

CANTERBURY TALES
THE MERCHANT'S TALE
by Geoffrey Chaucer

Once on a time there dwelt in Lombardy
One born in Pavia, a knight worthy,
And there he lived in great prosperity;
And sixty years a wifeless man was he,
And followed ever his bodily delight
In women, whereof was his appetite,
As these fool laymen will, so it appears.
And when he had so passed his sixty years,
Were it for piety or for dotage
I cannot say, but such a rapturous rage
Had this knight to become a wedded man
That day and night he did his best to scan
And spy a place where he might wedded be;
Praying Our Lord to grant to him that he
Might once know something of that blissful life
That is between a husband and his wife;
And so to live within that holy band
Wherein God first made man and woman stand.
"No other life," said he, "is worth a bean;
For wedlock is so easy and so clean
That in this world it is a paradise."
Thus said this ancient knight, who was so wise.
And certainly, as sure as God is King,
To take a wife, it is a glorious thing,
Especially when a man is old and hoary;
Then is a wife the fruit of wealth and glory.
Then should he take a young wife and a fair,
On whom he may beget himself an heir,
And lead his life in joy and in solace,
Whereas these bachelors do but sing "Alas!"
When they fall into some adversity
In love, which is but childish vanity.
And truly, it is well that it is so
That bachelors have often pain and woe;
On shifting ground they build, and shiftiness
They find when they suppose they've certainness.
They live but as a bird does, or a beast,
In liberty and under no arrest,
Whereas a wedded man in his high state
Lives a life blissful, ordered, moderate,
Under the yoke of happy marriage bound;
Well may his heart in joy and bliss abound.
For who can be so docile as a wife?
Who is so true as she whose aim in life

Is comfort for him, sick or well, to make?
 For weal or woe she will not him forsake.
 She's ne'er too tired to love and serve, say I,
 Though he may lie bedridden till he die.
 And yet some writers say it is not so,
 And Theophrastus is one such, I know.
 What odds though Theophrastus chose to lie?
 "Take not a wife," said he, "for husbandry,
 If you would spare in household your expense;
 A faithful servant does more diligence
 To keep your goods than your own wedded wife.
 For she will claim a half part all her life;
 And if you should be sick, so God me save,
 Your true friends or an honest serving knave
 Will keep you better than she that waits, I say,
 After your wealth, and has done, many a day.
 And if you take a wife to have and hold,
 Right easily may you become cuckold."
 This judgment and a hundred such things worse
 Did this man write, may God his dead bones curse!
 But take no heed of all such vanity.
 Defy old Theophrastus and hear me.
 A wife is God's own gift, aye verily;
 All other kinds of gifts, most certainly,
 As lands, rents, pasture, rights in common land,
 Or moveables, in gift of Fortune stand,
 And pass away like shadows on the wall.
 But, without doubt, if plainly speak I shall,
 A wife will last, and in your house endure
 Longer than you would like, peradventure.
 But marriage is a solemn sacrament;
 Who has no wife I hold on ruin bent;
 He lives in helplessness, all desolate,
 I speak of folk in secular estate.
 And hearken why, I say not this for naught:
 It's because woman was for man's help wrought.
 The High God, when He'd Adam made, all rude,
 And saw him so alone and belly-nude,
 God of His goodness thus to speak began:
 "Let us now make a help meet for this man,
 Like to himself." And then he made him Eve.
 Here may you see, and here prove, I believe,
 A wife is a man's help and his comfort,
 His earthly paradise and means of sport;
 So docile and so virtuous is she
 That they must needs live in all harmony.
 One flesh they are, and one flesh, as I guess,
 Has but one heart in weal and in distress.
 A wife! Ah, Holy Mary, ben'cite!

How may a man have any adversity
Who has a wife? Truly, I cannot say.
The bliss that is between such two, for aye,
No tongue can tell, nor any heart can think.
If he be poor, why, she helps him to swink;
She keeps his money and never wastes a deal;
All that her husband wishes she likes well;
She never once says "nay" when he says "yea."
"Do this," says he; "All ready, sir," she'll say.
O blissful state of wedlock, prized and dear,
So pleasant and so full of virtue clear,
So much approved and praised as fortune's peak,
That every man who holds him worth a leek
Upon his bare knees ought, through all his life,
To give God thanks, Who's sent to him a wife;
Or else he should pray God that He will send
A wife to him, to last till his life's end.
For then his life is set in certainness;
He cannot be deceived, as I may guess,
So that he act according as she's said;
Then may he boldly carry high his head,
They are so true and therewithal so wise;
Wherefore, if you will do as do the wise,
Then aye as women counsel be your deed.

Lo, how young Jacob, as these clerics read,
About his hairless neck a kid's skin bound,
A trick that Dame Rebecca for him found,
By which his father's benison he won.

Lo, Judith, as the ancient stories run,
By her wise counsel she God's people kept,
And Holofernes slew, while yet he slept.

Lo, Abigail, by good advice how she
Did save her husband, Nabal, when that he
Should have been slain; and lo, Esther also
By good advice delivered out of woe
The people of God and got him, Mordecai,
By King Ahasuerus lifted high.

There is no pleasure so superlative
(Says Seneca) as a humble wife can give.

Suffer your wife's tongue, Cato bids, as fit;
She shall command, and you shall suffer it;
And yet she will obey, of courtesy.

A wife is keeper of your husbandry;
Well may the sick man wail and even weep
Who has no wife the house to clean and keep.

