,

182 That with one should I never live at rest.

183 For several schools can make men clever clerks;

184 Woman in many schools learns clever works.

185 But certainly a young thing men may guide,

186 Just as warm wax may with one's hands be plied.

187 Wherefore I tell you plainly, in a clause,

188 I will not have an old wife, for that cause.

189 For if it chanced I made that sad mistake

190 And never in her could my pleasure take,

191 My life I'd lead then in adultery

192 And go straight to the devil when I die.

193 No children should I then on her beget;

194 Yet would I rather hounds my flesh should fret

195 Than that my heritage descend and fall

196 Into strange hands, and this I tell you all.

197 I dote not, and I know the reason why

198 A man should marry, and furthermore know I

199 There speaks full many a man of all marriage

200 Who knows no more of it than knows my page,

201 Nor for what reasons man should take a wife.

202 If one may not live chastely all his life,

203 Let him take wife whose quality he's known

204 For lawful procreation of his own

205 Blood children, to the honour of God above,

206 And not alone for passion or for love;

207 And because lechery they should eschew

208 And do their family duty when it's due;

209 Or because each of them should help the other

210 In trouble, as a sister shall a brother;

211 And live in chastity full decently.

212 But, sirs, and by your leave, that is not I.

213 For, God be thanked, I dare to make a vaunt,

214 I feel my limbs are strong and fit to jaunt

215 In doing all man's are expected to;

216 I know myself and know what I can do.

217 Though I am hoar, I fare as does a tree

218 That blossoms ere the fruit be grown; you see

219 A blooming tree is neither dry nor dead.

220 And I feel nowhere hoary but on head;

221 My heart and all my limbs are still as green

222 As laurel through the year is to be seen.

223 And now that you have heard all my intent,

224 I pray that to my wish you will assent.

225 Then divers men to him diversely told,

226 Of marriage, many an instance known of old.

227 Some blamed it and some praised it, that's certain,

228 But at the last, and briefly to make plain,

229 Since altercation follows soon or late

230 When friends begin such matters to debate,

231 There fell a strife between his brothers two,

232 Whereof the name of one was Placebo

233 And verily Justinus was that other.

234 Placebo said: O January, brother,

235 Full little need had you, my lord so dear,

236 Counsel to ask of anyone that's here;

237 Save that you are so full of sapience

238 That you like not, what of your high prudence,

239 To vary from the word of Solomon.

240 This word said he to each and every one:

241 'Do everything by counsel,' thus said he,

242 'And then thou hast no cause to repent thee.'

