

THE MERCHANT'S TALE

The Merchant's Prologue

'Weeping and wailing, care and other sorrow,
 I know them well enough by eve and morrow,'
 The Merchant said; 'like others I suppose
 That have been married, that's the way it goes;
 I know too well that's how it goes with me.
 I have a wife, the worst that there could be;
 For if a fiend were coupled to my wife,
 She'd overmatch him, you can bet your life.
 Why choose a special instance to recall
 Her soaring malice? She's a shrew in all.
 There's a wide difference I'm bound to say
 Between Griselda's patience and the way
 My wife behaves; her studied cruelty
 Surpasses everything. If I were free,
 Never again, never again the snare!
 We married men, our life is grief and care.
 Try it who will, and he will find, I promise
 That I have spoken truly, by St Thomas,
 For most of us – I do not say for all,
 And God forbid that such a thing befall.
 'Ah, my good Host, I have been wedded now
 These two months past, no more than that, I vow,
 Yet I believe no bachelor alive,
 Not if you were to take a knife and rive
 Him to the heart, could tell of so much grief
 As I could tell you of; beyond belief,

The curst malignity I get from her!'

Our Host replied, 'God bless you, my dear sir!
 But since you know so much about the art
 Of marriage, let me beg you to impart.'

'With pleasure,' he said, 'but on the personal score
 I'm so heart-scalded I shall say no more.'

The Merchant's Tale

There was a knight one time of good renown
 In Lombardy, Pavia was the town.
 He'd lived there very prosperously for more
 Than sixty years and was a bachelor,
 Though always taking bodily delight
 On women, such as pleased his appetite,
 As do these foolish worldlings, never fear.
 Now when this knight had passed his sixtieth year
 – Whether for holiness, or from a surge
 Of dotage, who can say? – he felt an urge
 So violent to be a wedded man
 That day and night his eager fancies ran
 On where and how to spy himself a bride,
 Praying the Lord he might not be denied
 Once to have knowledge of that blissful life
 There is between a husband and his wife,
 And live within the holy bond and tether
 In which God first bound woman and man together.
 'No other life,' he said, 'is worth a bean;
 For wedlock is so easy and so clean
 It is a very paradise on earth.'
 Thus said this ageing knight, so full of worth.
 And certainly, as sure as God is King,
 To take a wife is a most glorious thing,
 Especially if a man is old and hoary;
 Then she's the fruit of all his wealth and glory.
 It's then he ought to take her, young and fair,
 One upon whom he might beget an heir,

And lead a life of rapture and content,
 Whereas these bachelors can but lament
 And suffer, when in some adversity
 From love, which is but childish vanity.
 And it's no more than right it should be so
 If bachelors are beset by grief and woe:
 On brittle ground they build, so all is ready
 For brittle love, though they expect a steady.
 Their liberty is that of bird or beast,
 They've no restraint, no discipline at least,
 Whereas a married man achieves a state
 Of bliss that's orderly and fortunate.
 Under the yoke of matrimony bowed,
 The heart, in bliss abounding, sings aloud.
 For who is so obedient as a wife?
 Who is so true, so careful for his life
 Whether in health or sickness, as his mate?
 For weal or woe she tends upon his state,
 In service, and in love, she never tires,
 Though he lie bedridden till he expires.

And yet some writers say this isn't so;
 One such was Theophrastus long ago.
 Who cares if Theophrastus was a liar?
 'Don't take a wife,' he said, 'from a desire
 To make economies and spare expense.
 A faithful servant shows more diligence
 In guarding your possessions than a wife
 For she claims half you have throughout her life;
 And if you're sick, as God may give me joy,
 Your very friends, an honest serving-boy,
 Do more than she, who's watching for a way
 To corner your possessions night and day.
 And if you take a wife into your bed
 You're very likely to be cuckolded.'

Opinions such as these and hundreds worse
 This fellow wrote, God lay him under curse!
 But take no heed of all such vanity,
 Defy foul Theophrastus and hear me.

A wife is verily the gift of God.
 All other kinds of gift, the fruitful sod
 Of land, fair pastures, movables in store,
 Rents – they're the gifts of Fortune, nothing more,
 That pass as does a shadow on a wall.

Still, if I must speak plainly, after all
 A wife does last some time, and time may lapse
 A good deal slower than one likes, perhaps.

Marriage is a momentous sacrament,
 Bachelordom contemptible, and spent
 In helpless desolation and remorse
 – I'm speaking of the laity, of course.
 I don't say this for nothing; listen why.
 Woman was made to be a man's ally.
 When God created Adam, flesh and bone,
 And saw him belly-naked and alone,
 He of His endless goodness thus began:
 'Let us now make a help-meet for this man
 Like to himself.' And He created Eve.
 Here lies the proof of what we all believe,
 That woman is man's helper, his resort,
 His earthly paradise and his disport.
 So pliant and so virtuous is she
 They cannot but abide in unity.
 One flesh they are; one flesh as I suppose
 Has but a single heart in joys and woes.

A wife! Saint Mary, what a benediction!
 How can a man be subject to affliction
 Who has a wife? Indeed I cannot say.
 There is a bliss between them such as may
 No tongue tell forth, such as no heart can judge.
 If he be poor she helps her man to drudge,
 Sets guard upon his goods and checks the waste;
 All that her husband likes is to her taste,
 She never once says 'no' when he says 'yes'.
 'Do this,' says he; 'already done,' she says.
 O blissful state of wedlock, no way vicious
 But virtuous and merry, nay, delicious,

And so commended and approved withal
That any man who's worth a leek should fall
On his bare knees, to thank God, all his life,
For having ordained and given him a wife,
Or else to pray that he vouchsafe to send
A wife to last him to the very end.

Then he can count upon security
And not be tricked, as far as I can see,
Provided that he works by her advice:
Jacob, the learned tell us, was precise
In following the good counsel of his mother,
And won his father's blessing from his brother,
By binding round his neck a pelt of kid.
Or Judith, one can read of what she did:
Her wisdom held God's people in its keeping
By slaying Holofernes, who was sleeping.