I warn you now, if wisely you would work,
Love well your wife, as Jesus loves His Kirk.
For if you love yourself, you love your wife;
No man hates his own flesh, but through his life

He fosters it, and so I bid you strive
To cherish her, or you shall never thrive.
Husband and wife, despite men's jape or play,
Of all the world's folk hold the safest way;
They are so knit there may no harm betide,
Especially upon the good wife's side.
For which this January, of whom I told,
Did well consider in his days grown old,
The pleasant life, the virtuous rest complete
That are in marriage, always honey-sweet;
And for his friends upon a day he sent
To tell them the effect of his intent.

With sober face his tale to them he's told;
He said to them: "My friends, I'm hoar and old,
And almost, God knows, come to my grave's brink;
About my soul, now, somewhat must I think.
I have my body foolishly expended;
Blessed be God, that thing be amended!
For I will be, truly, a wedded man,
And that anon, in all the haste I can,
Unto some maiden young in age and fair.
I pray you for my marriage all prepare,
And do so now, for I will not abide;
And I will try to find one, on my side,
To whom I may be wedded speedily.
But for as much as you are more than I,
It's better that you have the thing in mind
And try a proper mate for me to find.

"But of one thing I warn you, my friends dear,
I will not have an old wife coming here.
She shan't have more than twenty years, that's plain;
Of old fish and young flesh I am full fain.
Better," said he, "a pike than pickerel;
And better than old beef is tender veal.
I'll have no woman thirty years of age,
It is but bean-straw and such rough forage.
And these old widows, God knows that, afloat,
They know so much of spells when on Wade's boat,
And do such petty harm, when they think best,
That with one should I never live at rest.
For several schools can make men clever clerks;
Woman in many schools learns clever works.
But certainly a young thing men may guide,
Just as warm wax may with one's hands be plied.
Wherefore I tell you plainly, in a clause,
I will not have an old wife, for that cause.
For if it chanced I made that sad mistake
And never in her could my pleasure take,
My life I'd lead then in adultery

And go straight to the devil when I die.
No children should I then on her beget;
Yet would I rather hounds my flesh should fret
Than that my heritage descend and fall
Into strange hands, and this I tell you all.
I dote not, and I know the reason why
A man should marry, and furthermore know I
There speaks full many a man of all marriage
Who knows no more of it than knows my page,
Nor for what reasons man should take a wife.
If one may not live chastely all his life,
Let him take wife whose quality he's known
For lawful procreation of his own
Blood children, to the honour of God above,
And not alone for passion or for love;
And because lechery they should eschew
And do their family duty when it's due;
Or because each of them should help the other
In trouble, as a sister shall a brother;
And live in chastity full decently.
But, sirs, and by your leave, that is not I.
For, God be thanked, I dare to make a vaunt,
I feel my limbs are strong and fit to jaunt
In doing all man's are expected to;
I know myself and know what I can do.
Though I am hoar, I fare as does a tree
That blossoms ere the fruit be grown; you see
A blooming tree is neither dry nor dead.
And I feel nowhere hoary but on head;
My heart and all my limbs are still as green
As laurel through the year is to be seen.
And now that you have heard all my intent,
I pray that to my wish you will assent."
Then divers men to him diversely told,
Of marriage, many an instance known of old.
Some blamed it and some praised it, that's certain,
But at the last, and briefly to make plain,
Since altercation follows soon or late
When friends begin such matters to debate,
There fell a strife between his brothers two,
Whereof the name of one was Placebo
And verily Justinus was that other.
Placebo said: "O January, brother,
Full little need had you, my lord so dear,
Counsel to ask of anyone that's here;
Save that you are so full of sapience
That you like not, what of your high prudence,
To vary from the word of Solomon.
This word said he to each and every one:

'Do everything by counsel,' thus said he,
'And then thou hast no cause to repent thee.'
But although Solomon spoke such a word,
My own dear brother and my proper lord,
So truly may God bring my soul to rest
As I hold your own counsel is the best.
For, brother mine, of me take this one word,
I've been a courtier all my days, my lord.
And God knows well, though I unworthy be
I have stood well, and in full great degree,
With many lords of very high estate;
Yet ne'er with one of them had I debate.
I never contradicted, certainly;
I know well that my lord knows more than I.
Whate'er he says, I hold it firm and stable;
I say the same, or nearly as I'm able.
A full great fool is any Councillor
That serves a lord of any high honour
And dares presume to say, or else think it,
His counsel can surpass his lordship's wit.
Nay, lords are never fools, nay, by my fay;
You have yourself, sir, showed, and here today,
With such good sense and piety withal
That I assent to and confirm it all,
The words and the opinions you have shown.
By God, there is no man in all this town,
Or Italy, it better could have phrased;
And Christ Himself your counsel would have praised
And truthfully, it argues high courage
In any man that is advanced in age
To take a young wife; by my father's kin,
A merry heart you've got beneath your skin?
Do in this matter at your own behest,
For, finally, I hold that for the best."