243 But although Solomon spoke such a word,

244 My own dear brother and my proper lord,

245 So truly may God bring my soul to rest

246 As I hold your own counsel is the best.

247 For, brother mine, of me take this one word,

248 I've been a courtier all my days, my lord.

249 And God knows well, though I unworthy be

250 I have stood well, and in full great degree,

251 With many lords of very high estate;

252 Yet ne'er with one of them had I debate.

253 I never contradicted, certainly;

254 I know well that my lord knows more than I.

255 Whate'er he says, I hold it firm and stable;

256 I say the same, or nearly as I'm able.

257 A full great fool is any Councillor

258 That serves a lord of any high honour

259 And dares presume to say, or else think it,

260 His counsel can surpass his lordship's wit.

261 Nay, lords are never fools, nay, by my fay;

262 You have yourself, sir, showed, and here today,

263 With such good sense and piety withal

264 That I assent to and confirm it all,

265 The words and the opinions you have shown.

266 By God, there is no man in all this town,

267 Or Italy, it better could have phrased;

268 And Christ Himself your counsel would have praised

269 And truthfully, it argues high courage

270 In any man that is advanced in age

271 To take a young wife; by my father's kin,

272 A merry heart you've got beneath your skin?

273 Do in this matter at your own behest,

274 For, finally, I hold that for the best.

275 Justinus, who sat still and calm, and heard,

276 Right in this wise Placebo he answered:

277 Now, brother mine, be patient, so I pray;

278 Since you have spoken, hear what I shall say.

279 For Seneca, among his words so wise,

280 Says that a man ought well himself advise

281 To whom he'll give his chattels or his land.

282 And since I ought to know just where I stand

283 Before I give my wealth away from me,

284 How much more well advised I ought to be

285 To whom I give my body; for alway

286 I warn you well, that it is not child's play

287 To take a wife without much advisement.

288 Men must inquire, and this is my intent,

289 Whether she's wise, or sober, or drunkard,

290 Or proud, or else in other things froward,

291 Or shrewish, or a waster of what's had,

292 Or rich, or poor, or whether she's man-mad.

293 And be it true that no man finds, or shall,

294 One in this world that perfect is in all,

295 Of man or beast, such as men could devise;

296 Nevertheless, it ought enough suffice

297 With any wife, if so were that she had

298 More traits of virtue that her vices bad;

299 And all this leisure asks to see and hear.

300 For God knows I have wept full many a tear

301 In privity, since I have had a wife.

302 Praise whoso will a wedded man's good life,

303 Truly I find in it, but cost and care

304 And many duties, of all blisses bare.

305 And yet, God knows, my neighbours round about,

306 Especially the women, many a rout,

307 Say that I've married the most steadfast wife,

308 Aye, and the meekest one there is in life.

309 But I know best where pinches me my shoe.

310 You may, for me, do as you please to do;

311 But take good heed, since you're a man of age,

312 How you shall enter into a marriage,

313 Especially with a young wife and a fair.

314 By Him Who made the water, earth, and air,

315 The youngest man there is in all this rout

316 Is busy enough to bring the thing about

317 That he alone shall have his wife, trust me.

318 You'll not be able to please her through years three,

319 That is to say, to give all she desires.

320 A wife attention all the while requires.

321 I pray you that you be not offended.

322 Well? asked this January, And have you said?

323 A straw for Seneca and your proverbs!

324 I value not a basketful of herbs

325 Your schoolmen's terms; for wiser men than you,

326 As you have heard, assent and bid me do

327 My purpose now. Placebo, what say ye?

328 I say it is a wicked man, said he,

329 That hinders matrimony, certainly.

330 And with that word they rose up, suddenly,

331 Having assented fully that he should

332 Be wedded when he pleased and where he would.

333 Imagination and his eagerness

334 Did in the soul of January press

335 As he considered marriage for a space.

336 Many fair shapes and many a lovely face

337 Passed through his amorous fancy, night by night.

338 As who might take mirror polished bright

339 And set it in the common market-place

340 And then should see full many a figure pace

341 Within the mirror; just in that same wise

342 Did January within his thought surmise

343 Of maidens whom he dwelt in town beside.

344 He knew not where his fancy might abide.

345 For if the one have beauty of her face,

346 Another stands so in the people's grace

347 For soberness and for benignity,

348 That all the people's choice she seems to be;

349 And some were rich and had an evil name.

350 Nevertheless, half earnest, half in game,

351 He fixed at last upon a certain one

352 And let all others from his heart be gone,

353 And chose her on his own authority;

354 For love is always blind and cannot see.

355 And when in bed at night, why then he wrought

356 To portray, in his heart and in his thought,

357 Her beauty fresh and her young age, so tender,

358 Her middle small, her two arms long and slender,

359 Her management full wise, her gentleness,

360 Her womanly bearing, and her seriousness.

361 And when to her at last his choice descended,

362 He thought that choice might never be amended.

363 For when he had concluded thus, egad,

364 He thought that other men had wits so bad

365 It were impossible to make reply

366 Against his choice, this was his fantasy.

367 His friends he sent to, at his own instance,

368 And prayed them give him, in this wise, pleasance,

369 That speedily they would set forth and come:

370 He would abridge their labour, all and some.

371 He need not more to walk about or ride,

372 For he'd determined where he would abide.

373 Placebo came, and all his friends came soon,

374 And first of all he asked of them the boon

375 That none of them an argument should make

376 Against the course he fully meant to take;

377 Which purpose pleasing is to God, said he,

378 And the true ground of my felicity.

379 He said there was a maiden in the town

380 Who had for beauty come to great renown,

381 Despite the fact she was of small degree;

382 Sufficed him well her youth and her beauty.

383 Which maid, he said, he wanted for his wife,

384 To lead in ease and decency his life.

385 And he thanked God that he might have her, all,

386 That none partook of his bliss now, nor shall.

387 And prayed them all to labour in this need

388 And so arrange that he'd fail not, indeed;

389 For then, he said, his soul should be at case.

390 And then, said he, there's naught can me displease,

391 Save one lone thing that sticks in my conscience,

392 The which I will recite in your presence.

393 I have, said he, heard said, and long ago,

394 There may no man have perfect blisses two,

395 That is to say, on earth and then in Heaven.

396 For though he keep from sins the deadly seven,

397 And, too, from every branch of that same tree,

398 Yet is there so complete felicity

399 And such great pleasure in the married state

400 That I am fearful, since it comes so late,

401 That I shall lead so merry and fine a life,

402 And so delicious, without woe and strife,

403 That I shall have my heaven on earth here.

404 For since that other Heaven is bought so dear,

405 With tribulation and with great penance,

406 How should I then, who live in such pleasance,

407 As all these wedded men do with their wives,

408 Come to the bliss where Christ Eternal lives?

409 This is my fear, and you, my brothers, pray

410 Resolve for me this problem now, I say.

411 Justinus, who so hated this folly,

412 Answered anon in jesting wise and free;

413 And since he would his longish tale abridge,

414 He would no old authority allege,

415 But said: Sir, so there is no obstacle

416 Other than this, God, of high miracle

417 And of His mercy, may so for you work

418 That, ere you have your right of Holy Kirk,

419 You'll change your mind on wedded husband's life,

420 Wherein you say there is no woe or strife.

421 And otherwise, God grant that there be sent

422 To wedded man the fair grace to repent

423 Often, and sooner than a single man!

424 And therefore, sir, this is the best I can:

425 Despair not, but retain in memory,

426 Perhaps she may your purgatory be!

427 She may be God's tool, she may be God's whip;

428 Then shall your spirit up to Heaven skip

429 Swifter than does an arrow from the bow!

430 I hope to God, hereafter you shall know

431 That there is none so great felicity

432 In marriage, no nor ever shall there be,

433 To keep you from salvation that's your own,

434 So that you use, with reason that's well known,

435 The charms of your wife's body temperately,

436 And that you please her not too amorously,

437 And that you keep as well from other sin.

438 My tale is done now, for my wit is thin.

439 Be not deterred hereby, my brother dear-

440 (But let us pass quite over what's said here.

