The Wife of Bath’s Portrait, Prologue, and Tale from The Canterbury Tales (ca. 1387–1400)

Geoffrey Chaucer
Contributed by Tory V. Pearman

Introduction

Though the General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales mentions a handful of atypical physical features on the pilgrims such as the Friar’s lisp, the Miller’s wart, the Summoner’s scarred face, and the Cook’s ulcer, only Alisoun of Bath’s partial deafness appears beyond the Prologue, where its cause, a strike from her fifth husband Jankyn, becomes an integral plot point in her Prologue. Introduced in the second line of her portrait, Alisoun’s deafness becomes a primary physical marker of her identity, one in a line of physical anomalies that include her aging (and perhaps infertile), yet sexually voracious body, wide hips, gap-teeth, and visible birthmarks. The narrator deems her deafness “scathe,” which the MED explains could indicate both “a matter of regret, a pity” and “harm resulting from war” or “punishment.” And, as we see in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, Jankyn’s blow is obviously punitive, done in retaliation after Alisoun damages his Book of Wicked Wives, a compilation of biblical, patriarchal, and medical texts outlining the defiant and disobedient nature of womankind and rooting stereotypical feminine attributes to the supposed physical deficiency of the female body itself. Alisoun’s violent ripping out of three of the book’s leaves foreshadows the violent injury that Jankyn will soon deal out. Her deafness is thus the punishment for her sexual voracity, a condition with its own disabling qualities, as her Prologue effectively demonstrates. Tellingly, in her Tale, Alisoun aligns herself not only with the “loathly lady” and Midas’ prattling wife, but also Midas himself, whose ears have been transformed into those of an ass as penance for his own insubordination.

The condition of deafness carried many meanings in the late Middle Ages. Medical authorities distinguished between congenital and acquired deafness, noting the incurability of the condition in most cases despite the existence of some medical treatments. Though not generally doled out as a punishment, deafness was in some cases viewed as a divine punishment for sinfulness, whether committed by a deaf child’s parents or committed by an individual acquiring deafness later in life. Because the ears and eyes were considered bodily portals to the soul, medieval interpretations of deafness were similar to those of blindness. As a result, deafness, like blindness, could be viewed as evidence of a limited ability to fully comprehend Christian religious truths. Upon first glance, the defiance Alisoun exhibits in response to male-authored religious and medical texts throughout her Prologue seems to demonstrate what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call the materiality of metaphor, or the metaphorical uses of disability in written texts to give tangibility to abstract concepts such as ignorance or sinfulness; however, it becomes clear that Alisoun’s deliberate and skillful manipulation of such misogynist texts to support her permissive stance on multiple marriages reveals a deep understanding of the “auctoritee” that she purports to oppose. Scholars
remain divided on whether Alisoun’s use of male authority allows her to break free from it or merely reiterate it, but it is clear that she exposes the sexism, ageism, and ableism institutionalized by such discourse.

A question central to understanding the literary function(s) of deafness in Alisoun’s Portrait and Prologue is whether the condition truly disables her. Although it is clearly a punishment for her subversive behavior, her deafness does not seem to impede her life in any substantial ways. She remains a successful cloth-maker and manages to establish herself as a seasoned pilgrim. In fact, her impairment gives her a reason to take part in pilgrimage, as pilgrims often journeyed to shrines like Saint Thomas Beckett’s in search of miraculous cure for physical ailments. Moreover, the fight that causes her deafness ends in what could be interpreted as a “victory” for Alisoun: the destruction of the book and dominion over Jankyn and his estate (ll. 813–22). Her admitted deference to him, however, calls her newfound power into question. Her Tale presents a similar dilemma. In it, an old hag, who is most certainly Alisoun’s fantastical counterpart, transforms into a beautiful woman who remains deferential to her new husband, a convicted rapist. Both the Prologue and Tale thus feature women with imperfect bodies whose contested power is consistently undercut by male authority.

