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The Works Of Alexander Pope Esq.

In Nine Volumes Complete. With His Last Corrections, Additions, And Improvements; As they were delivered to the Editor a little before his Death

Containing His Translations And Imitations

Pope, Alexander

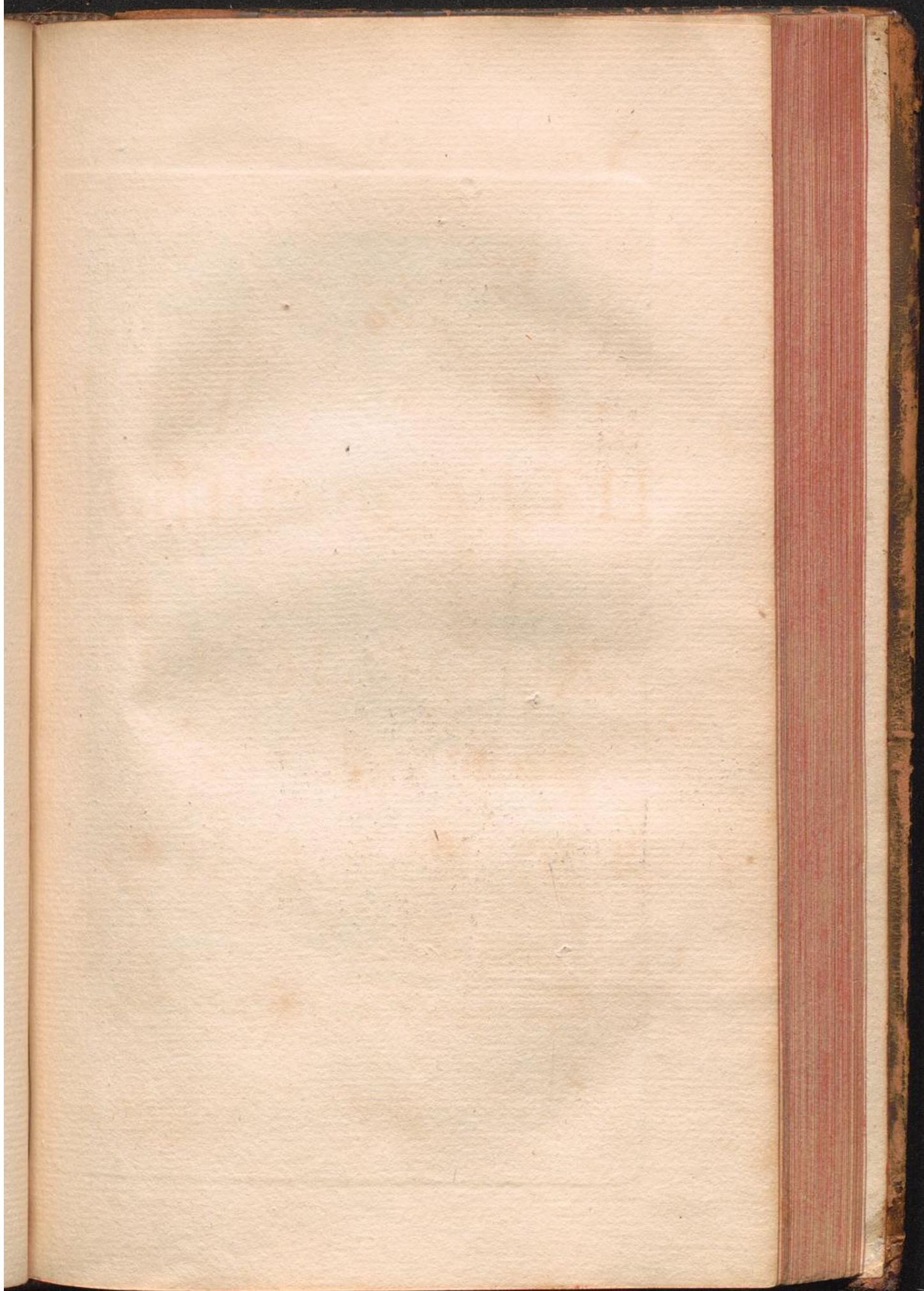
London, 1751

The Wife of Bath, from Chaucer

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THE
WIFE of BATH
HER
PROLOGUE.
FROM
CHAUCER.