441 The wife of Bath, if you have understood,

442 Has treated marriage, in its likelihood,

443 And spoken well of it in little space)-

444 Fare you well now, God have you in His grace.

445 And with that word this Justin and his brother

446 Did take their leave, and each of them from other.

447 For when they all saw that it must needs be,

448 They so arranged, by sly and wise treaty,

449 That she, this maiden, who was Maia hight,

450 As speedily indeed as ever she might,

451 Should wedded be unto this January.

452 I think it were too long a time to tarry

453 To tell of deed and bond between them, and

454 The way she was enfeoffed of all his land;

455 Or to hear tell of all her rich array.

456 But finally was come the happy day

457 When to the church together they two went,

458 There to receive the holy sacrament.

459 Forth came the priest with stole about his neck,

460 Saying of Rebecca and Sarah she should reck

461 For wisdom and for truth in her marriage;

462 And said his orisons, as is usage,

463 And crossed them, praying God that He should bless,

464 And made all tight enough with holiness.

465 Thus are they wedded with solemnity,

466 And at the feast are sitting, he and she,

467 With other worthy folk upon the dais.

468 All full of joy and bliss the palace gay is,

469 And full of instruments and viandry,

470 The daintiest in all of Italy.

471 Before them played such instruments anon

472 That Orpheus or Theban Amphion

473 Never in life made such a melody.

474 With every course there rose loud minstrelsy,

475 And never Joab sounded trump, to hear,

476 Nor did Theodomas, one half so clear

477 At Thebes, while yet the city hung in doubt.

478 Bacchus the wine poured out for all about,

479 And Venus gaily laughed for every wight.

480 For January had become her knight,

481 And would make trial of his amorous power

482 In liberty and in the bridal bower;

483 And with her firebrand in her hand, about

484 Danced she before the bride and all the rout.

485 And certainly I dare right well say this,

486 That Hymenaeus, god of wedded bliss,

487 Ne'er saw in life so merry a married man.

488 Hold thou thy peace, thou poet Marcian

489 Who tellest how Philology was wed

490 And how with Mercury she went to bed,

491 And of the sweet songs by the Muses sung.

492 Too slight are both thy pen and thy thin tongue.

493 To show aright this wedding on thy page.

494 When tender youth has wedded stooping age,

495 There is such mirth that no one may it show;

496 Try it yourself, and then you well will know

497 Whether I lie or not in matters here.

498 Maia, she sat there with so gentle cheer,

499 To look at her it seemed like faery;

500 Queen Esther never looked with such an eye

501 Upon Ahasuerus, so meek was she.

502 I can't describe to you all her beauty;

503 But thus much of her beauty I can say,

504 That she was like the brightening morn of May,

505 Fulfilled of beauty and of all pleasance.

506 January was rapt into a trance

507 With each time that he looked upon her face;

508 And in his heart her beauty he'd embrace,

509 And threatened in his arms to hold her tight,

510 Harder than Paris Helen did, that night.

511 But nonetheless great pity, too, had he

512 Because that night she must deflowered be;

513 And thought: Alas! O tender young creature!

514 Now would God you may easily endure

515 All my desire, it is so sharp and keen.

516 I fear you can't sustain it long, my queen.

517 But God forbid that I do all I might!

518 And now would God that it were come to night,

519 And that the night would last for ever- oh,

520 I wish these people would arise and go.

521 And at the last he laboured all in all,

522 As best he might for Manners there in hall,

523 To haste them from the feast in subtle wise.

524 Time came when it was right that they should rise;

525 And after that men danced and drank right fast,

526 And spices all about the house they cast;

527 And full of bliss and joy was every man,

528 All but a squire, a youth called Damian,

529 Who'd carved before the knight full many a day.

530 He was so ravished by his Lady May

531 That for the very pain, as madman would,

532 Almost he fell down fainting where he stood.

533 So sore had Venus hurt him with her brand,

534 When she went dancing, bearing it in hand.

535 And to his bed he took him speedily;

536 No more of him just at this time say I.

537 I'll let him weep his fill, with woe complain,

538 Until fresh May have ruth upon his pain.

539 O parlous fire that in the bedstraw breeds!

540 O foe familiar that his service speeds!

541 O treacherous servant, false domestic who

542 Is most like adder in bosom, sly, untrue,

543 God shield us all from knowing aught of you!

544 O January, drunk of pleasure's brew

545 In marriage, see how now your Damian,

546 Your own trained personal squire, born your man,

547 Wishes and means to do you villainy.

548 God grant that on this household foe you'll spy!

549 For in this world no pestilence is worse

550 Than foe domestic, constantly a curse.

551 When traversed has the sun his are of day,

552 No longer may the body of him stay

553 On the horizon, in that latitude.

554 Night with his mantle, which is dark and rude,

555 Did overspread the hemisphere about;

556 And so departed had this joyous rout

557 From January, with thanks on every side.

558 Home to their houses happily they ride,

559 Whereat they do what things may please them best,

560 And when they see the time come, go to rest.

561 Soon after that this hasty January

562 Would go to bed, he would no longer tarry.

563 He drank of claret, hippocras, vernage,

564 All spiced and hot to heighten his love's rage;

565 And many an aphrodisiac, full and fine,

566 Such as the wicked monk, Dan Constantine,

567 Has written in his book De Coitu

568 Not one of all of them he did eschew.

569 And to his friends most intimate, said he:

570 For God's love, and as soon as it may be,

571 Let all now leave this house in courteous wise.

572 And all they rose, just as he bade them rise.

573 They drank good-night, and curtains drew anon;

574 The bride was brought to bed, as still as stone;

575 And when the bed had been by priest well blessed,

576 Out of the chamber everyone progressed.

577 And January lay down close beside

578 His fresh young May, his paradise, his bride.

579 He soothed her, and he kissed her much and oft,

580 With the thick bristles of his beard, not soft,

581 But sharp as briars, like a dogfish skin,

582 For he'd been badly shaved ere he came in.

583 He stroked and rubbed her on her tender face,

584 And said: Alas! I fear I'll do trespass