Bibliography


The Portrait of the Wife of Bath*

A good Wyf was ther of bisyde Bathe,
But she was som-del° deef, and that was
scarhe.""
Of clooth-making she hadde swiche an
haunt,"
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.°
In al the parisshe wyf ne was ther noon
That to the offring° before hir sholde
goon;
And if ther dide, certeyn, so wrooth
was she,
That she was out of alle charitee.
Hir coverchiefs° ful fyne were of
ground;
I dorste swere they weyeden ten pound
That on a Sonday were upon hir heed.
Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,
Ful streite y-teyd, and shoos ful moiste°
and newe.
Bold was hir face, and fair, and reed of
hewe.
She was a worthy womman al hir lyve,
Housbondes at chirche-dore she hadde
fyve,
Withouten other companye in youthe;
But therof nedeth nat to speke as
noutha.°
And thryes hadde she been at Ierusale-
lem;°
She hadde passed many a straunge
streem;
At Rome she hadde been, and at Bo-
loigne,
In Galice at seint Iame,° and at Co-
loigne.
She coude° muche of wandring by the
weye.
Gat-tothed° was she, soothly for to seye.

Up-on an amblere° esily she sat,
Y-wimpled wel, and on hir heed an hat
As brood as is a bokeler° or a targe;°
A foot-mantel° aboute hir hipes large,
And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue+

Experience, though noon auctoritee°
Were in this world, were right y-nough
to me
To speke of wo that is in mariage;
For, lordinges, sith I twelf yeer was of
age,
Thonked be god that is eterne on lyve,°
Housbondes at chirche-dore I have had
fyve;
For I so ofte have y-wedded be;
And alle were worthy men in hir
degree.
But me was told certeyn, nat longe agon
is,
That sith° that Crist ne wente never but
onis
To wedding in the Cane° of Galilee,
That by the same ensample taughte he
me
That I ne sholde wedded be but ones.
Herke eek, lo! which a sharp word for
the nones°
Besyde a welle Iesus, god and man,
Spak in repreve of the Samaritan:°
"Thou hast y-had fyve housbondes,”
quod he,

som-del partially  scathe a pity, a penalty  haunt skill
Ypres...Gaunt centers of cloth-making  off-
fring offering at Mass  coverchiefs head-coverings  moiste supple  noutha now
al. popular pilgrimage destinations  seint Iame St. James of Compostella  coude knew  Gat-tothed
gap-toothed amblere horse bokeler small shield targe small shield foot-mantel overskirt carpe
talk  auctoritee written authority eterne on lyve lives eternally  sith since Cane Cana for the
nones for the time  Samaritan to the Samaritan woman in John 4
“And thilke° man, the which that hath now thee,
Is noght thyn housbond;” thus seyde he certeyn;

What that he mente ther-by, I can nat seyn;
But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
Was noon housbond to the Samaritan?
How manye mighte she have in marriage?
Yet herde I never tellen in myn age
Upon this nombre diffinicioun;°
Men may devyne° and glosen° up and doun.
But wel I woot expres, with-oute lye,
God bad us for to wexe and multiplye;
That gentil text can I wel understande.

Eek wel I woot he seyde, myn hous-bonde
Sholde lete fader and moder, and take me;
But of no nombre mencion made he,
Of bigamy or of octogamy;
Why sholde men speke of it vileiney?°
[Alisoun provides examples of bigamists]

Whan saugh ye ever, in any maner age,
That hye god defended° mariage
By expres word? I pray you, telleth me;
Or wher comanded he virginitee?
I woor as well as ye, it is no drede,"°
Theapostel,"° whan he speketh of maydenhede;°
He seyde, that precept ther-of hadde he noon.
Men may conseille a womman to been oon,"°
But conseilling is no comandement;
He putte it in our owene lugement.
For hadde god comanded maydenhede,

Thanne hadde he damped° wedding
with the dede;
And certes, if ther were no seed y-sowe.°
Virginitee, wher-of than sholde it growe?
[Alisoun discusses virginity]

Virginitee is greet perfeccioun,
And continence eek with devocioun.
But Crist, that of perfeccioun is welle,°
Bad nat every wight he shold go selle
All that he hadde, and give it to the pore,
And in swich wyse folwe hime and his fore."°
He spak to hem that wolde live parfitly;
And lordinges, by your leve, that am nat I.
I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age
In the actes and in fruit of mariage.
Telle me also, to what conclusioun°
Were membres maad of generacioun,
And for what profit was a wight y-wroght?
Trusteth right wel, they wer nat maad for noght.
Glose° who-so wole, and seye bothe up and doun,
That they were maked for purgacioun
Of urine, and our bothe thinges smale
Were eek to knowe a femele from a male,
And for noone other cause: sey ye no?
The experience woot wel it is noght so;
So that the clerkes° be nat with me wrothe,
I sey this, that they maked been for bothe,
This is to seye, for office, and for esse°