Take Abigail, what good advice she gave!
It saved her husband Nabal from the grave.
Take Esther too, whose wisdom brought relief
To all God's people, saved them from their grief
And made Ahasuerus grant promotion
To Mordecai for his true devotion.
There's no superlative that ranks in life,
Says Seneca, above a humble wife.
'The tongue of wife,' so Cato was to say,
'Commands the husband: suffer and obey.'
And yet she will obey by courtesy.
A wife is guardian of your husbandry;
Well may a man in sickness wail and weep
Who has no wife to nurse him and to keep
His house for him; do wisely then and search
For one and love her as Christ loves His Church.
For if you love yourself you love your wife,
For no one hates his flesh, nay all his life
He fosters it, and so I bid you wive
And cherish her, or you will never thrive.
Husband and wife, whatever the worldly say
In ribald jest, are on the straight, sure way.

They are so knit no accident or strife
Harms them, particularly not the wife.

So January thought, of whom I told,
Deeply considering as he grew old
The life of lusty joy and virtuous quiet
That marriage offers in its honey-diet.
And so one day he sent for all his friends
To ask their views on what he now intends.

With serious face he spoke, and solemn tongue.
'My friends,' he said, 'I am no longer young;
God knows, I'm near the pit, I'm on the brink:
I have a soul, of which I ought to think.

'My body I have foolishly expended;
Blessed be God, that still can be amended.
I have resolved to be a wedded man,
And that at once, in all the haste I can,
To some fair virgin; one of tender years.
Prepare yourselves to help as overseers
Against my wedding, for I will not wait.
I for my own part will investigate
And find a hasty match, if there be any:
But in as much as you, my friends, are many,
You may discern more readily than I
Where it would most befit me to ally.

'But, my dear friends, you may as well be told
The woman must on no account be old,
Certainly under twenty, and demure.
Flesh should be young though fish should be mature;
As pike, not pickerel, makes the tastier meal,
Old beef is not so good as tender veal.
I'll have no woman thirty years of age
That's only fodder, bean-straw for a cage.
Old women are as tricky in their trade
Of making trouble as the Boat of Wade*
And when they choose, they can be such a pest –
It's clear I'd never have a moment's rest.
Subtle is the scholar taught in several schools;
And women taught in many are no fools,

Half-scholars one might say; but when they're young
 A man can still control them with his tongue
 And guide them, should their duty seem too lax
 Just as a man may model in warm wax.
 So let me sum the matter in a clause;
 I will have no old woman, for this cause.
 For were I so unlucky as to marry
 Where I could take no pleasure, I'd miscarry,
 I should commit adultery and slide
 Straight downwards to the devil when I died.
 I could beget no child on her to greet me,
 Yet I had rather that the dogs should eat me
 Than that my fine inheritance should fall
 Into strange hands, that let me tell you all.
 'I'm not a fool, I know the reason why
 One ought to wed, though I could specify
 Many who prate of it, but I engage
 They know about as little as my page
 Touching the reasons why to take a wife.
 A man unable to be chaste in life
 Should take a wife in holy dedication
 And for the sake of lawful procreation
 Of children, to the honour of God above,
 Not as a paramour or lady-love,
 But to curb lechery, which he should eschew,
 Paying his debt whenever it falls due,
 Or each a willing helper to the other
 In trouble, like a sister to a brother
 And live a life of holy chastity;
 But, by your leave, sirs, that would not suit me,
 For, God be thanked, I dare to make the claim,
 I feel my limbs sufficient, strong and game
 For all that is belonging to a man,
 And am my own best judge in what I can.
 I may seem hoary, but I'm like a tree
 That blossoms white before the fruit can be;
 Blossoming trees are neither dry nor dead
 And I am only hoary on my head.

My heart and all my members are as green
 As laurel is; all the year round, I mean.
 And now you are informed of my intention
 I beg you to agree without dissension.'

Various men gave various examples
 Of classic marriages, convincing samples;
 Some praised it certainly, some reprehended,
 But at the last (to get the matter ended),
 As altercation happens every day
 Among good friends who mean to say their say,
 An argument was presently begun
 Between two friends of his, Placebo one,
 Justinus, as I recollect, the other.

Placebo said, 'O January, dear brother,
 You have no need, sweet lord, it must appear,
 To take advice from anybody here,
 Save that your sapience, after meditation,
 Would prudently resist the inclination
 To set aside the word of Solomon,
 For this is what he said for everyone:
 "Do all things by advice," his saying went,
 "And then you'll have no reason to repent."
 Though that may be what Solomon commends,
 Dear lord, my brother, nay, my best of friends,
 As surely as the Lord may give me rest
 I think your own opinion is the best.
 Take it from me – if I can find the phrase –
 You know I've been a courtier all my days,
 God knows unworthily, I make admission,
 Yet I have stood in quite a high position
 And among lords of very great estate;
 But I have never joined in a debate
 With them, or offered contradiction. Why?
 Well, obviously, my lord knows more than I,
 And what he says I hold as firm and stable;
 I echo it as far as I am able.
 No counsellor is such a fool as he
 That, serving on a lord of high degree,

Dares to presume or even thinks it fit
 To be superior to him in wit.
 Lords are no fools, believe me . . . May I say
 That you have also shown yourself today
 A man of lofty views, an eloquent,
 A holy-minded man, and I consent
 To all you said. It should be written down.
 A speech like that – there isn't one in town,
 No, nor all Italy, able to supply it!
 Christ holds himself more than rewarded by it.
 In anyone at all advanced in age
 It shows a lively spirit to engage
 In taking a young wife. Ah, Lord of grace!
 You've pinned your heart up in a jolly place;
 Follow your inclination; I protest
 Whatever you decide on will be best.'