585 Against you here, my spouse, and much offend

586 Before the time when I will down descend.

587 But nonetheless, consider this, said he,

588 There is no workman, whosoe'er he be,

589 That may work well, if he works hastily;

590 This will be done at leisure, perfectly.

591 It makes no difference how long we two play;

592 For in true wedlock were we tied today;

593 And blessed be the yoke that we are in,

594 For in our acts, now, we can do no sin.

595 A man can do no sin with his own wife,

596 Nor can he hurt himself with his own knife;

597 For we have leave most lawfully to play.

598 Thus laboured he till came the dawn of day;

599 And then he took in wine a sop of bread,

600 And upright sat within the marriage bed,

601 And after that he sang full loud and clear

602 And kissed his wife and made much wanton cheer.

603 He was all coltish, full of venery,

604 And full of chatter as a speckled pie.

605 The slackened skin about his neck did shake

606 The while he sang and chanted like a crake.

607 But God knows what thing May thought in her heart

608 When up she saw him sitting in his shirt,

609 In his nightcap, and with his neck so lean;

610 She valued not his playing worth a bean.

611 Then said he thus: My rest now will I take;

612 Now day is come, I can no longer wake.

613 And down he laid his head and slept till prime.

614 And afterward, when saw he it was time,

615 Up rose this January; but fresh May,

616 She kept her chamber until the fourth day,

617 As custom is of wives, and for the best.

618 For every worker sometime must have rest,

619 Or else for long he'll certainly not thrive,

620 That is to say, no creature that's alive,

621 Be it of fish, or bird, or beast, or man.

622 Now will I speak of woeful Damian,

623 Who languished for his love, as you shall hear;

624 I thus address him in this fashion here.

625 I say: O hapless Damian, alas!

626 Answer to my demand in this your case,

627 How shall you to your lady, lovely May,

628 Tell all your woe? She would of course say 'Nay.'

629 And if you speak, she will your state betray;

630 God be your help! I can no better say.

631 This lovesick Damian in Venus' fire

632 So burned, he almost perished for desire;

633 Which put his life in danger, I am sure;

634 Longer in this wise could he not endure;

635 But privily a pen-case did he borrow

636 And in a letter wrote he all his sorrow,

637 In form of a complaint or of a lay,

638 Unto his fair and blooming Lady May.

639 And in a purse of silk hung in his shirt,

640 He put the poem and laid it next his heart.

641 The moon, which was at noon of that same day

642 Whereon this January wedded May

643 Half way through Taurus, had to Cancer glided,

644 So long had Maia in her chamber bided.

645 As is the custom among nobles all.

646 A bride shall not eat in the common hall

647 Until four days, or three days at the least,

648 Have fully passed; then let her go to feast.

649 On the fourth day, complete from noon to noon,

650 After the high Mass had been said and done,

651 In hall did January sit with May

652 As fresh as is the fair bright summer day.

653 And so befell it there that this good man

654 Recalled to mind his squire, this Damian,

655 And said: Why holy Mary! How can it be

656 That Damian attends not here on me?

657 Is he sick always? How may this betide?

658 His other squires, who waited there beside,

659 Made the excuse that he indeed was ill,

660 Which kept him from his proper duties still;

661 There was no other cause could make him tarry.

662 That is a pity, said this January,

663 He is a gentle squire, aye, by my truth!

664 If he should die, it were great harm and ruth;

665 As wise and secret, and discreet is he

666 As any man I know of his degree;

667 Therewith he's manly and he's serviceable,

668 And to become a useful man right able.

669 But after meat, as soon as ever I may,

670 I will myself go visit him, with May,

671 To give him all the comfort that I can.

672 And for that word they blessed him, every man,

673 Because, for goodness and his gentleness,

674 He would so go to comfort, in sickness,

675 His suffering squire, for 'twas a gentle deed.

676 Dame, said this January, take good heed

677 That after meat, you, with your women all,

678 When you have gone to chamber from this hall,

679 That all you go to see this Damian;

680 Cheer him a bit, for he's a gentleman;

681 And tell him that I'll come to visit him

682 After I've rested- a short interim;

683 And get this over quickly, for I'll bide

684 Awake until you sleep there at my side.

685 And with that word he raised his voice to call

686 A squire, who served as marshal of his hall,

687 And certain things he wished arranged were told.

688 This lovely May then did her straight way hold,

689 With all her women, unto Damian.

690 Down by his bed she sat, and so began

691 To comfort him with kindly word and glance.

692 This Damian, when once he'd found his chance,

693 In secret wise his purse and letter, too,

694 Wherein he'd said what he aspired to,

695 He put into her hand, with nothing more,

696 Save that he heaved a sigh both deep and sore,

697 And softly to her in this wise said he:

698 Oh, mercy! Don't, I beg you, tell on me;

699 For I'm but dead if this thing be made known.

700 This purse she hid in bosom of her gown

701 And went her way; you get no more of me.

702 But unto January then came she,

703 Who on his bedside sat in mood full soft.

704 He took her in his arms and kissed her oft,

705 And laid him down to sleep, and that anon.

706 And she pretended that she must be gone

707 Where you know well that everyone has need.

708 And when she of this note had taken heed,

709 She tore it all to fragments at the last

710 And down the privy quietly it cast.

711 Who's in brown study now but fair fresh May?

712 Down by old January's side she lay,

713 Who slept, until the cough awakened him;

714 He prayed her strip all naked for his whim;

715 He would have pleasure of her, so he said,

716 And clothes were an incumbrance when in bed,

717 And she obeyed him, whether lief or loath.

718 But lest these precious folk be with me wroth,

719 How there he worked, I dare not to you tell;

720 Nor whether she thought it paradise or hell;

721 But there I leave them working in their wise

722 Till vespers rang and they must needs arise.

723 Were it by destiny or merely chance,

724 By nature or some other circumstance,

725 Or constellation's sign, that in such state

726 The heavens stood, the time was fortunate

727 To make request concerning Venus' works

728 (For there's a time for all things, say these clerks)