---

thilke that
diffinicioun a definitive statement
devyne interpret
glosen comment on, gloss
vileiney reproachfully
defended prohibited
drede doubt
Thapostel The Apostle (Paul)
maydenhede virginity
oon a virgin
damped condemned
y-sowe sown
welle source
fore doctrine
conclusioun purpose
Glose gloss, interpret clerkes scholars for...ese for duty and for pleasure
Of engendrure, ther we nat god displease.
Why sholde men elles in hir bokes sette,
That man shal yelde to his wyf hir dette?
Now wher-with sholde he make his payement,
If he ne used his sely instrument?
Than were they maad up-on a creature,
To purge uryne, and eek for engendrure.
But I seye noght that every wight is holde,
That hath swich harneys as I to yow tolde,
To goon and usen hem in engendrure;
Crist was a mayde, and shapen as a man,
Yet lived they ever in parfit chastitee.
I nil envye no virginitee;
Lat hem be breed of pured whete-seed,
And lat us wyves hoten barly-breed;
Our lord Iesu refresshed many a man.
And have his tribulacioun with-al
Up-on his flessh, whyl that I am his wyf.
I have the power duriinge al my lyf
Up-on his propre body, and noght he.
Right thus the apostel tolde it un-to me;
And bad our housbondes for to love us well.
Al this sentence me lyketh every-deel—

[The Pardoner interrupts]

Now sires, now wol I telle forth my tale.—
As ever mote I drinken wyn or ale,
I shal seye sooth, tho housbondes that I hadde,
As three of hem were gode and two were badde.
The three men were gode, and riche, and olde;
Unnethe mighte they the statut holde
In which that they were bounden un-to me.
Ye woot wel what I mene of this, pardee!
As help me god, I laughe whan I thinke
How pitously a-night I made hem swinke;
And by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.

[Alisoun speaks about her first three husbands]

Now wol I spoken of my fourthe housbonde.
My fourthe housbonde was a revelour,
This is to seyn, he hadde a paramour;
And I was yong and ful of ragerye,
Striborn and strong, and Ioly as a pye.
Wel coude I daunce to an harpe smale,
And singe, y-wis,° as any nightingale,
When I had dronke a draughte of sweete
wyn.

Metellius,° the foule cherl, the swyn,
That with a staf birafte his wyf hir lyf,
For she drank wyn, thogh I hadde been
his wyf,
He sholde nat han daunted me fro
drinke;
And, after wyn, on Venus moste I
thinke:
For al so siker as cold engendreth hayl,
A likerous mouth° moste han a likerous
tayl.°
In womman vinolent° is no defence,
This knowen lechours by experience.
But, lord Crist! whan that it remem-
broth me
Up-on my yowthe, and on my Iolitee,°
It tikleth me aboute myn herte rote.°
Unto this day it dooth myn herte bote°
That I have had my world as in my
tyme.
But age, alas! that al wol envenyme,°
Hath me biraft my beautee and my
pith;°
Lat go, fare-wel, the devil go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is na-more to
telle,
The bren, as I best can, now moste I
selle;
But yet to be right mery wol I fonde.°

Now wol I tellen of my fourthe hous-
bonde.
I seye, I hadde in herte greet despyt
That he of any other had delyt.
But he was quit, by god and by seint
loce!°
I made him of the same wode a croce;
Nat of my body in no foul manere,
but certeinly, I made folk swich chere,
That in his owene grece I made him fre
For angre, and for verray Lalousye.
By god, in erthe I was his purgatorie,
For which I hope his soule be in glorie.
For god it woot, he sat ful ofte and song
When that his shoo ful bitterly him
wrong."°
Ther was no wight, save god and he,
that wiste,°
In many wyse, how sore I him twiste.
He deyde when I cam fro Jerusalem,
And lyth y-grave under the rode-beem,"°
Al is his tombe noght so curious
As was the sepulcre of him, Darius,°
Which that Appelles° wroghte subtrilly;
It nis but wast to burie him precisely.
Lat him fare-wel, god yeve his soule
reste,
He is now in the grave and in his cheste.
Now of my fiftie housbond wol I telle.
God lete his soule never come in helle!
And yet was he to me the moste
shrewe;°
That fele I on my ribbes al by rewe,°
And ever shal, un-to myn ending-day.
But in our bed he was so fresh and gay,
And ther-with-al so wel coude he me
glose,°