Justinus who sat silent, having heard
 Placebo speaking, then took up the word.
 'Brother,' he said, 'be patient with me, pray;
 You spoke your mind, now hear what I would say;
 Seneca gave a lot of sound advice;
 He says it's always better to think twice
 Before you give away estate or pelf.
 And therefore if you should advise yourself
 In giving property away or land,
 If it's important you should understand
 Who is to get your goods, how much the more
 You ought to think things over well before
 You give away your body. If I may
 I'd like to warn you; it is no child's play
 Choosing a wife. It needs consideration,
 In fact it asks a long investigation.

'Is she discreet and sober? Or a drinker?
 Or arrogant? Or, in other ways, a stinker?
 A scolder? Or extravagant? Too clannish?
 Too poor? Too rich? Unnaturally mannish?
 Although we know there isn't to be found
 In all the world one that will trot quite sound,

Whether it's man or beast, the way we'd like it,
 It were sufficient bargain, could we strike it,
 In any woman, were one sure she had
 More good among her qualities than bad.
 'But all this asks some leisure to review;
 God knows that many is the tear I too
 Have wept in secret since I had a wife.
 Praise whoso will the married state of life
 I find it a routine, a synthesis
 Of cost and care, and wholly bare of bliss.
 And yet the neighbours round about, by God,
 Especially the women – in a squad –
 Congratulate me that I chose to wive
 The constantest, the meekest soul alive.
 I know where the shoe pinches; but for you,
 Why, you must please yourself in what you do.
 You're old enough – that's not what I disparage –
 To think before you enter into marriage,
 Especially if your wife is young and fair.
 By Him that made earth, water, fire and air,
 The youngest man in this distinguished rout
 Will have a busy task – you need not doubt –
 To keep a woman to himself. Trust me,
 You will not please her more than for, three
 Years – that is, please her to the point of fervence.
 Wives ask a lot in matters of observance.
 I beg you not to take it the wrong way.'
 'Well,' said old January, 'have you said your say?
 Straw for your Seneca and proverbial tags;
 Not worth a basketful of weeds and rags,
 Your pedant-jargon! Wiser men than you,
 As you have heard, take quite another view
 Of my proposal. What would you reply,
 Placebo?' 'An accursed man, say I,
 It is that offers an impediment,'
 Said he, and so, by general consent,
 His friends then rose, declaring it was good
 That he should marry when and where he would.

Busy imaginations, strange invention
 And soaring fantasy obsessed the attention
 Of January's soul, about his wedding.
 Came many a lovely form and feature shedding
 A rapture through his fancies night by night.
 As who should take a mirror polished bright
 And set it in the common market-place,
 And watch the many figures pause and pace
 Across his mirror; in the self-same way,
 Old January allowed his choice to play
 Mirroring all the girls that lived nearby,
 Still undetermined where his thought should lie.
 For were there one with beauty in her face
 There was another standing high in grace
 With people, for her grave benignity,
 Whose voices gave her the supremacy.

Others were rich, but had a tarnished name.
 At last, and half in earnest, half in game,
 He fixed on one, and setting her apart,
 He banished all the others from his heart.
 He chose her on his own authority,
 For love is always blind and cannot see,
 And when he lay in bed at night his thought
 Pictured her in his heart, for he was caught
 By her fresh beauty and her age so tender;
 Her little waist, her arms so long and slender,
 Her wise self-discipline, her gentle ways,
 Her womanly bearing and her serious gaze.
 His thought, descending on her thus, was fettered,
 It seemed to him choice could not be bettered.
 Once he was satisfied in this decision,
 He held all other judgement in derision:
 It was impossible to disagree
 With him in taste, such was his fantasy.

He sent his friends a very strong request
 Begging the pleasure – would they do their best? –
 Of an immediate visit. In his belief
 They needn't be kept long; he would be brief,

For there was no more need to cast around;
 His mind made up, he would not shift his ground.

Placebo came and so did all the rest,
 And January began with the request
 That none should offer any argument
 Against the purpose 'which was his intent,
 Pleasing to God Almighty, and,' said he,
 'The very ground of his prosperity.'

He said there was a maiden in the town
 Whose beauty was indeed of great renown;
 Her rank was not so great, to tell the truth,
 But still she had her beauty and her youth;
 She was the girl he wanted for his wife,
 To lead a life of ease, a holy life.
 And he would have her all – thank God for this! –
 There would be shares for no one in his bliss.
 He begged them then to labour in his need
 And help to make his enterprise succeed,
 For then, he said, his mind would be at rest
 'With nothing to annoy me or molest,
 But for one thing which pricks my conscience still,
 So listen to me kindly if you will.

'I've often,' he continued, 'heard ere this
 That none may have two perfect kinds of bliss,
 Bliss in this world, I mean, and bliss in Heaven;
 Though he keep clear of sin – the deadly seven
 And all the branches of their dreadful tree –
 Yet there's so perfect a felicity
 In marriage, so much pleasure, so few tears,
 That I keep fearing, though advanced in years,
 I shall be leading such a happy life,
 So delicate, with neither grief nor strife,
 That I shall have my heaven here in earth,
 And may not that cost more than it is worth?
 Since that true heaven costs a man so dear
 In tribulation and in penance here,
 How should I then, living in such delight,
 As every married man, by day and night,

Has with his wife, attain to joys supernal
 And enter into bliss with Christ Eternal?
 That is my terror. Have you a suggestion,
 My worthy brothers, to resolve the question?

Justinus, who despised his nonsense, said,
 Jest as ever, what came into his head;
 And wishing not to spin things out in chatter
 Used no authorities to support the matter.
 'If there's no obstacle,' he said, 'but this,
 God by some mighty miracle of His
 May show you mercy as He is wont to do,
 And long before they come to bury you
 May cause you to bewail your married life
 In which you say there never can be strife.
 And God forbid that there should not be sent
 A special grace that husbands may repent,
 And sent more often than to single men.
 This, sir, would be my own conclusion then;
 Never despair! You still may go to glory,
 For she perhaps may prove your purgatory,
 God's means of grace, as one might say, "God's whip",
 To send your soul to Heaven with a skip
 And swifter than an arrow from the bow!