Justinus, who sat still and calm, and heard,
Right in this wise Placebo he answered:
"Now, brother mine, be patient, so I pray;
Since you have spoken, hear what I shall say.
For Seneca, among his words so wise,
Says that a man ought well himself advise
To whom he'll give his chattels or his land.
And since I ought to know just where I stand
Before I give my wealth away from me,
How much more well advised I ought to be
To whom I give my body; for alway
I warn you well, that it is not child's play
To take a wife without much advisement.
Men must inquire, and this is my intent,
Whether she's wise, or sober, or drunkard,

Or proud, or else in other things froward,
 Or shrewish, or a waster of what's had,
 Or rich, or poor, or whether she's man-mad.
 And be it true that no man finds, or shall,
 One in this world that perfect is in all,
 Of man or beast, such as men could devise;
 Nevertheless, it ought enough suffice
 With any wife, if so were that she had
 More traits of virtue than her vices bad;
 And all this leisure asks to see and hear.
 For God knows I have wept full many a tear
 In privacy, since I have had a wife.
 Praise whoso will a wedded man's good life,
 Truly I find in it, but cost and care
 And many duties, of all blisses bare.
 And yet, God knows, my neighbours round about,
 Especially the women, many a rout,
 Say that I've married the most steadfast wife,
 Aye, and the meekest one there is in life.
 But I know best where pinches me my shoe.
 You may, for me, do as you please to do;
 But take good heed, since you're a man of age,
 How you shall enter into a marriage,
 Especially with a young wife and a fair.
 By Him Who made the water, earth, and air,
 The youngest man there is in all this rout
 Is busy enough to bring the thing about
 That he alone shall have his wife, trust me.
 You'll not be able to please her through years three,
 That is to say, to give all she desires.
 A wife attention all the while requires.
 I pray you that you be not offended."
 "Well?" asked this January, "And have you said?
 A straw for Seneca and your proverbs!
 I value not a basketful of herbs
 Your schoolmen's terms; for wiser men than you,
 As you have heard, assent and bid me do
 My purpose now. Placebo, what say ye?"
 "I say it is a wicked man," said he,
 "That hinders matrimony, certainly."
 And with that word they rose up, suddenly,
 Having assented fully that he should
 Be wedded when he pleased and where he would.
 Imagination and his eagerness
 Did in the soul of January press
 As he considered marriage for a space.
 Many fair shapes and many a lovely face
 Passed through his amorous fancy, night by night.
 As who might take mirror polished bright

And set it in the common market-place
And then should see full many a figure pace
Within the mirror; just in that same wise
Did January within his thought surmise
Of maidens whom he dwelt in town beside.
He knew not where his fancy might abide.
For if the one have beauty of her face,
Another stands so in the people's grace
For soberness and for benignity,
That all the people's choice she seems to be;
And some were rich and had an evil name.
Nevertheless, half earnest, half in game,
He fixed at last upon a certain one
And let all others from his heart be gone,
And chose her on his own authority;
For love is always blind and cannot see.
And when in bed at night, why then he wrought
To portray, in his heart and in his thought,
Her beauty fresh and her young age, so tender,
Her middle small, her two arms long and slender,
Her management full wise, her gentleness,
Her womanly bearing, and her seriousness.
And when to her at last his choice descended,
He thought that choice might never be amended.
For when he had concluded thus, egad,
He thought that other men had wits so bad
It were impossible to make reply
Against his choice, this was his fantasy.
His friends he sent to, at his own instance,
And prayed them give him, in this wise, pleasance,
That speedily they would set forth and come:
He would abridge their labour, all and some.
He need not more to walk about or ride,
For he'd determined where he would abide.
Placebo came, and all his friends came soon,
And first of all he asked of them the boon
That none of them an argument should make
Against the course he fully meant to take;
"Which purpose pleasing is to God," said he,
"And the true ground of my felicity."
He said there was a maiden in the town
Who had for beauty come to great renown,
Despite the fact she was of small degree;
Sufficed him well her youth and her beauty.
Which maid, he said, he wanted for his wife,
To lead in ease and decency his life.
And he thanked God that he might have her, all,
That none partook of his bliss now, nor shall.
And prayed them all to labour in this need

And so arrange that he'd fail not, indeed;
 For then, he said, his soul should be at ease.
 "And then," said he, "there's naught can me displease,
 Save one lone thing that sticks in my conscience,
 The which I will recite in your presence.
 "I have," said he, "heard said, and long ago,
 There may no man have perfect blisses two,
 That is to say, on earth and then in Heaven.
 For though he keep from sins the deadly seven,
 And, too, from every branch of that same tree,
 Yet is there so complete felicity
 And such great pleasure in the married state
 That I am fearful, since it comes so late,
 That I shall lead so merry and fine a life,
 And so delicious, without woe and strife,
 That I shall have my heaven on earth here.
 For since that other Heaven is bought so dear,
 With tribulation and with great penance,
 How should I then, who live in such pleasance,
 As all these wedded men do with their wives,
 Come to the bliss where Christ Eternal lives?
 This is my fear, and you, my brothers, pray
 Resolve for me this problem now, I say."
 Justinus, who so hated this folly,
 Answered anon in jesting wise and free;
 And since he would his longish tale abridge,
 He would no old authority allege,
 But said: "Sir, so there is no obstacle
 Other than this, God, of high miracle
 And of His mercy, may so for you work
 That, ere you have your right of Holy Kirk,
 You'll change your mind on wedded husband's life,
 Wherein you say there is no woe or strife.
 And otherwise, God grant that there be sent
 To wedded man the fair grace to repent
 Often, and sooner than a single man!
 And therefore, sir, this is the best I can:
 Despair not, but retain in memory,
 Perhaps she may your purgatory be!
 She may be God's tool, she may be God's whip;
 Then shall your spirit up to Heaven skip
 Swifter than does an arrow from the bow!
 I hope to God, hereafter you shall know
 That there is none so great felicity
 In marriage, no nor ever shall there be,
 To keep you from salvation that's your own,
 So that you use, with reason that's well known,
 The charms of your wife's body temperately,
 And that you please her not too amorously,