When that he wolde han my bele chose,
That thogh he hadde me bet on every
boon,°
He coude winne agayn my love anon.
I trowe I loved him beste, for that he
Was of his love damagerous° to me.
We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,
In this matere a queynte fantasye;
Wayte what thing we may nat lightly
have,
Ther-after wol we crye al-day and crave.
Forbede us thing, and that desyren we;
Pres on us faste, and thanne wol we flee.
With daunger oute we al our chaffare;°
Greet prees at market maketh dere ware,
And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys;
This knoweth every womman that is wys.
My fiftfe housbonde, god his soule blesse!
Which that I took for love and no richesse,
He som-tyme was a clerk of Oxenford,°
And had left scole, and wente at hoom to bord
With my gossib, dwellinge in oure toun.
530 God have hir soule! hir name was Alisoun.
She knew myn herte and eek my privatete°
Bet° than our parisshe-preest, so moot I thee!

[While her fourth husband is out of town, Alisoun, her gossip, and Jankin go on walk]
563 Now wol I tellen forth what happped me.
I seye, that in the feeldes walked we,
Til trewely we hadde swich daliance,
This clerk and I, that of my purveyance°
I spak to him, and seyde him, how that he,
If I were widwe, sholde wedde me.

[Alisoun describes a dream]
586 A! ha! by god, I have my tale ageyn.
When that my fourthe housbond was on bere,
I weep algate,° and made sory chere,
As wyves moten, for it is usage,
And with my coverchief covered my visage;
But for that I was purveyed of a make,
I weep but smal, and that I undertake.°
To chirche was myn housbond born a-morwe
With neighebores, that for him maden sorwe;
And Iankin oure clerk was oon of tho.
As help me god, whan that I saugh him go
After the bere, me thoughte he hadde a paire
Of legges and of feet so clene and faire,
That al myn herte I yaf un-to his hold.°
600 He was, I trowe,° a twenty winter old,
And I was fourty, if I shal seye sooth;
But yet I hadde alwey a coltes tooth.
Gat-tothed I was, and that bicam me weel;
I hadde the prette of seynt Venus seel.°
As help me god, I was a lusty oon,
And faire and riche, and yong, and wel bigoon;
And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me,
I had the beste quoniam° mighte be.
For certes, I am al Venerien°
610 In felinge, and myn herte is Marcien.°
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardiness.
Myn ascendent was Taur,° and Mars ther-inne.
Allas! allas! that ever love was sinne!
I folwed ay myn inclinacioun
By vertu of my constellacioun;
That made me I coude noght withdrawe
My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.
Yet have I Martes mark° up-on my face,
620 And also in another prive place.