'I hope to God that you will shortly know
 There's no such paramount felicity
 In marriage, nor is ever like to be,
 As to disqualify you for salvation,
 Provided you observe some moderation,
 Tempering down the passions of your wife
 With some restriction of your amorous life,
 Keeping yourself, of course, from other sin.
 My tale is done, but there! My wit is thin.
 Be not afraid, dear brother, that's the moral.
 Let us wade out, however, of this quarrel;
 The Wife of Bath, if you can understand
 Her views in the discussion now on hand,
 Has put them well and briefly in this case:
 And now, farewell, God have you in His Grace!

He then took leave of January his brother
 And they had no more speech with one another.
 And when his friends saw that it needs must be
 They made a careful marriage-treaty. She,
 The girl agreed upon, whose name was May,
 (And with the smallest possible delay)
 Was to be married to this January.

And I assume there is no need to tarry
 Over the bonds and documents they planned
 To give her the possession of his land.
 Or make you listen to her rich array,
 But finally there came the happy day
 And off at last to church the couple went
 There to receive the holy sacrament.

Out came the priest, with stole about his neck,
 And bade her be like Sarah at the beck
 Of Abraham in wisdom, truth and grace,
 Said all the prayers were proper to the case,
 Then signed them with the cross and bade God bless
 Them both, and made all sure in holiness.

Thus they were wedded in solemnity,
 And at the wedding-banquet he and she
 Sat with their worthier guests upon the dais.
 Joy and delight filled the entire place,
 Stringed instruments, victuals of every kind,
 The daintiest all Italy could find.
 Music broke forth as with the sound of Zion,
 Not Orpheus nor the Theban king Amphion
 Ever achieved so sweet a melody.

At every course there came loud minstrelsy
 And Joab's trumpets never took the ear
 So forcefully as this, nor half so clear
 Those of Theodamas when Thebes held out.
 Bacchus himself was pouring wine about
 And Venus smiled on everyone in sight,
 For January had become her knight
 And wished to try his courage in the carriage
 Of his new liberty combined with marriage.

Armed with a fire-brand she danced about
 Before the bride and all the happy rout;
 And certainly I'll go as far as this.
 And say that Hymen, God of wedded bliss,
 Never beheld so happy a wedded man.

Hold thou thy peace, O poet Martian,
 Give us no more thy marital doxology
 For Mercury on wedding with Philology!
 Silence the song the Muses would have sung,
 Thine is too small a pen, too weak a tongue,
 To signalize this wedding or engage
 To tell of tender youth and stooping age,
 Such joy it is as none may write about:
 Try it yourself and you will soon find out
 If I'm a liar or not in such a case.

For there sat May with so benign a face
 That but to see her was a fairy-tale.
 Queen Esther's eye could never so assail
 Ahasuerus, never looked so meek;
 Of so much loveliness I dare not speak,
 Yet thus much of her beauty I will say
 That she was like the brightest morn of May
 With every grace and pleasure in her glance.
 This January sat ravished, in a trance,
 And every time he gazed upon her face
 His heart began to menace her and race;
 That night his arms would strain her with the ardour
 That Paris showed for Helen, aye, and harder.
 And yet he felt strong qualms of pity stir
 To think he soon must do offence to her,
 That very night, and thought, 'O tender creature!
 Alas, God grant you may endure the nature
 Of my desires, they are so sharp and hot.
 I am aghast lest you sustain them not.
 God hinder me from doing all I might!
 But O I wish to God that it were night,
 And the night last for ever! Oh, how slow . . .
 I wish these guests would hurry up and go!'

So he began to dedicate his labours
 To getting rid politely of his neighbours,
 And to detaching them from food supplies.
 At last their reason told them they should rise;
 They danced and drank and, left to their devices,
 They went from room to room to scatter spices
 About the house. Joy rose in every man
 Except in one, a squire called Damian,
 Who carved for January every day.

He was so ravished by the sight of May
 As to be mad with suffering; he could
 Almost have died or fainted where he stood,
 So sorely Venus burnt him with the brand
 Which, as she danced, she carried in her hand.
 And hastily the boy went off to bed;
 No more of him at present need be said.
 I leave him there to weep and to complain
 Till fresh young May have pity on his pain.

O perilous fire kindled in the bedding,
 Domestic traitor, with the danger spreading!
 O adder in the bosom, false of hue,
 So sly, so homely-seeming, so untrue!
 God shield us all from your acquaintanceship!
 O January, drunk upon the lip
 Of marriage, see your servant, Damian,
 Who was your very squire, born your man,
 Even now is meditating villainy.
 O God unmask your household enemy!
 Over the world no pestilence can roam
 That is so foul as treachery at home.

The sun had traced his arc with golden finger
 Across the sky, caring no more to linger
 On the horizon in that latitude.
 Night with her mantel which is dark and rude
 Had overspread the hemisphere about,
 And gone were all the merry-making rout
 Of January's guests, with hearty thanks,
 And homeward each convivially spans

To undertake such business as will keep
Him happy, till it should be time for sleep.

Soon after this the restive January
Demanded bed; no longer would he tarry
Except to quaff a cordial for the fire
That claret laced with spice can lend desire;
For he had many potions, drugs as fine
As those that monk, accursed Constantine,
Has numbered in his book *De Coitu*.
He drank them all; not one did he eschew,
And to his private friends who lingered on
He said, 'For God's love, hurry and be gone,
Empty the house politely if you can.'
And presently they did so to a man.
A toast was drunk, the curtains back were thrown;
The bride was borne to bed as still as stone.
And when the priest had blessed the wedding-bed
The room was emptied and the guests were sped.