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PROLOGUE
FROM
CHAUCER.





J. Wale delin

C. Mosley Sculp.

*Ye sovereign Wives! give ear and understand,
Thus shall ye speed and exercise Command.
Wife of Bath.*

THE
WIFE of BATH.
FROM
CHAUCER.

BEHOLD the woes of matrimonial life,
And hear with rev'rence an experienc'd wife!
To dear-bought wisdom give the credit due,
And think, for once, a woman tells you true.
In all these trials I have borne a part, 5
I was myself the scourge that caus'd the smart;
For, since fifteen, in triumph have I led
Five captive husbands from the church to bed.

Christ saw a wedding once, the scripture says,
And saw but one, 'tis thought, in all his days; 10
Whence some infer, whose conscience is too nice,
No pious Christian ought to marry twice.

But let them read, and solve me, if they can,
The words address'd to the Samaritan;

Five times in lawful wedlock she was join'd ; 15
And sure the certain stint was ne'er defin'd.

Encrease and multiply, was heav'n's command,
And that's a text I clearly understand
This too, " Let men their fires and mothers leave
" And to their dearer wives for ever cleave." 20
More wives than one by Solomon were try'd,
Or else the wisest of mankind's bely'd.
I've had myself full many a merry fit ;
And trust in heav'n I may have many yet.

For when my transitory spouse, unkind, 25 }
Shall die, and leave his woeful wife behind, }
I'll take the next good Christian I can find. }

Paul, knowing one could never serve our turn,
Declar'd 'twas better far to wed than burn.
There's danger in assembling fire and tow ; 30
I grant 'em that, and what it means you know.
The same Apostle too has elsewhere own'd,
No precept for Virginitie he found :
'Tis but a counsel—and we women still
Take which we like, the counsel, or our will. 35

I envy not their blifs, if he or she
Think fit to live in perfect chastity ;

THE WIFE OF BATH. 127

Pure let them be, and free from taint of vice ;
 I, for a few slight spots, am not so nice.
 Heav'n calls us diff'rent ways, on these bestows 40
 One proper gift, another grants to those :
 Not ev'ry man's oblig'd to sell his store,
 And give up all his substance to the poor ;
 Such as are perfect, may, I can't deny ;
 But, by your leave, Divines, so am not I. 45

Full many a Saint, since first the world began,
 Liv'd an unspotted maid, in spite of man :
 Let such (a God's name) with fine wheat be fed,
 And let us honest wives eat barley bread.
 For me, I'll keep the post assign'd by heav'n, 50
 And use the copious talent it has giv'n :
 Let my good spouse pay tribute, do me right,
 And keep an equal reck'ning ev'ry night :
 His proper body is not his, but mine ;
 For so said Paul, and Paul's a sound divine. 55

Know then, of those five husbands I have had,
 Three were just tolerable, two were bad.
 The three were old, but rich and fond beside,
 And toil'd most piteously to please their bride :
 But since their wealth (the best they had) was mine,
 The rest, without much loss, I could resign.

128 THE WIFE OF BATH.

Sure to be lov'd, I took no pains to please,
Yet had more Pleasure far than they had Ease.

Presents flow'd in apace : with show'rs of gold,
They made their court, like Jupiter of old. 65

If I but smil'd, a sudden youth they found,
And a new palsy seiz'd them when I frown'd.

Ye sov'reign wives! give ear, and understand,
Thus shall ye speak, and exercise command.

For never was it giv'n to mortal man, 70
To lye so boldly as we women can :

Forswear the fact, tho' seen with both his eyes,
And call your maids to witness how he lies.

Hark, old Sir Paul! ('twas thus I us'd to say)
Whence is our neighbour's wife so rich and gay?
Treated, carefs'd, where'er she's pleas'd to roam---
I sit in tatters, and immur'd at home.

Why to her house dost thou so oft repair?

Art thou so am'rous? and is she so fair?

If I but see a cousin or a friend, 80

Lord! how you swell, and rage like any fiend!