chaffare difficulty; merchandise clerk of Oxenford a scholar of Oxford privatete secrets Bet better puryvance foresight algate continuously belief seynt Venus seel Venus’ mark, a birthmark undertake promise hold keeping trowe I quoniam vagina Venerien under Venus’ influence Marcien under Mars’ influence Taur Taurus Martes mark Mars’ mark, a red birthmark
For, god so wis be my savacioun,
I ne loved never by no discrecioun,
But ever folwede myn appetyt,
Al were he short or long, or blak or whyt;
I took no kepe, so that he lyked me,
How pore he was, ne eek of what degree.
What sholde I seye, but, at the monthes ende,
This loly clerk Iankin, that was so hende,
Hath wedded me with greet solemp-nitee,
And to him yaf I al the lond and fee
That ever was me yeven ther-bifore;
But afterward repented me ful sore.
He nolde suffre nothing of my list.
For that I rente out of his book a leef,
That of the strook myn ere wex al deef.
Stiborn I was as is a leonesse,
And of my tonge a verray Iangleresse,
And walke I wolde, as I had doon biforn,
From hous to hous, al-though he had it sworn.
For which he often tymes wolde preche,
And me of olde Romayn gestes teche,
How he, Simplicius Gallus, lefte his wyf,
And hir forsook for terme of al his lyf,
Noght but for open-heeded he hir say
Lokinge out at his dore upon a day.
Another Romayn tolde he me by name,
That, for his wyf was at a someres game
With-outen his witing, he forsook hir eke.
And than wolde he up-on his Bible seke
That ilke proverbe of Ecclesiaste,
Wher he comanderth and forbeth ast
Man shal nat suffre his wyf go roule aboute;
Than wolde he seye right thus, withouten doute,
"Who-so that buildeth his hous al of salwes," And priketh his blinde hors over the falwes,
And suffreth his wyf to go seken halwes,
Is worthy to been hanged on the gal-wes!
But al for noght, I sette noght an hawe
Of his proverbes nof his olde sawe,
Ne I wolde nat of him corrected be.
I hate him that my vices telleth me,
And so do mo, god woot! of us than I.
This made him with me wood al out-rely;
I nolde noght forbere him in no cas.
Now wol I seye yow sooth, by seint Thomas,
Why that I rente out of his book a leef,
For which he smoot me so that I was deef.
He hadde a book that gladly, night and day,
For his desport he wolde rede alway.
He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste,
At whiche book he lough alwey ful haste.
And eek ther was som-tyme a clerk at Rome,
A cardinal, that highte Seint Ierome,
That made a book agayn Iovinian;
In whiche book eek ther was Tertulan,
Crisippus, Trotula, and Helowys,
That was abbesse nat fer fro Parys;
And eek the Parables of Salomon,
Ovydes Art, and bokes many on,
And alle thise wer bounden in o°
volume.
And every night and day was his cus-
tume.
When he had leyser and vacacioun
From other worldly occupacioun,
To reden on this book of wikked wyves.
He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves
Than been of gode wyves in the Bible.
For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
But-if it be of holy seintes lyves,
Ne of noon other womman never the
mo.
Who peyntede the leoun, tel me who?
By god, if wommen hadde writen
stories,
As clerkes han with-inne hir oratories,
They wolde han writen of men more
wikkednesse
Than all the mark of Adam° may
redresse.
The children of Mercurie and of Venus°
Been in hir wirking ful contrarious;
Mercurie loveth wisdom and science,
And Venus loveth ryot and dispence.°
And, for hir diverse disposicioun,
Ech falleth in otheres exaltacioun;°
And thus, god woot! Mercurie is desolat
In Pisces, wher Venus is exaltat;
And Venus falleth ther Mercurie is
reysed;
Therfore no womman of no clerk is
reysed.
The clerk, when he is old, and may
noght do
Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,
Than sit he doun, and writ in his dotage
That wommen can nat kepe hir mar-
riage!
But now to purpos, why I tolde thee
That I was beten for a book, pardee.
Up-on a night Iankin, that was our
syre,°
Redde on his book, as he sat by the fyre,
Of Eva° first, that, for hir wikkednesse,
Was al mankinde broght to wrecched-
nesse,
For which that Iesu Crist him-self was
slayn,
That boghte us with his herte-blood
agayn.
Lo, here expres of womman may ye
finde,
That womman was the los of al man-
kinde.

[Jankin reads about women who have be-
trayed or murdered their husbands]

He spak more harm than herte may
bithinke.
And ther-with-al, he knew of mo
proverbs
Than in this world ther growen gras or
herbes.
“Bet is,” quod he, “thyn habitacioun
Be with a leoun or a foul dragoun,
Than with a womman usinge for to
chyde.
Bet is,” quod he, “hye in the roof abyde
Than with an angry wyf doun in the
hous;
They been so wikked and contrarious;
They haten that hir housbondes loveth
ay.”
He seyde, “a womman cast hir shame
away,
When she cast of hir smok;” and
forther-mo,
“A fair womman, but she be chaast also,
Is lyk a gold ring in a sowes nose.”
Who wolde wenen,° or who wolde sup-
pose