Fast in the arms of January lay
His mate, his paradise, his fresh young May.
He lulled her, sought to kiss away all trouble;
The bristles of his beard were thick as stubble,
Much like a dog-fish skin, and sharp as briars,
Being newly shaved to sweeten his desires.
He rubbed his chin against her tender cheek
And said, 'Alas, alas that I should seek
To trespass – yet I must – and to offend
You greatly too, my spouse, ere I descend.
Nevertheless consider this,' said he,
'No workman, whatsoever he may be,
Can do his work both well and in a flurry;
This shall be done in perfect ease, no hurry.
It's of no consequence how long we play,
We are in holy wedlock, and we may.
And blessed be the yoke that we are in
For nothing we can do will count as sin.
A man is not a sinner with his wife,
He cannot hurt himself with his own knife;

We have the law's permission thus to play.'
And so he laboured till the break of day,
Then took a sop of claret-sodden toast,
Sat up in bed as rigid as a post,
And started singing very loud and clear.
He kissed his wife and gave a wanton leer,
Feeling a coltish rage towards his darling
And chattering in the jargon of a starling.
The slack of skin about his neck was shaking
As thus he fell a-chanting and corn-craking.

God knows what May was thinking in her heart,
Seeing him sit there in his shirt apart,
Wearing his night-cap, with his scrawny throat.
She didn't think his games were worth a groat.

At last he said, 'I think I'll take a rest;
Now day has come a little sleep were best.'
And down he lay and slept till half-past eight;
Then he woke up, and seeing it was late,
Old January arose; but fresh young May
Kept her apartment until the fourth day
As women will, they do it for the best.
For ever labourer must have time to rest,
For otherwise he can't keep labouring;
And that is true of every living thing,
Be it a fish, a bird, a beast, or man.

Now I will speak of woeful Damian
Languishing in his love, as will appear.
I would address him thus, if he could hear:
'O silly Damian! Alas, alas!
Answer my question; in your present pass
How are you going to tell her of your woe?
She's absolutely bound to answer no,
And if you speak, she's certain to betray you;
I can say nothing. God be your help, and stay you!'

Sick-hearted Damian in Venus' fire
Is so consumed, he's dying with desire;
And so he took his courage in his hand
To end a grief he could no longer stand

And with a pen that he contrived to borrow
 He wrote a letter pouring out his sorrow,
 After the fashion of a song or lay,
 Indited to his lady, dazzling May,
 And wrapped it in a purse of silk apart
 To hang inside his shirt, upon his heart.
 The moon, that stood in Taurus on the day
 When January had wedded lovely May,
 Had glided into Cancer; she of whom
 I speak, fresh May, had meanwhile kept her room,
 As is the custom among nobles all.
 A bride of course should never eat in hall
 Till four days afterwards, or three at least,
 But when they're over, let her go and feast.

On the fourth day, from noon to noon complete,
 And when high mass was over, in his seat
 Sat January in his hall with May,
 As fresh and bright as is a summer's day.
 And it so happened that this good old man
 Exclaimed, as he remembered Damian,
 'Blessed St Mary! How can such things be?
 Why isn't Damian here to wait on me?
 Is he still sick? What's happened? Is he up?'

The squires standing there to fill his cup
 Excused him on the grounds that he was ill,
 He was in bed, unfit for duty still;
 No other reason could have made him tarry.
 'I'm very sorry for it,' said January,
 'And he's a gentleman, to tell the truth,'
 The old man said, 'and if he died, poor youth,
 It were a pity; he's a lad of worth.
 I don't know anyone of equal birth
 So wise, discreet and secret, and so able;
 Thrifty and serviceable too at table.
 As soon as possible after meat to-day
 I'll visit him myself; and so shall May.
 We'll give him all the comfort that we can.'

Then everybody blessed the kind old man

So eager in his bounty and good breeding
 To offer anything that might be needing
 To comfort a sick squire; a gentle deed.
 'Madam,' said January, 'take good heed
 That after meat you and your women all,
 When you have sought your room and left the hall,
 Go up and have a look at Damian
 And entertain him; he's a gentleman.
 And tell him too that I shall do my best
 To visit him myself, after my rest.
 Now hurry on, be quick, and I shall bide me
 Here, until you return to sleep beside me.'
 And on the word he rose and gave a call
 To fetch a squire (the marshal of the hall)
 And gave him some instructions. Fresh young May
 With all her women took the shortest way
 To Damian's room and sat beside his bed;
 A warmth of comfort was in all she said,
 Benignity and beauty in her glance.
 And Damian, when at last he saw his chance,
 Secretly took his purse and billet-doux,
 Couched in the sweetest phrases that he knew,
 And put it in her hand with nothing more
 Than a long sigh, as deep as to the core;
 But in a whisper he contrived to say,
 'Mercy, have mercy! Don't give me away!
 I should be killed if this were ever known.'
 The purse slid from his bosom to her own
 And off she went. You get no more of me.
 Back to old January then went she;
 He was reclining on his bed by this.
 He drew her to his arms with many a kiss,
 Then settled back to sleep at once; and so
 She then pretended that she had to go
 Where everybody has to go at times.
 There, after memorizing Damian's rhymes,
 She tore them into pieces and she cast
 Them softly down the privy-drain at last.

Who fell into a study then but May?
 And down beside old January she lay
 Who slept until awoken by his cough.
 He begged her then to strip her garments off
 For he would have some pleasure of her, he said,
 Her clothes were an encumbrance, to be shed.
 And she obeyed, whether she would or no.
 Lest I offend the precious, I will go
 No further into what he did, or tell
 Whether she thought it paradise or hell.
 I leave them working thus as I suppose
 Till it was evensong, and then they rose.

Whether by destiny or accident,
 By starry influence or natural bent,
 Or whether some constellation held its state
 In heaven to make the hour fortunate
 For giving billet-doux and lending wing
 To Venus – there's a time for everything,
 The learned say – and get a lady's love,
 I cannot tell. But God who sits above
 And knows that every action has a cause,
 Let Him decide, for I can only pause
 In silence; this at least is true of May
 That such was the impression made that day
 And such her pity for that sick young man
 She could not rid her heart of Damian,
 Or of the wish to see his troubles ended.
 'Whoever else,' she thought, 'may be offended,
 I do not care; but I can promise this,
 To love him more than anyone there is,
 Though he mayn't have a shirt. I will be kind.'
 Pity flows swiftly in a noble mind.