But you reel home, a drunken beastly bear,

Then preach till midnight in your easy chair;

Cry, wives are false, and ev'ry woman evil,

And give up all that's female to the devil. 85

THE WIFE OF BATH. 129

If poor (you say) she drains her husband's purse;
If rich, she keeps her priest, or something worse;
If highly born, intolerably vain,
Vapours and pride by turns possess her brain,
Now gayly mad, now sourly splenetic, 90
Freakish when well, and fretful when she's sick.
If fair, then chaste she cannot long abide,
By pressing youth attack'd on ev'ry side:
If foul, her wealth the lusty lover lures,
Or else her wit some fool-gallant procures, 95
Or else she dances with becoming grace,
Or shape excuses the defects of face.
There swims no goose so grey, but soon or late,
She finds some honest gander for her mate.

Horses (thou say'st) and asses, men may try,
And ring suspected vessels ere they buy: 101
But wives, a random choice, untry'd they take,
They dream in courtship, but in wedlock wake:
Then, nor till then, the veil's remov'd away,
And all the woman glares in open day. 105

You tell me, to preserve your wife's good grace,
Your eyes must always languish on my face,
Your tongue with constant flatt'ries feed my ear,
And tag each sentence with, My life! my dear!

If by strange chance, a modest blush be rais'd, 110
 Be sure my fine complexion must be prais'd.
 My garments always must be new and gay,
 And feasts still kept upon my wedding-day.
 Then must my nurse be pleas'd, and fav'rite maid;
 And endless treats, and endless visits paid, 115
 To a long train of kindred, friends, allies;
 All this thou say'st, and all thou say'st are lyes.

On Jenkin too you cast a squinting eye:
 What! can your prentice raise your jealousy?
 Fresh are his ruddy cheeks, his forehead fair, 120
 And like the burnish'd gold his curling hair.
 But clear thy wrinkled brow, and quit thy sorrow,
 I'd scorn your prentice, should you die to-morrow.

Why are thy chests all lock'd? on what design?
 Are not thy worldly goods and treasure mine? 125
 Sir, I'm no fool: nor shall you, by St. John,
 Have goods and body to yourself alone.
 One you shall quit, in spite of both your eyes—
 I heed not, I, the bolts, the locks, the spies.
 If you had wit, you'd say, "Go where you will,
 "Dear spouse, I credit not the tales they tell: 131
 "Take all the freedoms of a married life;
 "I know thee for a virtuous, faithful wife.

THE WIFE OF BATH. 131

Lord! when you have enough, what need you care
How merrily soever others fare? 135

Tho' all the day I give and take delight,
Doubt not, sufficient will be left at night.

'Tis but a just and rational desire,
To light a taper at a neighbour's fire.

There's danger too, you think, in rich array,
And none can long be modest that are gay: 141

The Cat, if you but singe her tabby skin,
The chimney keeps, and sits content within;
But once grown sleek, will from her corner run,
Sport with her tail, and wanton in the sun; 145

She licks her fair round face, and frisks abroad,
To show her furr, and to be catterwaw'd.

Lo thus, my friends, I wrought to my desires
These three right ancient venerable fires.

I told 'em, Thus you say, and thus you do, 150
And told 'em false, but Jenkin swore 'twas true.

I, like a dog, could bite as well as whine,
And first complain'd, whene'er the guilt was mine:

I tax'd them oft with wenching and amours,
When their weak legs scarce dragg'd 'em out of
doors; 155

And swore the rambles that I took by night,
Were all to spy what damsels they bedight.

That colour brought me many hours of mirth;
 For all this wit is giv'n us from our birth.
 Heav'n gave to woman the peculiar grace 160
 To spin, to weep, and cully human race.
 By this nice conduct, and this prudent course,
 By murm'ring, wheedling, stratagem, and force,
 I still prevail'd, and would be in the right,
 Or curtain-lectures made a restless night. 165
 If once my husband's arm was o'er my side,
 What! so familiar with your spouse? I cry'd:
 I levied first a tax upon his need;
 Then let him—'twas a nicety indeed!
 Let all mankind this certain maxim hold, 170
 Marry who will, our sex is to be fold.
 With empty hands no taffels you can lure,
 But fulsom love for gain we can endure;
 For gold we love the impotent and old, 174
 And heave, and pant, and kifs, and cling, for gold.
 Yet with embraces, curses oft I mixt,
 Then kifs'd again, and chid and rail'd betwixt.
 Well, I may make my will in peace, and die,
 For not one word in man's arrears am I.
 To drop a dear dispute I was unable, 180
 Ev'n tho' the Pope himself had sat at table.