And that you keep as well from other sin.
My tale is done now, for my wit is thin.
Be not deterred hereby, my brother dear"-
 (But let us pass quite over what's said here.
The wife of Bath, if you have understood,
Has treated marriage, in its likelihood,
And spoken well of it in little space)-
"Fare you well now, God have you in His grace."
 And with that word this Justin and his brother
Did take their leave, and each of them from other.
For when they all saw that it must needs be,
They so arranged, by sly and wise treaty,
That she, this maiden, who was Maia hight,
As speedily indeed as ever she might,
Should wedded be unto this January.
I think it were too long a time to tarry
To tell of deed and bond between them, and
The way she was enfeoffed of all his land;
Or to hear tell of all her rich array.
But finally was come the happy day
When to the church together they two went,
There to receive the holy sacrament.
Forth came the priest with stole about his neck,
Saying of Rebecca and Sarah she should reck
For wisdom and for truth in her marriage;
And said his orisons, as is usage,
And crossed them, praying God that He should bless,
And made all tight enough with holiness.
 Thus are they wedded with solemnity,
And at the feast are sitting, he and she,
With other worthy folk upon the dais.
All full of joy and bliss the palace gay is,
And full of instruments and viandry,
The daintiest in all of Italy.
Before them played such instruments anon
That Orpheus or Theban Amphion
Never in life made such a melody.
 With every course there rose loud minstrelsy,
And never Joab sounded trump, to hear,
Nor did Theodomas, one half so clear
At Thebes, while yet the city hung in doubt.
Bacchus the wine poured out for all about,
And Venus gaily laughed for every wight.
For January had become her knight,
And would make trial of his amorous power
In liberty and in the bridal bower;
And with her firebrand in her hand, about
Danced she before the bride and all the rout.
And certainly I dare right well say this,

That Hymenaeus, god of wedded bliss,
Ne'er saw in life so merry a married man.
Hold thou thy peace, thou poet Marcian
Who tellest how Philology was wed
And how with Mercury she went to bed,
And of the sweet songs by the Muses sung.
Too slight are both thy pen and thy thin tongue.
To show aright this wedding on thy page.
When tender youth has wedded stooping age,
There is such mirth that no one may it show;
Try it yourself, and then you well will know
Whether I lie or not in matters here.

Maia, she sat there with so gentle cheer,
To look at her it seemed like faery;
Queen Esther never looked with such an eye
Upon Ahasuerus, so meek was she.
I can't describe to you all her beauty;
But thus much of her beauty I can say,
That she was like the brightening morn of May,
Fulfilled of beauty and of all pleasance.

January was rapt into a trance
With each time that he looked upon her face;
And in his heart her beauty he'd embrace,
And threatened in his arms to hold her tight,
Harder than Paris Helen did, that night.
But nonetheless great pity, too, had he
Because that night she must deflowered be;
And thought: "Alas! O tender young creature!
Now would God you may easily endure
All my desire, it is so sharp and keen.
I fear you can't sustain it long, my queen.
But God forbid that I do all I might!
And now would God that it were come to night,
And that the night would last for ever- oh,
I wish these people would arise and go."
And at the last he laboured all in all,
As best he might for Manners there in hall,
To haste them from the feast in subtle wise.

Time came when it was right that they should rise;
And after that men danced and drank right fast,
And spices all about the house they cast;
And full of bliss and joy was every man,
All but a squire, a youth called Damian,
Who'd carved before the knight full many a day.
He was so ravished by his Lady May
That for the very pain, as madman would,
Almost he fell down fainting where he stood.
So sore had Venus hurt him with her brand,
When she went dancing, bearing it in hand.

And to his bed he took him speedily;
No more of him just at this time say I.
I'll let him weep his fill, with woe complain,
Until fresh May have ruth upon his pain.

O parlous fire that in the bedstraw breeds!
O foe familiar that his service speeds!
O treacherous servant, false domestic who
Is most like adder in bosom, sly, untrue,
God shield us all from knowing aught of you!
O January, drunk of pleasure's brew
In marriage, see how now your Damian,
Your own trained personal squire, born your man,
Wishes and means to do you villainy.
God grant that on this household foe you'll spy!
For in this world no pestilence is worse
Than foe domestic, constantly a curse.

When traversed has the sun his are of day,
No longer may the body of him stay
On the horizon, in that latitude.
Night with his mantle, which is dark and rude,
Did overspread the hemisphere about;
And so departed had this joyous rout
From January, with thanks on every side.
Home to their houses happily they ride,
Whereat they do what things may please them best,
And when they see the time come, go to rest.
Soon after that this hasty January
Would go to bed, he would no longer tarry.
He drank of claret, hippocras, vernage,
All spiced and hot to heighten his love's rage;
And many an aphrodisiac, full and fine,
Such as the wicked monk, Dan Constantine,
Has written in his book De Coitu
Not one of all of them he did eschew.
And to his friends most intimate, said he:
"For God's love, and as soon as it may be,
Let all now leave this house in courteous wise."
And all they rose, just as he bade them rise.
They drank good-night, and curtains drew anon;
The bride was brought to bed, as still as stone;
And when the bed had been by priest well blessed,
Out of the chamber everyone progressed.
And January lay down close beside
His fresh young May, his paradise, his bride.
He soothed her, and he kissed her much and oft,
With the thick bristles of his beard, not soft,
But sharp as briars, like a dogfish skin,
For he'd been badly shaved ere he came in.
He stroked and rubbed her on her tender face,