729 To any woman, to procure her love,

730 I cannot say; but the great God above,

731 Who knows there's no effect without a cause,

732 He may judge all, for here my voice withdraws.

733 But true it is that this fair blooming May

734 Was so affected and impressed that day

735 For pity of this lovesick Damian,

736 That from her heart she could not drive or ban

737 Remembrance of her wish to give him ease.

738 Certainly, thought she, whom this may displease

739 I do not care, for I'd assure him now

740 Him with my love I'd willingly endow,

741 Though he'd no more of riches than his shirt.

742 Lo, pity soon wells up in gentle heart.

743 Here may you see what generosity

744 In women is when they advise closely.

745 Perhaps some tyrant (for there's many a one)

746 Who has a heart as hard as any stone,

747 Would well have let him die within that place

748 Much rather than have granted him her grace;

749 And such would have rejoiced in cruel pride,

750 Nor cared that she were thus a homicide.

751 This gentle May, fulfilled of all pity,

752 With her own hand a letter then wrote she

753 In which she granted him her utmost grace;

754 There was naught lacking now, save time and place

755 Wherein she might suffice to ease his lust:

756 For all should be as he would have it, just;

757 And when she'd opportunity on a day,

758 To visit Damian went this lovely May,

759 And cleverly this letter she thrust close

760 Under his pillow, read it if he chose.

761 She took him by the hand and hard did press,

762 So secretly that no one else could guess,

763 And bade him gain his health, and forth she went

764 To January, when for her he sent.

765 Up rose this Damian upon the morrow,

766 For gone was all his sickness and his sorrow.

767 He combed himself and preened his feathers smooth,

768 He did all that his lady liked, in sooth;

769 And then to January went as low

770 As ever did a hound trained to the bow.

771 He was so pleasant unto every man

772 (For craft is everything for those who can),

773 That everyone was fain to speak his good;

774 And fully in his lady's grace he stood.

775 Thus Damian I leave about his need

776 And forward in my tale I will proceed.

777 Some writers hold that all felicity

778 Stands in delight, and therefor, certainly,

779 This noble January, with all his might,

780 Honourably, as does befit a knight,

781 Arranged affairs to live deliciously.

782 His housing, his array, as splendidly

783 Befitted his condition as a king's.

784 Among the rest of his luxurious things

785 He built a garden walled about with stone;

786 So fair a garden do I know of none.

787 For, without doubt, I verily suppose

788 That he who wrote The Romance of the Rose

789 Could not its beauty say in singing wise;

790 Nor could Priapus' power quite suffice,

791 Though he is god of gardens all, to tell

792 The beauty of that garden, and the well

793 Which was beneath the laurel always green.

794 For oftentimes God Pluto and his queen,

795 Fair Proserpine and all her faery

796 Disported there and made sweet melody

797 About that well, and danced there, as men told.

798 This noble knight, this January old,

799 Such pleasure had therein to walk and play,

800 That none he'd suffer bear the key, they say.

801 Save he himself; for of the little wicket

802 He carried always the small silver clicket

803 With which, as pleased him, he'd unlock the gate.

804 And when he chose to pay court to his mate

805 In summer season, thither would he go

806 With May, his wife, and no one but they two;

807 And divers things that were not done abed,

808 Within that garden there were done, 'tis said.

809 And in this manner many a merry day

810 Lived this old January and young May.

811 But worldly pleasure cannot always stay,

812 And January's joy must pass away.

813 O sudden chance, O Fortune, thou unstable,

814 Like to the scorpion so deceptive, able

815 To flatter with thy mouth when thou wilt sting;

816 Thy tail is death, through thine envenoming.

817 O fragile joy! O poison sweetly taint!

818 O monster that so cleverly canst paint

819 Thy gifts in all the hues of steadfastness

820 That thou deceivest both the great and less!

821 Why hast thou January thus deceived,

822 That had'st him for thine own full friend received?

823 And now thou hast bereft him of his eyes,

824 For sorrow of which in love he daily dies.

825 Alas! This noble January free,

826 In all his pleasure and prosperity,

827 Is fallen blind, and that all suddenly.

828 He wept and he lamented, pitifully;

829 And therewithal the fire of jealousy

830 Lest that his wife should fall to some folly,

831 So burned within his heart that he would fain

832 Both him and her some man had swiftly slain.

833 For neither after death nor in his life

834 Would he that she were other's love or wife,

835 But dress in black and live in widow's state,

836 Lone as the turtle-dove that's lost her mate.

837 But finally, after a month or twain,

838 His grief somewhat abated, to speak plain;

839 For when he knew it might not elsewise be,

840 He took in patience his adversity,

841 Save, doubtless, he could not renounce, as done,