But when my point was gain'd, then thus I spoke,

“ Billy, my dear, how sheepishly you look ?

“ Approach, my spouse, and let me kiss thy cheek ;

“ Thou shoul'dst be always thus, resign'd and meek !

“ Of Job's great patience since so oft you preach,

“ Well should you practise, who so well can teach.

“ 'Tis difficult to do, I must allow,

“ But I, my dearest, will instruct you how.

“ Great is the blessing of a prudent wife, 190

“ Who puts a period to domestic strife.

“ One of us two must rule, and one obey; }
 “ And since in man right reason bears the sway, }
 “ Let that frail thing, weak woman, have her way. }

“ The wives of all my family have rul'd 195

“ Their tender husbands, and their passions cool'd.

“ Eye, 'tis unmanly thus to sigh and groan ;

“ What ! would you have me to yourself alone ?

“ Why take me, Love ! take all and every part !

“ Here's your Revenge ! you love it at your heart.

“ Would I vouchsafe to sell what nature gave,

“ You little think what custom I could have.

“ But see ! I'm all your own--nay hold--for shame !

“ What means my dear — indeed — you are to

“ blame.”

Thus with my first three Lords I past my life;
A very woman, and a very wife.

What sums from these old spouses I could raise,
Procur'd young husbands in my riper days.
Tho' past my bloom, not yet decay'd was I,
Wanton and wild, and chatter'd like a pye. 210

In country dances still I bore the bell,
And sung as sweet as ev'ning Philomel.
To clear my quail-pipe, and refresh my soul,
Full oft I drain'd the spicy nut-brown bowl;
Rich luscious wines, that youthful blood improve,
And warm the swelling veins to feats of love:
For 'tis as sure, as cold ingenders hail,
A liqu'rish mouth must have a lech'rous tail;
Wine lets no lover unrewarded go,
As all true gamesters by experience know. 220

But oh, good Gods! whene'er a thought I cast
On all the joys of youth and beauty past,
To find in pleasures I have had my part,
Still warms me to the bottom of my heart.
This wicked world was once my dear delight; 225
Now all my conquests, all my charms good night!
The flour consum'd, the best that now I can,
Is e'en to make my market of the bran,

My fourth dear spouse was not exceeding true ;
 He kept, 'twas thought, a private miss or two :
 But all that score I paid—as how? you'll say, 231
 Not with my body, in a filthy way :
 But I so dress'd, and danc'd, and drank, and din'd ;
 And view'd a friend, with eyes so very kind,
 As stung his heart, and made his marrow fry, 235
 With burning rage, and frantick jealousy.
 His soul, I hope, enjoys eternal glory,
 For here on earth I was his purgatory.
 Oft, when his shoe the most severely wrung,
 He put on careless airs, and fat and sung. 240
 How sore I gall'd him, only heav'n could know,
 And he that felt, and I that caus'd the woe.
 He dy'd, when last from pilgrimage I came,
 With other gossips, from Jerusalem ;
 And now lies buried underneath a Rood, 245
 Fair to be seen, and rear'd of honest wood.
 A tomb indeed, with fewer sculptures grac'd,
 Than that Mausolus' pious widow plac'd,
 Or where inshrin'd the great Darius lay ;
 But cost on graves is merely thrown away. 250
 The pit fill'd up, with turf we cover'd o'er ;
 So bless the good man's soul, I say no more.

Now for my fifth lov'd Lord, the last and best;
 (Kind heav'n afford him everlasting rest)
 Full hearty was his love, and I can shew, 255
 The tokens on my ribs in black and blue;
 Yet, with a knack, my heart he could have won,
 While yet the smart was shooting in the bone.
 How quaint an appetite in women reigns!
 Free gifts we scorn, and love what costs us pains:
 Let men avoid us, and on them we leap; 261
 A glutted market makes provision cheap.
 In pure good will I took this jovial spark,
 Of Oxford he, a most egregious clerk.
 He boarded with a widow in the town, 265
 A trusty gossip, one dame Alison.
 Full well the secrets of my soul she knew,
 Better than e'er our parish Priest could do.
 To her I told whatever could befall:
 Had but my husband piss'd against a wall, 270
 Or done a thing that might have cost his life,
 She—and my niece—and one more worthy wife,
 Had known it all: what most he would conceal,
 To these I made no scruple to reveal.
 Oft has he blush'd from ear to ear for shame, 275
 That e'er he told a secret to his dame,