And said: "Alas! I fear I'll do trespass
 Against you here, my spouse, and much offend
 Before the time when I will down descend.
 But nonetheless, consider this," said he,
 "There is no workman, whosoe'er he be,
 That may work well, if he works hastily;
 This will be done at leisure, perfectly.
 It makes no difference how long we two play;
 For in true wedlock were we tied today;
 And blessed be the yoke that we are in,
 For in our acts, now, we can do no sin.
 A man can do no sin with his own wife,
 Nor can he hurt himself with his own knife;
 For we have leave most lawfully to play."
 Thus laboured he till came the dawn of day;
 And then he took in wine a sop of bread,
 And upright sat within the marriage bed,
 And after that he sang full loud and clear
 And kissed his wife and made much wanton cheer.
 He was all coltish, full of venery,
 And full of chatter as a speckled pie.
 The slackened skin about his neck did shake
 The while he sang and chanted like a crake.
 But God knows what thing May thought in her heart
 When up she saw him sitting in his shirt,
 In his nightcap, and with his neck so lean;
 She valued not his playing worth a bean.
 Then said he thus: "My rest now will I take;
 Now day is come, I can no longer wake."
 And down he laid his head and slept till prime.
 And afterward, when saw he it was time,
 Up rose this January; but fresh May,
 She kept her chamber until the fourth day,
 As custom is of wives, and for the best.
 For every worker sometime must have rest,
 Or else for long he'll certainly not thrive,
 That is to say, no creature that's alive,
 Be it of fish, or bird, or beast, or man.
 Now will I speak of woeful Damian,
 Who languished for his love, as you shall hear;
 I thus address him in this fashion here.
 I say: "O hapless Damian, alas!
 Answer to my demand in this your case,
 How shall you to your lady, lovely May,
 Tell all your woe? She would of course say 'Nay.'
 And if you speak, she will your state betray;
 God be your help! I can no better say."
 This lovesick Damian in Venus' fire
 So burned, he almost perished for desire;

Which put his life in danger, I am sure;
Longer in this wise could he not endure;
But privily a pen-case did he borrow
And in a letter wrote he all his sorrow,
In form of a complaint or of a lay,
Unto his fair and blooming Lady May.
And in a purse of silk hung in his shirt,
He put the poem and laid it next his heart.

The moon, which was at noon of that same day
Whereon this January wedded May
Half way through Taurus, had to Cancer glided,
So long had Maia in her chamber bided.
As is the custom among nobles all.
A bride shall not eat in the common hall
Until four days, or three days at the least,
Have fully passed; then let her go to feast.
On the fourth day, complete from noon to noon,
After the high Mass had been said and done,
In hall did January sit with May
As fresh as is the fair bright summer day.
And so befell it there that this good man
Recalled to mind his squire, this Damian,
And said: "Why holy Mary! How can it be
That Damian attends not here on me?
Is he sick always? How may this betide?"
His other squires, who waited there beside,
Made the excuse that he indeed was ill,
Which kept him from his proper duties still;
There was no other cause could make him tarry.
"That is a pity," said this January,
"He is a gentle squire, aye, by my truth!
If he should die, it were great harm and ruth;
As wise and secret, and discreet is he
As any man I know of his degree;
Therewith he's manly and he's serviceable,
And to become a useful man right able.
But after meat, as soon as ever I may,
I will myself go visit him, with May,
To give him all the comfort that I can."
And for that word they blessed him, every man,
Because, for goodness and his gentleness,
He would so go to comfort, in sickness,
His suffering squire, for 'twas a gentle deed.
"Dame," said this January, "take good heed
That after meat, you, with your women all,
When you have gone to chamber from this hall,
That all you go to see this Damian;
Cheer him a bit, for he's a gentleman;
And tell him that I'll come to visit him

After I've rested- a short interim;
And get this over quickly, for I'll bide
Awake until you sleep there at my side."

And with that word he raised his voice to call
A squire, who served as marshal of his hall,
And certain things he wished arranged were told.

This lovely May then did her straight way hold,
With all her women, unto Damian.

Down by his bed she sat, and so began
To comfort him with kindly word and glance.
This Damian, when once he'd found his chance,
In secret wise his purse and letter, too,
Wherein he'd said what he aspired to,
He put into her hand, with nothing more,
Save that he heaved a sigh both deep and sore,
And softly to her in this wise said he:

"Oh, mercy! Don't, I beg you, tell on me;
For I'm but dead if this thing be made known."

This purse she hid in bosom of her gown
And went her way; you get no more of me.
But unto January then came she,
Who on his bedside sat in mood full soft.
He took her in his arms and kissed her oft,
And laid him down to sleep, and that anon.
And she pretended that she must be gone
Where you know well that everyone has need.
And when she of this note had taken heed,
She tore it all to fragments at the last
And down the privy quietly it cast.

Who's in brown study now but fair fresh May?
Down by old January's side she lay,
Who slept, until the cough awakened him;
He prayed her strip all naked for his whim;
He would have pleasure of her, so he said,
And clothes were an incumbrance when in bed,
And she obeyed him, whether lief or loath.
But lest these precious folk be with me wroth,
How there he worked, I dare not to you tell;
Nor whether she thought it paradise or hell;
But there I leave them working in their wise
Till vespers rang and they must needs arise.

Were it by destiny or merely chance,
By nature or some other circumstance,
Or constellation's sign, that in such state
The heavens stood, the time was fortunate
To make request concerning Venus' works
(For there's a time for all things, say these clerks)
To any woman, to procure her love,
I cannot say; but the great God above,

Who knows there's no effect without a cause,
He may judge all, for here my voice withdraws.
But true it is that this fair blooming May
Was so affected and impressed that day
For pity of this lovesick Damian,
That from her heart she could not drive or ban
Remembrance of her wish to give him ease.
"Certainly," thought she, "whom this may displease
I do not care, for I'd assure him now
Him with my love I'd willingly endow,
Though he'd no more of riches than his shirt."
Lo, pity soon wells up in gentle heart.