0 one
all...Adam all men
children...Venus scholars and lovers, respectively
dispence extravag-
ance
exaltacioun when planet is at its most powerful in the zodiac
syre master of the house
Eva
Eve
wenen think
The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?
And whan I saugh he wolde never fyne°
To reden on this cursed book al night,
Al sodeynly three leves have I plight°
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke,
I with my fist so took him on the cheke,
That in our fyr he fil bakward adoun.
And he up-stirte as dooth a wood leoun,°
And with his fist he smoot me on the heed,
That in the floor I lay as I were deed.
And when he saugh how stille that I lay,
He was agast, and wolde han fled his way,
Til atte laste out of my swogh I breyde:°
“O! hastow slayn me, false theef?” I seyde,
“And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
Er I be deed, yet wol I kisse thee.”
And neer he cam, and kneled faire adoun,
And seyde, “dere suster Alisoun,
As help me god, I shal thee never smyte;
That I have doon, it is thy-self to wyte.°
Foryeve it me, and that I thee biseke”—°
And yet eft-sones° I hitte him on the cheke,
And seyde, “theef, thus muchel am I wreke;°
Now wol I dye, I may no lenger speke.”
But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,
We fille acorded, by us selven two.
He yaf me al the brydel in myn hond
To han the governance of hous and lond,
And of his tonge and of his hond also,
And made him brenne his book anon right tho.”

And when that I hadde geten un-to me,
By maistrie," al the soveraynetee,
And that he seyde, “myn owene trewe wyf,
Do as thee lust” the terme of al thy lyf,
Keep thy honour, and keep eek myn estaat”—
After that day we hadden never deabaat.
God help me so, I was to him as kinde
As any wyf from Denmark un-to Inde," And also trewe, and so was he to me.
I prey to god that sit in magestee,
So blesse his soule, for his mercy dere!
Now wol I seye my tale, if ye wol here.’

[The Friar and Summoner converse]

The Wife of Bath’s Tale

In tholde dayes of the king Arthour,
Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
All was this land fulfild of fayerye.°
The elf-queen, with hir Ioly companye,
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede;
This was the olde opinion, as I rede,
I speke of manye hundred yeres ago;
But now can no man see none elves mo.
For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of limitours° and othere holy freres,
That serchen every lond and every streem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessinge halles, chambres, kichenes, boure,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes,° bernes, shipnes,° dayeryes,°
This maketh that ther been no fayeryes.
For ther° as wont to walken was an elf,
Ther walketh now the limitour him-self
As thee lust® the terme of al thy lyf,
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estaat”—
After that day we hadden never deabaat.
God help me so, I was to him as kinde
As any wyf from Denmark un-to Inde," And also trewe, and so was he to me.
I prey to god that sit in magestee,
So blesse his soule, for his mercy dere!
Now wol I seye my tale, if ye wol here.’

fyne finish plight plucked wood leoun mad lion breyde woke wyte blame biseke beseech eftsones quickly wreke avenged tho then maistrie mastery as thee lust® as you please° Inde India fayerey fairies limitours begging friars Thropes° villages shipnes cattle’s sheds dayeryes stables ther where undeemeles evenings morweninges mornings

285
And seyth his matins and his holy things
As he goth in his limitacioun.º
Wommen may go saufly up and doun,
In every bush, or under every tree;
Ther is noon other incubus° but he,
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour.
And so bifel it, that this king Arthour
Hadde in his hous a lusty bacheler,
That on a day cam rydinge fro river;
And happed that, allone as she was born,
He saugh a mayde walkinge him biforn,
Of whiche mayde anon, maugree hir heed,°
By verray force he rafte her maiden-heed;
For which oppressioun was swich clamour
And swich pursue un-to the king Arthour,
That dampned° was this knight for to be deed
By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed
Paraventure,° swich was the statut tho;
But that the quene and othe ladies mo
So longe preyeden the king of grace,
Til he his lyf him graunted in the place,
And yaf him to the quene al at hir wille,
To chese, whether she wolde him save or spille.º
The quene thanketh the king with al hir might,
And after this thus spak she to the knight,
When that she saugh hir tyme, up-on a day:
‘Thou standest yet,’ quod she, ‘in swich array,’
That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee.

I grant thee lyf, if thou canst tellen me
What thing is it that wommen most desyren?
Be war, and keep thy nekke-boon from yren."°
And if thou canst nat tellen it anon,
Yet wol I yeve thee leve for to gon
A twelf-month and a day, to seche and lereº

An answere suffisant in this matere.