842 His jealousy, from which he never won.

843 For this his passion was so outrageous

844 That neither in his hall nor other house

845 Nor any other place, not ever, no,

846 He suffered her to ride or walking go,

847 Unless he had his hand on her alway;

848 For which did often weep this fresh young May,

849 Who loved her Damian so tenderly

850 That she must either swiftly die or she

851 Must have him as she willed, her thirst to slake;

852 Biding her time, she thought her heart would break.

853 And on the other side this Damian

854 Was now become the most disconsolate man

855 That ever was; for neither night nor day

856 Might he so much as speak a word to May

857 Of his desire, as I am telling here,

858 Save it were said to January's ear,

859 Who never took his blind hand off her, no.

860 Nevertheless, by writing to and fro

861 And secret signals, he knew what she meant;

862 And she too knew the aim of his intent.

863 O January, what might it now avail

864 Could your eyes see as far as ships can sail?

865 For it's as pleasant, blind, deceived to be

866 As be deceived while yet a man may see.

867 Lo, Argus, who was called the hundred-eyed,

868 No matter how he peered and watched and pried,

869 He was deceived; and God knows others to

870 Who think, and firmly, that it is not so.

871 Oblivion is peace; I say no more.

872 This lovely May, of whom I spoke before,

873 In warm wax made impression of the key

874 Her husband carried, to the gate where he

875 In entering his garden often went.

876 And Damian, who knew all her intent,

877 The key did counterfeit, and privately;

878 There is no more to say, but speedily

879 Some mischief of this latch-key shall betide,

880 Which you shall hear, if you but time will bide.

881 O noble Ovid, truth you say, God wot!

882 What art is there, though it be long and hot,

883 But Love will find it somehow suits his turn?

884 By Pyramus and Thisbe may men learn;

885 Though they were strictly kept apart in all,

886 They soon accorded, whispering through a wall,

887 Where none could have suspected any gate.

888 But now to purpose: ere had passed: days eight,

889 And ere the first day of July, befell

890 That January was under such a spell,

891 Through egging of his wife, to go and play

892 Within his garden, and no one but they,

893 That on a morning to this May said he:

894 Rise up, my wife, my love, my lady free;

895 The turtle's voice is heard, my dove so sweet;

896 The winter's past, the rain's gone, and the sleet;

897 Come forth now with your two eyes columbine!

898 How sweeter are your breasts than is sweet wine!

899 The garden is enclosed and walled about;

900 Come forth, my white spouse, for beyond all doubt

901 You have me ravished in my heart, O wife!

902 No fault have I found in you in my life.

903 Come forth, come forth, and let us take our sport;

904 I chose you for my wife and my comfort.

905 Such were the lewd old words that then used he;

906 To Damian a secret sign made she

907 That he should go before them with his clicket;

908 This Damian then opened up the wicket,

909 And in he slipped, and that in manner such

910 That none could see nor hear; and he did crouch

911 And still he sat beneath a bush anon.

912 This January, blind as is a stone,

913 With Maia's hand in his, and none else there,

914 Into his garden went, so fresh and fair,

915 And then clapped to the wicket suddenly.

916 Now, wife, said he, here's none but you and I,

917 And you're the one of all that I best love.

918 For by that Lord Who sits in Heaven above,

919 Far rather would I die upon a knife

920 Than do offence to you, my true, dear wife!

921 For God's sake how I did choose you out,

922 And for no love of money, beyond doubt,

923 But only for the love you roused in me.

924 And though I am grown old and cannot see,

925 Be true to me, and I will tell you why.

926 Three things, it's certain, shall you gain thereby;

927 First, Christ's dear love, and honour of your own,

928 And all my heritage of tower and town;

929 I give it you, draw deeds to please you, pet;

930 This shall be done tomorrow ere sunset.

931 So truly may God bring my soul to bliss,

932 I pray you first, in covenant, that we kiss.

933 And though I'm jealous, yet reproach me not.

934 You are so deeply printed in my thought

935 That, when I do consider your beauty

936 And therewith all the unlovely age of me,

937 I cannot, truly, nay, though I should die,'

938 Abstain from being in your company,

939 For utter love; of this there is no doubt.

940 Now kiss me, wife, and let us walk about.

941 This blooming May, when these words she had heard,

942 Graciously January she answered,

943 But first and foremost she began to weep.

944 I have also, said she, a soul to keep,

945 As well as you, and also honour mine,

946 And of my wifehood that sweet flower divine

947 Which I assured you of, both safe and sound,

948 When unto you that priest my body bound;

949 Wherefore I'll answer you in this manner,

950 If I may by your leave, my lord so dear.

951 I pray to God that never dawns the day

952 That I'll not die, foully as woman may,