Here may you see what generosity
In women is when they advise closely.
Perhaps some tyrant (for there's many a one)
Who has a heart as hard as any stone,
Would well have let him die within that place
Much rather than have granted him her grace;
And such would have rejoiced in cruel pride,
Nor cared that she were thus a homicide.

This gentle May, fulfilled of all pity,
With her own hand a letter then wrote she
In which she granted him her utmost grace;
There was naught lacking now, save time and place
Wherein she might suffice to ease his lust:
For all should be as he would have it, just;
And when she'd opportunity on a day,
To visit Damian went this lovely May,
And cleverly this letter she thrust close
Under his pillow, read it if he chose.
She took him by the hand and hard did press,
So secretly that no one else could guess,
And bade him gain his health, and forth she went
To January, when for her he sent.

Up rose this Damian upon the morrow,
For gone was all his sickness and his sorrow.
He combed himself and preened his feathers smooth,
He did all that his lady liked, in sooth;
And then to January went as low
As ever did a hound trained to the bow.
He was so pleasant unto every man
(For craft is everything for those who can),
That everyone was fain to speak his good;
And fully in his lady's grace he stood.
Thus Damian I leave about his need
And forward in my tale I will proceed.

Some writers hold that all felicity
Stands in delight, and therefor, certainly,
This noble January, with all his might,

Honourably, as does befit a knight,
Arranged affairs to live deliciously.
His housing, his array, as splendidly
Befitted his condition as a king's.
Among the rest of his luxurious things
He built a garden walled about with stone;
So fair a garden do I know of none.
For, without doubt, I verily suppose
That he who wrote The Romance of the Rose
Could not its beauty say in singing wise;
Nor could Priapus' power quite suffice,
Though he is god of gardens all, to tell
The beauty of that garden, and the well
Which was beneath the laurel always green.
For oftentimes God Pluto and his queen,
Fair Proserpine and all her faery
Disported there and made sweet melody
About that well, and danced there, as men told.

This noble knight, this January old,
Such pleasure had therein to walk and play,
That none he'd suffer bear the key, they say.
Save he himself; for of the little wicket
He carried always the small silver clicket
With which, as pleased him, he'd unlock the gate.
And when he chose to pay court to his mate
In summer season, thither would he go
With May, his wife, and no one but they two;
And divers things that were not done abed,
Within that garden there were done, 'tis said.
And in this manner many a merry day
Lived this old January and young May.
But worldly pleasure cannot always stay,
And January's joy must pass away.

O sudden chance, O Fortune, thou unstable,
Like to the scorpion so deceptive, able
To flatter with thy mouth when thou wilt sting;
Thy tail is death, through thine envenoming.
O fragile joy! O poison sweetly taint!
O monster that so cleverly canst paint
Thy gifts in all the hues of steadfastness
That thou deceivest both the great and less!
Why hast thou January thus deceived,
That had'st him for thine own full friend received?
And now thou hast bereft him of his eyes,
For sorrow of which in love he daily dies.

Alas! This noble January free,
In all his pleasure and prosperity,
Is fallen blind, and that all suddenly.
He wept and he lamented, pitifully;

And therewithal the fire of jealousy
Lest that his wife should fall to some folly,
So burned within his heart that he would fain
Both him and her some man had swiftly slain.
For neither after death nor in his life
Would he that she were other's love or wife,
But dress in black and live in widow's state,
Lone as the turtle-dove that's lost her mate.
But finally, after a month or twain,
His grief somewhat abated, to speak plain;
For when he knew it might not otherwise be,
He took in patience his adversity,
Save, doubtless, he could not renounce, as done,
His jealousy, from which he never won.
For this his passion was so outrageous
That neither in his hall nor other house
Nor any other place, not ever, no,
He suffered her to ride or walking go,
Unless he had his hand on her alway;
For which did often weep this fresh young May,
Who loved her Damian so tenderly
That she must either swiftly die or she
Must have him as she willed, her thirst to slake;
Biding her time, she thought her heart would break.

And on the other side this Damian
Was now become the most disconsolate man
That ever was; for neither night nor day
Might he so much as speak a word to May
Of his desire, as I am telling here,
Save it were said to January's ear,
Who never took his blind hand off her, no.
Nevertheless, by writing to and fro
And secret signals, he knew what she meant;
And she too knew the aim of his intent.

O January, what might it now avail
Could your eyes see as far as ships can sail?
For it's as pleasant, blind, deceived to be
As be deceived while yet a man may see.
Lo, Argus, who was called the hundred-eyed,
No matter how he peered and watched and pried,
He was deceived; and God knows others to
Who think, and firmly, that it is not so.
Oblivion is peace; I say no more.

This lovely May, of whom I spoke before,
In warm wax made impression of the key
Her husband carried, to the gate where he
In entering his garden often went.
And Damian, who knew all her intent,
The key did counterfeit, and privately;

There is no more to say, but speedily
Some mischief of this latch-key shall betide,
Which you shall hear, if you but time will bide.