Here one may see how excellently free
 In bounty women, on taking thought, can be.
 Some female tyrants – many I have known –
 Are pitiless, their hearts are made of stone
 And would have rather let him die the death
 Than yield their grace or favour by a breath,

And they exult in showing cruel pride,
 Calmly indifferent to homicide.

Soft May felt pity, you must understand.
 She wrote a letter in her own fair hand
 In which she granted him her very grace.
 There needed nothing but the time and place
 To grant the satisfaction he desired;
 He was to have whatever he required.

So when she saw occasion one fine day
 To visit him, off went the lovely May
 And thrust this letter down with subtle skill
 Under his pillow, read it if he will.
 She took him by the hand and squeezed it hard
 (But secretly, for she was on her guard),
 Bade him get well, then went without demur
 To January who had called for her.

And up rose happy Damian on the morrow;
 Gone was all trace of malady and sorrow.
 He preens himself and prunes and combs his curls
 To take the fancy of this queen of girls.
 To January his master, in addition
 He was a very spaniel in submission,
 And was so pleasant in his general drift
 (Craft's all that matters if you have the gift),
 That people spoke him well in every way,
 But above all he stood in grace with May.
 Thus I leave Damian, busy with his needs,
 And turn once more to how my tale proceeds.

Some writers argue that felicity
 Wholly consists in pleasure; certainly
 This noble January, as best he might
 In all that was befitting to a knight,
 Had planned to live deliciously in pleasure;
 His house and all his finery and treasure
 Were fashioned to his rank as are a king's,
 And among other of his handsome things
 He had a garden, walled about with stone;
 So fair a garden never was there known.

For out of doubt I honestly suppose
 That he who wrote the *Romance of the Rose*
 Could not have pictured such magnificence;
 Priapus never had the eloquence,
 Though he be god of gardens, to re-tell
 The beauty of this garden and the well
 Under a laurel, standing ever-green.
 Many a time King Pluto and his Queen
 Prosérpina and all her fairy rout
 Disported and made melody about
 That well and held their dances, I am told.
 This January, so noble, and so old,
 Found walking in it such felicity
 That no one was allowed to have the key
 Except himself, and for its little wicket
 He had a silver latch-key to unclick it
 Or lock it up, and when his thought was set
 Upon the need to pay his wife her debt
 In summer season, thither would he go
 With May his wife when there was none to know,
 And anything they had not done in bed
 There in the garden was performed instead,
 So in this manner many a merry day
 Was spent by January and lovely May.
 But worldly joys, alas, may not endure
 For January or anyone, be sure.

Changeable Fortune, O unstable Chance,
 Thine is the scorpion's treacherous advance!
 Thy head all flattery, about to sting,
 Thy tail a death, and death by poisoning.
 O brittle joy, O venom sweet and strange,
 O monster that so subtly canst arrange
 Thy gifts and colour them with all the dyes
 Of durability to catch the wise
 And foolish too! Say, why hast thou deceived
 Old January, thy friend, as he believed?
 Thou hast bereft him of his sight, his eye
 Is dark, and in his grief he longs to die.

Alas this noble January, he
 So generous once in his prosperity
 Went blind; quite suddenly he lost his sight.
 Pitiful loss! He wept it day and night,
 While fires of jealousy seared his melancholy,
 For fear his wife might fall into some folly.
 His heart burned hot; he had been nothing loth,
 Nay glad, if one had come to slay them both.
 For neither on his death nor in his life
 Was she to be the mistress or the wife
 Of any other, but in weeds of state,
 True as a turtle that has lost her mate,
 She was to live, the garments on her back
 A widow's, never anything but black.

But in the end, after a month or two,
 His sorrows cooled a little, it is true,
 For when he saw there was no remedy
 He took in patience his adversity,
 Save that the ineradicable sting
 Of jealousy embittered everything,
 For so outrageous are the thoughts it rouses
 That neither when at home nor in the houses
 Of his acquaintance, no, nor anywhere
 Would he allow his wife to take the air
 Unless his hand were on her, day and night.

Ah, how she wept, fresh as she was, and bright,
 Who loved her Damian, and with so benign
 A love that sudden death was her design
 Unless she could enjoy him; so at first
 She wept and waited for her heart to burst.

And Damian too, upon the other part,
 Became in turn so sorrowful of heart
 That none was ever like him: night or day
 There never was a chance to speak to May
 As to his purpose, no, nor anything near it,
 Unless old January was there to hear it,
 Holding her hand and never letting go.
 Nevertheless by writing to and fro

And private signals, Damian knew her mind;
 And she was well aware what he designed.
 O January, what might it thee avail
 Though thou couldst see as far as ship can sail?
 As well be blind and be deceived as be
 Deceived as others are that still can see.
 Consider Argus with his hundred eyes
 Poring and prying, yet for all these spies
 He was deceived, and many more I know,
 God wot, who sagely think they are not so.
 Least said is soonest mended; say no more.

Now this fresh May of whom I spoke before
 Took some warm wax and fashioned an impression
 Of that same key (in January's possession)
 Into the garden, where he often went.
 Damian, who knew exactly what she meant,
 Secretly forged a counterfeited key.
 That's all there is to say, but presently
 A wonder will befall, if you will wait,
 Thanks to this key and to the wicket-gate.

O noble Ovid, that was truly spoken
 When you affirmed there was no cunning token
 Or trickery, however long or hot,
 That lovers could not find. For did they not
 When Pyramus and Thisbe, I recall,
 Though strictly watched, held converse through a wall?
 There was a trick that none could have forecast!
 But to our purpose; ere a week had passed,
 Before July was on them, it befell
 That January's thoughts began to swell,
 Incited by his wife, with eager wishes
 To be at play with her among the bushes
 In his walled garden, he and she alone,
 And so at last one morning he made moan
 To May with this intention: 'Ah,' said he,
 'Rise up, my wife, my love, my lady free!
 The turtle's voice is heard, my dove, my pet.
 Winter is gone with all its rain and wet;

Come out with me, bright-eyes, my columbine,
 O how far fairer are thy breasts than wine!
 Our garden is enclosed and walled about;
 White spouse, come forth to me; ah, never doubt
 But I am wounded to the heart, dear wife,
 For love of you, unspotted in your life
 As well I know. Come forth to take our pleasures,
 Wife of my choice and treasure of my treasures!