It so befel, in holy time of Lent,
 That oft a day I to this goffip went ;
 (My husband, thank my stars, was out of town)
 From house to house we rambled up and down,
 This clerk, myself, and my good neighbour Alse,
 To see, be seen, to tell, and gather tales.
 Visits to ev'ry Church we daily paid,
 And march'd in ev'ry holy Masquerade,
 The Stations duly, and the Vigils kept ; 285
 Not much we fasted, but scarce ever slept.
 At Sermons too I shone in scarlet gay,
 The wasting moth ne'er spoil'd my best array ;
 The cause was this, I wore it ev'ry day.

'Twas when fresh May her early bloffoms yields,
 This Clerk and I were walking in the fields.
 We grew so intimate, I can't tell how,
 I pawn'd my honour, and engag'd my vow,
 If e'er I laid my husband in his urn,
 That he, and only he, should serve my turn. 295
 We strait struck hands, the bargain was agreed ;
 I still have shifts against a time of need :
 The mouse that always trusts to one poor hole,
 Can never be a mouse of any soul.

I vow'd, I scarce cou'd sleep since first I knew him
 And durst be sworn he had bewitch'd me to him ;
 If e'er I slept, I dream'd of him alone,
 And dreams foretel, as learned men have shown: }
 All this I said ; but dream, firs, I had none : }
 I follow'd but my crafty Crony's lore, 305
 Who bid me tell this lye—and twenty more.

Thus day by day, and month by month we past ;
 It pleas'd the Lord to take my spouse at last.
 I tore my gown, I soil'd my locks with dust,
 And beat my breasts, as wretched widows—must.
 Before my face my handkerchief I spread, 311
 To hide the flood of tears I did—not shed.
 The good man's coffin to the Church was born ;
 Around, the neighbours, and my clerk too, mourn.
 But as he march'd, good Gods ! he show'd a pair
 Of legs and feet, so clean, so strong, so fair ! 316
 Of twenty winters age he seem'd to be ;
 I (to say truth) was twenty more than he ;
 But vig'rous still, a lively buxom dame ;
 And had a wond'rous gift to quench a flame. 320
 A Conj'rer once, that deeply could divine,
 Assur'd me, Mars in Taurus was my sign.

THE WIFE OF BATH. 139

As the stars order'd, such my life has been :

Alas, alas, that ever love was sin !

Fair Venus gave me fire, and sprightly grace, 325

And Mars assurance, and a dauntless face.

By virtue of this pow'rful constellation,

I follow'd always my own inclination.

But to my tale : A month scarce pass'd away,
With dance and song we kept the nuptial day. 330

All I possess'd I gave to his command,

My goods and chattels, money, house, and land :

But oft repented, and repent it still ;

He prov'd a rebel to my sov'reign will :

Nay once by heav'n he struck me on the face ; 335

Hear but the fact, and judge yourselves the case.

Stubborn as any Lions was I ;

And knew full well to raise my voice on high ;

As true a rambler as I was before,

And would be so, in spite of all he swore. 340

He, against this right sagely would advise,

And old examples set before my eyes,

Tell how the Roman matrons led their life,

Of Gracchus' mother, and Duilius' wife ;

And chose the sermon, as befeem'd his wit, 345

With some grave sentence out of holy writ.

140 THE WIFE OF BATH.

Oft would he fay, who builds his house on sands,
 Pricks his blind horse across the fallow lands,
 Or lets his wife abroad with pilgrims roam,
 Deserves a fool's-cap and long ears at home. 350
 All this avail'd not; for whoe'er he be
 That tells my faults, I hate him mortally:
 And so do numbers more, I'll boldly say,
 Men, women, clergy, regular, and lay.
 My spouse (who was, you know, to learning bred)
 A certain treatise oft at ev'ning read, 356
 Where divers Authors (whom the dev'l confound
 For all their lyes) were in one volume bound.
 Valerius, whole; and of St. Jerome, part;
 Chrysippus and Tertullian, Ovid's Art, 360
 Solomon's proverbs, Eloïsa's loves;
 And many more than sure the Church approves.
 More legends were there here, of wicked wives,
 Than good, in all the Bible and Saints-lives.
 Who drew the Lion vanquish'd? 'Twas a Man.
 But cou'd we women write as scholars can, 366
 Men should stand mark'd with far more wickedness,
 Than all the sons of Adam could redress.
 Love seldom haunts the breast where Learning lies,
 And Venus sets ere Mercury can rise. 270

Those play the scholars who can't play the men,
 And use that weapon which they have, their pen;
 When old, and past the relish of delight,
 Then down they sit, and in their dotage write,
 That not one woman keeps her marriage-vow. 375
 (This by the way, but to my purpose now.)