O noble Ovid, truth you say, God wot!
What art is there, though it be long and hot,
But Love will find it somehow suits his turn?
By Pyramus and Thisbe may men learn;
Though they were strictly kept apart in all,
They soon accorded, whispering through a wall,
Where none could have suspected any gate.
But now to purpose: ere had passed: days eight,
And ere the first day of July, befell
That January was under such a spell,
Through egging of his wife, to go and play
Within his garden, and no one but they,
That on a morning to this May said he:
"Rise up, my wife, my love, my lady free;
The turtle's voice is heard, my dove so sweet;
The winter's past, the rain's gone, and the sleet;
Come forth now with your two eyes columbine!
How sweeter are your breasts than is sweet wine!
The garden is enclosed and walled about;
Come forth, my white spouse, for beyond all doubt
You have me ravished in my heart, O wife!
No fault have I found in you in my life.
Come forth, come forth, and let us take our sport;
I chose you for my wife and my comfort."

Such were the lewd old words that then used he;
To Damian a secret sign made she
That he should go before them with his clicket;
This Damian then opened up the wicket,
And in he slipped, and that in manner such
That none could see nor hear; and he did crouch
And still he sat beneath a bush anon.

This January, blind as is a stone,
With Maia's hand in his, and none else there,
Into his garden went, so fresh and fair,
And then clapped to the wicket suddenly.

"Now, wife," said he, "here's none but you and I,
And you're the one of all that I best love.
For by that Lord Who sits in Heaven above,
Far rather would I die upon a knife
Than do offence to you, my true, dear wife!
For God's sake how I did choose you out,
And for no love of money, beyond doubt,
But only for the love you roused in me.
And though I am grown old and cannot see,
Be true to me, and I will tell you why.
Three things, it's certain, shall you gain thereby;

First, Christ's dear love, and honour of your own,
And all my heritage of tower and town;
I give it you, draw deeds to please you, pet;
This shall be done tomorrow ere sunset.
So truly may God bring my soul to bliss,
I pray you first, in covenant, that we kiss.
And though I'm jealous, yet reproach me not.
You are so deeply printed in my thought
That, when I do consider your beauty
And therewith all the unlovely age of me,
I cannot, truly, nay, though I should die,
Abstain from being in your company,
For utter love; of this there is no doubt.
Now kiss me, wife, and let us walk about."

This blooming May, when these words she had heard,
Graciously January she answered,
But first and foremost she began to weep.
"I have also," said she, "a soul to keep,
As well as you, and also honour mine,
And of my wifehood that sweet flower divine
Which I assured you of, both safe and sound,
When unto you that priest my body bound;
Wherefore I'll answer you in this manner,
If I may by your leave, my lord so dear.
I pray to God that never dawns the day
That I'll not die, foully as woman may,
If ever I do unto my kin such shame,
And likewise damage so my own fair name,
As to be false; and if I grow so slack,
Strip me and put me naked in a sack
And in the nearest river let me drown.
I am a lady, not a wench of town.
Why speak you thus? Men ever are untrue,
And woman have reproaches always new.
No reason or excuse have you, I think,
And so you harp on women who hoodwink."
And with that word she saw where Damian
Sat under bush; to cough then she began,
And with her slender finger signs made she
That Damian should climb into a tree
That burdened was with fruit, and up he went;
For verily he knew her full intent,
And understood each sign that she could make,
Better than January, her old rake.
For in a letter she had told him all
Of how he should proceed when time should fall.
And thus I leave him in the pear-tree still
While May and January roam at will.
Bright was the day and blue the firmament,

Phoebus his golden streamers down has sent
 To gladden every flower with his warmness.
 He was that time in Gemini, I guess,
 And but a little from his declination
 Of Cancer, which is great Jove's exaltation.
 And so befell, in that bright morning-tide,
 That in this garden, on the farther side,
 Pluto, who is the king of Faery,
 With many a lady in his company,
 Following his wife, the fair Queen Proserpine,
 Each after other, straight as any line
 (While she was gathering flowers on a mead,
 In Claudian you may the story read
 How in his grim car he had stolen her)-
 This king of Faery sat down yonder
 Upon a turfen bank all fresh and green,
 And right anon thus said he to his queen.
 "My wife," said he, "there may no one say nay;
 Experience proves fully every day
 The treason that these women do to man.
 Ten hundred thousand stories tell I can
 To show your fickleness and lies. Of which,
 O Solomon wise, and richest of the rich,
 Fulfilled of sapience and worldly glory,
 Well worth remembrance are thy words and story
 By everyone who's wit, and reason can.
 Thus goodness he expounds with praise of man:
 'Among a thousand men yet found I one,
 But of all women living found I none.'
 "Thus spoke the king that knew your wickedness;
 And Jesus son of Sirach, as I guess,
 Spoke of you seldom with much reverence.
 A wild-fire and a rotten pestilence
 Fall on your bodies all before tonight!
 Do you not see this honourable knight,
 Because, alas! he is both blind and old,
 His own sworn man shall make him a cuckold;
 Lo, there he sits, the lecher, in that tree.
 Now will I grant, of my high majesty,
 Unto this old and blind and worthy knight,
 That he shall have again his two eyes' sight,
 Just when his wife shall do him villainy;
 Then shall he know of all her harlotry,
 Both in reproach to her and others too."
 "You shall," said Proserpine, "if will you so;
 Now by my mother's father's soul, I swear
 That I will give her adequate answer,
 And all such women after, for her sake;
 That, though in any guilt caught, they'll not quake,

But with a bold face they'll themselves excuse,
And bear him down who would them thus accuse.
For lack of answer none of them shall die.
Nay, though a man see things with either eye,
Yet shall we women brazen shamelessly
And weep and swear and wrangle cleverly,
So that you men shall stupid be as geese.
What do I care for your authorities?