He got these lewd old words out of a book.
 And May at once gave Damian a look
 Signalling he should go before and wait;
 So Damian ran ahead, unlocked the gate
 And darted in as swiftly as a bird,
 He managed to be neither seen nor heard,
 And crouched beneath the bushes on his own.

And then this January, blind as stone,
 Came hand in hand with May, but unattended,
 And down into the garden they descended
 And having entered clapped the wicket to.

'Now wife,' he said, 'none's here but I and you,
 And you are she, the creature I best love.
 For by the Lord that sits in Heaven above,
 Believe me I would die upon the knife
 Rather than hurt you, truest, dearest wife.
 Remember how I chose you, for God's sake;
 Not covetously nor in hope to make,
 But only for the love I had to you.
 And though I may be old and sightless too,
 Be true to me and I will tell you why.

'Three things for certain you shall win thereby:
 First, love of Christ; next, honour to yourself;
 Last, your inheritance, my lands and pelf,
 Towers and towns; draw the agreement up,
 They're yours, it shall be signed before we sup.
 But first, as God may bring my soul to bliss,
 I pray you seal the covenant with a kiss.
 And though I may be jealous, blame me not;
 You are so deeply printed in my thought

That when I see your beauty, and engage
 That thought with my dislikable old age,
 I cannot – though it might be death to me –
 Forbear a moment of your company
 For very love; I say it with no doubt.
 Now kiss me, wife, and let us roam about.'

Fresh-hearted May on hearing what he said
 Benignly answered him with drooping head,
 But first and foremost she began to weep.
 'Indeed,' she said, 'I have a soul to keep
 No less than you, and then there is my honour
 Which for a wife is like a flower upon her.
 I put it in your hands for good or ill
 When the priest bound my body to your will,
 So let me answer of my own accord
 If you will give me leave, beloved lord;
 I pray to God that never dawn the day
 – Or let me die as foully as I may –
 When I shall do my family that shame
 Or bring so much dishonour on my name
 As to be false. And if my love grow slack,
 Take me and strip me, sew me in a sack
 And drop me in the nearest lake to drown.
 I am no common woman of the town,
 I am of gentle birth, I keep aloof.
 So why speak thus to me, for what reproof
 Have I deserved? It's men that are untrue
 And women, women ever blamed anew.
 I think it a pretence that men profess
 They hide behind a charge of faithlessness.'

And as she spoke she saw a short way off
 Young Damian in his bush. She gave a cough
 And signalled with a finger quickly where
 He was to climb into a tree – a pear –
 Heavily charged with fruit, and up he went,
 Perfectly understanding what she meant,
 Or any other signal, I may state,
 Better than January could, her mate.

For she had written to him, never doubt it,
 Telling him all and how to set about it.
 And there I leave him sitting, by your pardon,
 While May and January roamed the garden.

Bright was the day and blue the firmament,
 Down fell the golden flood that Phoebus sent
 To gladden every flower with his beams;
 He was in Gemini at the time, it seems,
 And but a little from his declination
 In Cancer, which is Jupiter's exaltation.
 And so it happened through the golden tide
 Into the garden from the further side
 Came Pluto who is king of Fairyland
 And many a lady of his elfin band
 Behind his queen, the lady Proserpine,
 Ravished by him from Aetna. I incline
 To think it is in Claudian you can read
 How she was gathering flowers in a mead
 And how he fetched her in his grisly cart.
 The King of Faery sat him down apart
 Upon a little bench of turfy green,
 And then he turned and thus addressed his queen:

'Dear wife,' he said, 'what no one can gainsay
 And what experience shows us every day
 Are the foul treacheries women do to men.
 Ten thousand tales, and multiply by ten,
 Record your notable untruth and lightness.
 O Solomon in thy wisdom, wealth and brightness,
 Replete in sapience as in worldly glory,
 How memorable are thy words and story
 To every creature capable of reason!
 Of man's true bounty and of woman's treason
 Thou saidst, "Among a thousand found I one,
 And yet among all women found I none."

'So said the king who knew your wickedness;
 And Jesus son of Sirach,* as I guess,
 Seldom says much of you in reverence –
 Wild fire and a corruptive pestilence

Fall down upon you all to burn and blight!
 Do you not see that honourable knight
 Who, being blind and old and unobservant,
 Is to be cuckolded by his own servant?
 Look, there he sits, that lecher in the tree!
 Now will I grant it of my majesty
 To this blind, old and estimable knight
 That he shall instantly receive his sight
 Whenever his wife begins her villainy.
 He shall know all about her harlotry
 Both in rebuke of her and others too.'

'So that,' the queen replied, 'is what you'll do!
 Now, by my grandsire's soul, though she is young
 I'll put a ready answer on her tongue
 And every woman's after, for her sake.
 Though taken in their guilt they yet shall make
 A bold-faced explanation to excuse them
 And bear down all who venture to accuse them;
 For lack of answer none of them shall die.
 Though a man saw things with his naked eye
 We'll face it out, we women, and be bold
 To weep and swear, insinuate and scold
 As long as men are gullible as geese.

'What do I care for your authorities?
 I'm well aware this Jew, this Solomon,
 Found fools among us women, many a one;
 But if he never found a woman true,
 God knows that there are many men who do,
 Who find them faithful, virtuous and good.
 Witness all those in Christian sisterhood
 Who proved their constancy by martyrdom.
 And Roman history has mentioned some,
 Aye many, women of exceeding truth.
 Now keep your temper, sir, though he, forsooth,
 Said there were no good women, if you can.
 Consider the opinion of this man.
 He meant it thus, that sovereign constancy
 Is God's alone who sits in Trinity.