953 If ever I do unto my kin such shame,

954 And likewise damage so my own fair name,

955 As to be false; and if I grow so slack,

956 Strip me and put me naked in a sack

957 And in the nearest river let me drown.

958 I am a lady, not a wench of town.

959 Why speak you thus? Men ever are untrue,

960 And woman have reproaches always new.

961 No reason or excuse have you, I think,

962 And so you harp on women who hoodwink.

963 And with that word she saw where Damian

964 Sat under bush; to cough then she began,

965 And with her slender finger signs made she

966 That Damian should climb into a tree

967 That burdened was with fruit, and up he went;

968 For verily he knew her full intent,

969 And understood each sign that she could make,

970 Better than January, her old rake.

971 For in a letter she had told him all

972 Of how he should proceed when time should fall.

973 And thus I leave him in the pear-tree still

974 While May and January roam at will.

975 Bright was the day and blue the firmament,

976 Phoebus his golden streamers down has sent

977 To gladden every flower with his warmness.

978 He was that time in Gemini, I guess,

979 And but a little from his declination

980 Of Cancer, which is great Jove's exaltation.

981 And so befell, in that bright morning-tide,

982 That in this garden, on the farther side,

983 Pluto, who is the king of Faery,

984 With many a lady in his company,

985 Following his wife, the fair Queen Proserpine,

986 Each after other, straight as any line

987 (While she was gathering flowers on a mead,

988 In Claudian you may the story read

989 How in his grim car he had stolen her)-

990 This king of Faery sat down yonder

991 Upon a turfen bank all fresh and green,

992 And right anon thus said he to his queen.

993 My wife, said he, there may no one say nay;

994 Experience proves fully every day

995 The treason that these women do to man.

996 Ten hundred thousand stories tell I can

997 To show your fickleness and lies. Of which,

998 O Solomon wise, and richest of the rich,

999 Fulfilled of sapience and worldly glory,

1000 Well worth remembrance are thy words and story

1001 By everyone who's wit, and reason can.

1002 Thus goodness he expounds with praise of man:

1003 'Among a thousand men yet found I one,

1004 But of all women living found I none.'

1005 Thus spoke the king that knew your wickedness;

1006 And Jesus son of Sirach, as I guess,

1007 Spoke of you seldom with much reverence.

1008 A wild-fire and a rotten pestilence

1009 Fall on your bodies all before tonight!

1010 Do you not see this honourable knight,

1011 Because, alas! he is both blind and old,

1012 His own sworn man shall make him a cuckold;

1013 Lo, there he sits, the lecher, in that tree.

1014 Now will I grant, of my high majesty,

1015 Unto this old and blind and worthy knight,

1016 That he shall have again his two eyes' sight,

1017 Just when his wife shall do him villainy;

1018 Then shall he know of all her harlotry,

1019 Both in reproach to her and others too.

1020 You shall, said Proserpine, if will you so;

1021 Now by my mother's father's soul, I swear

1022 That I will give her adequate answer,

1023 And all such women after, for her sake;

1024 That, though in any guilt caught, they'll not quake,

1025 But with a bold face they'll themselves excuse,

1026 And bear him down who would them thus accuse.

1027 For lack of answer none of them shall die.

1028 Nay, though a man see things with either eye,

1029 Yet shall we women brazen shamelessly

1030 And weep and swear and wrangle cleverly,

1031 So that you men shall stupid be as geese.

1032 What do I care for your authorities?

1033 I know well that this Jew, this Solomon

1034 Found fools among us women, many a one,

1035 But though he never found a good woman,

1036 Yet has there found full many another man

1037 Women right true, right good, and virtuous

1038 Witness all those that dwell in Jesus' house;

1039 With martyrdom they proved their constancy.

1040 The Gesta Romanorum speak kindly

1041 Of many wives both good and true also.

1042 But be not angry, sir, though it be so

1043 That he said he had found no good woman,

1044 I pray you take the meaning of the man;

1045 He meant that sovereign goodness cannot be.

1046 Except in God, Who is the Trinity.

1047 Ah, since of very God there is but one,

1048 Why do you make so much of Solomon?

1049 What though he built a temple for God's house?

1050 What though he were both rich and glorious?

1051 So built he, too, a temple to false gods,

1052 How could he with the Law be more at odds?

1053 By gad, clean as his name you whitewash, sir,

1054 He was a lecher and idolater;

1055 And in old age the True God he forsook.

1056 And if that God had not, as says the Book,

1057 Spared him for father David's sake, he should

1058 Have lost his kingdom sooner than he would.

1059 I value not, of all the villainy

1060 That you of women write, a butterfly.

1061 I am a woman, and needs must I speak,

1062 Or else swell up until my heart shall break.

1063 For since he said we gossip, rail, and scold,

1064 As ever may I my fair tresses hold,

1065 I will not spare, for any courtesy,