"I know well that this Jew, this Solomon
Found fools among us women, many a one,
But though he never found a good woman,
Yet has there found full many another man
Women right true, right good, and virtuous
Witness all those that dwell in Jesus' house;
With martyrdom they proved their constancy.
The Gesta Romanorum speak kindly
Of many wives both good and true also.
But be not angry, sir, though it be so
That he said he had found no good woman,
I pray you take the meaning of the man;
He meant that sovereign goodness cannot be.
Except in God, Who is the Trinity.

"Ah, since of very God there is but one,
Why do you make so much of Solomon?
What though he built a temple for God's house?
What though he were both rich and glorious?
So built he, too, a temple to false gods,
How could he with the Law be more at odds?
By gad, clean as his name you whitewash, sir,
He was a lecher and idolater;
And in old age the True God he forsook.
And if that God had not, as says the Book,
Spared him for father David's sake, he should
Have lost his kingdom sooner than he would.
I value not, of all the villainy
That you of women write, a butterfly.
I am a woman, and needs must I speak,
Or else swell up until my heart shall break.
For since he said we gossip, rail, and scold,
As ever may I my fair tresses hold,
I will not spare, for any courtesy,
To speak him ill who'd wish us villainy."

"Dame," said this Pluto, "be no longer wroth;
I give it up; but since I swore my oath
That I would give to him his sight again,
My word shall stand, I warn you that's certain.
I am a king, it suits me not to lie."

"And I," said she, "am queen of Faery.
Her answer shall she have, I undertake;

No further talk hereof let us two make.
Forsooth, I will not longer be contrary."
Now let us turn again to January,
Who in the garden with his lovely May
Sang, and that merrier than the popinjay,
"I love you best, and ever shall, I know."
And so about the alleys did he go
Till he had come at last to that pear-tree
Wherein this Damian sat right merrily
On high, among the young leaves fresh and green.

This blooming May, who was so bright of sheen,
Began to sigh, and said: "Alas, my side!
Now, sir," said she, "no matter what betide,
I must have some of these pears that I see,
Or I may die, so much I long," said she,
"To eat some of those little pears so green.
Help, for Her love Who is of Heaven Queen!
I tell you well, a woman in my plight
May have for fruit so great an appetite
That she may die if none of it she have."
"Alas!" said he, "that I had here a knave
That could climb up, alas, alas!" said he,
"That I am blind."

"Yea, sir, no odds," said she,
"If you'd but grant me, and for God's dear sake,
That this pear-tree within your arms you'd take
(For well I know that you do not trust me),
Then I could climb up well enough," said she,
"So I my foot might set upon your back."

"Surely," said he, "thereof should be no lack,
Might I so help you with my own heart's blood."

So he stooped down, and on his back she stood,
And gave herself a twist and up went she.
Ladies, I pray you be not wroth with me;
I cannot gloze, I'm an uncultured man.
For of a sudden this said Damian
Pulled up her smock and thrust both deep and long.

And when King Pluto saw this awful wrong,
To January he gave again his sight,
And made him see as well as ever he might.
And when he thus had got his sight again,
Never was man of anything so fain.
But since his wife he thought of first and last,
Up to the tree his eyes he quickly cast,
And saw how Damian his wife had dressed
In such a way as cannot be expressed,
Save I should rudely speak and vulgarly:
And such a bellowing clamour then raised he
As does a mother when her child must die:

"Out! Help! Alas! Oh, help me!" he did cry,
 "Outlandish, brazen woman, what do you do?"
 And she replied: "Why, sir, and what ails you?
 Have patience, and do reason in your mind
 That I have helped you for your two eyes blind.
 On peril of my soul, I tell no lies,
 But I was taught that to recover eyes
 Was nothing better, so to make you see,
 Than struggle with a man up in a tree.
 God knows I did it with a good intent."
 "Struggle!" cried he, "but damme, in it went!
 God give you both a shameful death to die!
 He banged you, for I saw it with my eye,
 Or may they hang me by the neck up, else!"
 "Then is," said she, "my medicine all false;
 For certainly, if you could really see,
 You would not say these cruel words to me;
 You catch but glimpses and no perfect sight."
 "I see," said he, "as well as ever I might-
 Thanks be to God!- and with my two eyes, too,
 And truth, I thought he did that thing to you."
 "You are bewildered still, good sir," said she,
 "Such thanks I have for causing you to see;
 Alas!" she cried, "that ever I was so kind!"
 "Now, dame," said he, "put all this out of mind.
 Come down, my dear, and if I have missaid,
 God help me if I'm not put out indeed.
 But by my father's soul, I thought to have seen
 How Damian right over you did lean
 And that your smock was pulled up to his breast."
 "Yes, sir," said she, "you may think as seems best;
 But, sir, a man that wakens out of sleep,
 He cannot suddenly take note and keep
 Of any thing, or see it perfectly,
 Until he has recovered verily;
 Just so a man that blinded long has been,
 He cannot say that suddenly he's seen
 So well, at first, when sight is new to him,
 As later, when his sight's no longer dim.
 Until your sight be settled for a while,
 There may full many a thing your mind beguile.
 Beware, I pray you, for, by Heaven's King,
 Full many a man thinks that he sees a thing,
 And it is other quite than what it seems.
 And he that misconstrues, why, he misdeems."
 And with that word she leaped down from the tree.
 This January, who is glad but he?
 He kissed her and he hugged her much and oft,
 And on her belly stroked and rubbed her soft,

And home to palace led her, let me add.
And now, good men, I pray you to be glad.
For here I end my tale of January;
God bless us, and His Mother, Holy Mary!
HERE ENDS THE MERCHANT'S TALE OF JANUARY