Hey! God knows Solomon is only one;
 Why do you make so much of Solomon?
 What though he built God's temple in the story?
 What though he were so rich, so high in glory?
 He made a temple for false gods as well,
 And what could be more reprehensible?
 Plaster him over as you may, dear sir,
 He was a lecher and idolater,
 And in his latter days forsook the Lord;
 Had God not spared him, as the books record,
 Because He loved his father, surely he would
 Have lost his kingdom, rather than that he should.
 And all the villainous terms that you apply
 To women, I value at a butterfly!
 I am a woman and I needs must speak
 Or swell until I burst. Shall I be meek
 If he has said that we were wrangleresses?
 As ever I may hope to flaunt my tresses,
 I will not spare for manners or politeness
 To rail at one who rails at woman's lightness.'

'Madam,' he said, 'be angry now no more;
 I give it up. But seeing that I swore
 Upon my oath to grant him sight again,
 I'll stand by what I said, I tell you plain.
 I am a king, it fits me not to lie.'
 'And I'm the Queen of Fairyland, say I!
 Her answer she shall have, I undertake.
 Let us have no more words, for goodness' sake.
 Indeed I don't intend to be contrary.'

Now let us turn again to January
 Who walked the garden with his airy May
 And sang more merrily than a popinjay,
 'I love you best, and ever shall, my sweet!'
 So long among the paths had strayed their feet
 That they at last had reached the very tree
 Where Damian sat in waiting merrily,
 High in his leafy bower of fresh green.
 And fresh young May, so shingly serene,

Began to sigh and said 'Oh! I've a pain!
 Oh Sir! Whatever happens, let me gain
 One of those pears up there that I can see,
 Or I shall die! I long so terribly
 To eat a little pear, it looks so green.
 O help me for the love of Heaven's Queen!
 I warn you that a woman in my plight
 May often feel so great an appetite
 For fruit that she may die to go without.'

'Alas,' he said, 'that there's no boy about,
 Able to climb. Alas, alas,' said he,
 'That I am blind.' 'No matter, sir,' said she,
 'For if you would consent – there's nothing in it –
 To hold the pear-tree in your arms a minute
 (I know you have no confidence in me),
 Then I could climb up well enough,' said she,
 'If I could set my foot upon your back.'

'Of course,' he said, 'why, you shall never lack
 For that, or my heart's blood to do you good.'
 And down he stooped; upon his back she stood,
 Catching a branch, and with a spring she thence
 – Ladies, I beg you not to take offence,
 I can't embellish, I'm a simple man –
 Went up into the tree, and Damian
 Pulled up her smock at once and in he thrust.

And when King Pluto saw this shameful lust
 He gave back sight to January once more
 And made him see far better than before.
 Never was man more taken with delight
 Than January when he received his sight.
 And his first thought was to behold his love.
 He cast his eyes into the tree above
 Only to see that Damian had addressed
 His wife in ways that cannot be expressed
 Unless I use a most discourteous word.
 He gave a roaring cry, as might be heard
 From stricken mothers when their babies die.
 'Help! Out upon you!' He began to cry.
 'Strong Madam Strumpet! 'What are you up to there?'

'What ails you, sir?' said she, 'what makes you swear?
 Have patience, use the reason in your mind,
 I've helped you back to sight when you were blind!
 Upon my soul I'm telling you no lies;
 They told me if I wished to heal your eyes
 Nothing could cure them better than for me
 To struggle with a fellow in a tree.
 God knows it was a kindness that I meant.'
 'Struggle?' said he, 'Yes! Anyhow, in it went!
 God send you both a shameful death to die!
 He had you, I saw it with my very eye,
 And if I did not, hang me by the neck!'

'Why then,' she said, 'my medicine's gone to wreck,
 For certainly if you could really see
 You'd never say such words as those to me;
 You caught some glimpses, but your sight's not good.'
 'I see,' he said, 'as well as ever I could,
 Thanks be to God! And with both eyes, I do!
 And that, I swear, is what he seemed to do.'

'You're hazy, hazy, my good sir,' said she;
 'That's all I get for helping you to see.
 Alas,' she said, 'that ever I was so kind!'

'Dear wife,' said January, 'never mind,
 Come down, dear heart, and if I've slandered you
 God knows I'm punished for it. Come down, do!
 But by my father's soul, it seemed to me
 That Damian had enjoyed you in the tree
 And that your smock was pulled up over your breast.'
 'Well, think,' she said, 'as it may please you best,
 But, Sir, when suddenly a man awakes,
 He cannot grasp a thing at once, it takes
 A little time to do so perfectly,
 For he is dazed at first and cannot see.
 Just so a man who has been blind for long
 Cannot expect his sight to be so strong
 At first, or see as well as those may do
 Who've had their eyesight back a day or two.
 Until your sight has settled down a bit
 You may be frequently deceived by it.'

Be careful then, for by our heavenly King
 Many a man feels sure he's seen a thing
 Which was quite different really, he may fudge it;
 Misapprehend a thing and you'll misjudge it.'

And on the word she jumped down from the tree.
 And January – who is glad but he? –
 Kissed her and clasped her in his arms – how often! –
 And stroked her womb caressingly to soften
 Her indignation. To his palace then
 He led her home. Be happy, gentlemen,
 That finishes my tale of January;
 God and his Mother guard us, blessed Mary!

Epilogue to the Merchant's Tale

'Ey, mercy of God!' our Host exclaimed thereat,
 'May God preserve me from a wife like that!
 Just look what cunning tricks and subtleties
 There are in woman! Busy little bees
 They are, deceiving silly men like us!
 They're always sliding and evading thus,
 Dodging the truth; the Merchant's tale has shown it
 And it's as true as steel – I have to own it.
 I have a wife myself, a poor one too,
 But what a tongue! She is a blabbing shrew,
 And she has other vices, plenty more.
 Well, let it go! No sense to rub a sore.
 But, d'you know what? In confidence, good sir,
 I much regret that I am tied to her.
 Were I to reckon her vices one by one,
 I'd only be a fool when I had done;
 And why? Because it would be sure to be
 Reported back to her, by two or three
 Among us here; by whom I needn't say;
 In all such matters women find a way.
 And anyhow my brains would hardly run
 To telling you, and so my story's done.'