1066 To speak him ill who'd wish us villainy.

1067 Dame, said this Pluto, be no longer wroth;

1068 I give it up; but since I swore my oath

1069 That I would give to him his sight again,

1070 My word shall stand, I warn you that's certain.

1071 I am a king, it suits me not to lie.

1072 And I, said she, am queen of Faery.

1073 Her answer shall she have, I undertake;

1074 No further talk hereof let us two make.

1075 Forsooth, I will not longer be contrary.

1076 Now let us turn again to January,

1077 Who in the garden with his lovely May

1078 Sang, and that merrier than the popinjay,

1079 I love you best, and ever shall, I know.

1080 And so about the alleys did he go

1081 Till he had come at last to that pear-tree

1082 Wherein this Damian sat right merrily

1083 On high, among the young leaves fresh and green.

1084 This blooming May, who was so bright of sheen,

1085 Began to sigh, and said: Alas, my side!

1086 Now, sir, said she, no matter what betide,

1087 I must have some of these pears that I see,

1088 Or I may die, so much I long, said she,

1089 To eat some of those little pears so green.

1090 Help, for Her love Who is of Heaven Queen!

1091 I tell you well, a woman in my plight

1092 May have for fruit so great an appetite

1093 That she may die if none of it she have.

1094 Alas! said he, that I had here a knave

1095 That could climb up, alas, alas! said he,

1096 That I am blind. Yea, sir, no odds, said she,

1097 If you'd but grant me, and for God's dear sake,

1098 That this pear-tree within your arms you'd take

1099 (For well I know that you do not trust me),

1100 Then I could climb up well enough, said she,

1101 So I my foot might set upon your back.

1102 Surely, said he, thereof should be no lack,

1103 Might I so help you with my own heart's blood.

1104 So he stooped down, and on his back she stood,

1105 And gave herself a twist and up went she.

1106 Ladies, I pray you be not wroth with me;

1107 I cannot gloze, I'm an uncultured man.

1108 For of a sudden this said Damian

1109 Pulled up her smock and thrust both deep and long.

1110 And when King Pluto saw this awful wrong,

1111 To January he gave again his sight,

1112 And made him see as well as ever he might.

1113 And when he thus had got his sight again,

1114 Never was man of anything so fain.

1115 But since his wife he thought of first and last,

1116 Up to the tree his eyes he quickly cast,

1117 And saw how Damian his wife had dressed

1118 In such a way as cannot be expressed,

1119 Save I should rudely speak and vulgarly:

1120 And such a bellowing clamour then raised he

1121 As does a mother when her child must die:

1122 Out! Help! Alas! Oh, help me! he did cry,

1123 Outlandish, brazen woman, what do you do?

1124 And she replied: Why, sir, and what ails you?

1125 Have patience, and do reason in your mind

1126 That I have helped you for your two eyes blind.

1127 On peril of my soul, I tell no lies,

1128 But I was taught that to recover eyes

1129 Was nothing better, so to make you see,

1130 Than struggle with a man up in a tree.

1131 God knows I did it with a good intent.

1132 Struggle! cried he, but damme, in it went!

1133 God give you both a shameful death to die!

1134 He banged you, for I saw it with my eye,

1135 Or may they hang me by the neck up, else!

1136 Then is, said she, my medicine all false;

1137 For certainly, if you could really see,

1138 You would not say these cruel words to me;

1139 You catch but glimpses and no perfect sight.

1140 I see, said he, as well as ever I might-

1141 Thanks be to God!- and with my two eyes, too,

1142 And truth, I thought he did that thing to you.

1143 You are bewildered still, good sir, said she,

1144 Such thanks I have for causing you to see;

1145 Alas! she cried, that ever I was so kind!

1146 Now, dame, said he, put all this out of mind.

1147 Come down, my dear, and if I have missaid,

1148 God help me if I'm not put out indeed.

1149 But by my father's soul, I thought to have seen

1150 How Damian right over you did lean

1151 And that your smock was pulled up to his breast.

1152 Yes, sir, said she, you may think as seems best;

1153 But, sir, a man that wakens out of sleep,

1154 He cannot suddenly take note and keep

1155 Of any thing, or see it perfectly,

1156 Until he has recovered verily;

1157 Just so a man that blinded long has been,

1158 He cannot say that suddenly he's seen

1159 So well, at first, when sight is new to him,

1160 As later, when his sight's no longer dim.

1161 Until your sight be settled for a while,

1162 There may full many a thing your mind beguile.

1163 Beware, I pray you, for, by Heaven's King,

1164 Full many a man thinks that he sees a thing,

1165 And it is other quite than what it seems.

1166 And he that misconstrues, why, he misdeems.

1167 And with that word she leaped down from the tree.

1168 This January, who is glad but he?

1169 He kissed her and he hugged her much and oft,

1170 And on her belly stroked and rubbed her soft,

1171 And home to palace led her, let me add.

1172 And now, good men, I pray you to be glad.

1173 For here I end my tale of January;

1174 God bless us, and His Mother, Holy Mary!