It chanc'd my husband, on a winter's night,
 Read in this book, aloud, with strange delight,
 How the first female (as the Scriptures show)
 Brought her own spouse and all his race to woe.
 How Samson fell; and he whom Dejanire 381
 Wrap'd in th' envenom'd shirt, and set on fire.
 How curs'd Eryphile her lord betray'd,
 And the dire ambush Clytæmnestra laid.
 But what most pleas'd him was the Cretan dame,
 And husband-bull—oh monstrous! fie for shame!

He had by heart, the whole detail of woe
 Xantippe made her good man undergo;
 How oft she scolded in a day, he knew,
 How many piss-pots on the sage she threw; 390
 Who took it patiently, and wip'd his head;
 Rain follows thunder, that was all he said.

He read, how Arius to his friend complain'd,
 A fatal Tree was growing in his land,

On which three wives successively had twin'd 395
A sliding noose, and waver'd in the wind.

Where grows this plant (reply'd the friend) oh
where?

For better fruit did never orchard bear.

Give me some slip of this most blissful tree,

And in my garden planted shall it be. 400

Then how two wives their lord's destruction prove

Thro' hatred one, and one thro' too much love;

That for her husband mix'd a pois'nous draught,

And this for lust an am'rous philtre bought:

The nimble juice soon seiz'd his giddy head, 405

Frantic at night, and in the morning dead.

How some with swords their sleeping lords have
flain,

And some have hammer'd nails into their brain,

And some have drench'd them with a deadly potion;

All this he read, and read with great devotion. 410

Long time I heard, and swell'd, and blush'd, and
frown'd;

But when no end of these vile tales I found,

When still he read, and laugh'd, and read again,

And half the night was thus consum'd in vain;

Provok'd to vengeance, three large leaves I tore 415

And with one buffet fell'd him on the floor.

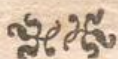
With that my husband in a fury rose,
 And down he fettled me with hearty blows.
 I groan'd, and lay extended on my side;
 Oh! thou hast slain me for my wealth (I cry'd) 420
 Yet I forgive thee --- take my last embrace ---
 He wept, kind soul! and stoop'd to kiss my face;
 I took him such a box as turn'd him blue,
 Then sigh'd and cry'd, Adieu, my dear, adieu!

But after many a hearty struggle past, 425
 I condescended to be pleas'd at last.

Soon as he said, My mistress and my wife,
 Do what you list, the term of all your life:

I took to heart the merits of the cause,
 And stood content to rule by wholesome laws; 430
 Receiv'd the reins of absolute command,
 With all the government of house and land,
 And empire o'er his tongue, and o'er his hand. }
 As for the volume that revil'd the dames, 434
 'Twas torn to fragments, and condemn'd to flames.

Now heav'n on all my husbands gone, bestow
 Pleasures above, for tortures felt below:
 That rest they wish'd for, grant them in the grave,
 And bless those souls my conduct help'd to save!



THE WIFE OF BATH

With that a husband in a wry way
And down he fell, as with heavy blows
I ground, and lay extended on my side
Oh! thou hast slain me for my wealth (I cry)
For I forgive thee — take thy full embrace —
He wept, kind soul! and hooded to his face;
I took him such a box as thou shalt find
That night, and cry'd, 'Adieu my dear, adieu!
But after many a heavy sigh he said,
I wish myself as dead as I am laid.

THE MERCHANT'S WIFE

I look to hear the news of the court
And heed count'ails by wisdom's way;

THE MERCHANT'S WIFE

And now, for the purpose, and so he said,
As for the purpose that would the danger
Transported remedy, and hounding distress
How hard on all my husband's goods
I have above, in nature, the better
That all they will, the goods shall be
And bid that thou art come to bed!