[The knight searches for answers]

Witnesse on Myda;° wol ye here the tale?
Ovyde, amonges othere thinges smale,
Seyde, Myda hadde, under his longe heres,
Growinge up-on his heed two asses eres,
The which vyce he hidde, as he best mighte,
Ful subtilly from every mannes sighte,
That, save his wyf, ther wiste of it na-no.
He loved hir most, and trusted hir also;
He preyede hir, that to no creature sholde telle it
She swoor him ‘nay, for al this world to winne,
She nolde do that vileinye or sinne,
To make hir housbond han so foul a name;
She nolde nat telle it for hir owene shame.’
But nathelees, hir thoughte that she dyde,
That she so longe sholde a conseil hyde;
Hir thoughte it swal so sore aboute hir herte,
That nedely som word hir moste asterre;
And sith she dorste telle it to no man,
Doun to a mareys° faste by she ran;
Til she came there, hir herte was a-fyre,  
And, as a bitore bombleth° in the myre,  
She leyde hir mouth un-to the water doun:  
Biwreye° me nat, thou water, with thy soun,’  
Quod she, ‘to thee I telle it, and namo;  
Myn housbond hath longeasses eres two!  
Now is myn herte all hool, now is it outhe;  
I mighte no lenger kepe it, out of doute,’  
Heer may ye se, thogh we a tyme abyde,  
Yet out it moot, we can no conseil hyde;  
The remenant of the tale if ye wol here,  
Redeth Ovyde, and ther ye may it lere."  
This knight, of which my tale is specially,  
Whan that he saugh he mighte nat come therby,  
This is to seye, what wommen loven moost,  
With-inne his brest ful sorweful was the goost;  
But hoom he gooth, he mighte nat soiourne.  
The day was come, that hoomward moste he tourne,  
In al this care, under a forest-syde,  
Wher-as he saugh up-on a daunce go  
Of ladies foure and twenty, and yet mo;  
Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,"  
In hope that som wisdom sholde he lerne.  
But certeinely, er he came fully there,  
Vanisshed was this daunce, he niste where.  
No creature saugh he that bar lyf,  
Save on the grene he saugh sittinge a wyf;  
A fouler wight ther may no man devyse.”  
Agayn° the knight this olde wyf gan ryse,  
And seyde, ‘sir knight, heer-forth° ne lyth no wey.  
Tel me, what that ye seken, by your fey?’°  
Paraventure it may the bettre be;  
Thise olde folk can muchel thing,’ quod she.  
‘My leve moother,’ quod this knight certeyn,  
I nam but deed, but-if that I can seyn  
What thing it is that wommen most desire;  
Coude ye me wisse," I wolde wel quyte" your hyre.’  
‘Plighte me thy trouthe, heer in myn hand,’ quod she,  
The nexte thing that I requere thee,  
Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy might;  
And I wol telle it yow er it be night.’  
‘Have heer my trouthe,’ quod the knight, ‘I grante.’  
‘Thanne,’ quod she, ‘I dar me wel avante,”  
Thy lyf is sauf, for I wol stonde therby,  
Up-on my lyf, the queen wol seye as I.  
Lat see which is the proudeste of hem alle,  
That wereth on a coverchief or a calle,°  
That dar seye nay, of that I shal thee teche;  
Let us go forth with-outen lenger speche.’  
Tho rouned she a pistel° in his ere,  
And bad him to be glad, and have no fere.  
Whan they be comen to the court, this knight  
Seyde, ’he had holde his day, as he hadde hight,”

° bombleth makes a humming noise  
° Biwreye Betray  
° lere teach, learn  
° yerne eagerly  
° devyse imagine, tell  
° Agayn To meet  
° heer-forth from here  
° fey faith  
° wisse instruct  
° quyte reward you  
° wel  
° avante boast, affirm  
° calle hairnet  
° Tho...pistel she whispered a secret  
° hight promised
And redy was his answere, as he sayde.
Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde,
And many a widwe, for that they ben wyse.
The quene hir-self sittinge as a lustyse,
Assembled been, his answere for to here;

1030 And afterward this knight was bode appere.
To every wight comanded was silence,
And that the knight sholde telle in audience,
What thing that worldly wommen loven best.
This knight ne stood nat stille as doth a best,
But to his questioun anon answerde
With manly voys, that al the court it herde:
‘My lige lady, generally,’ quod he,
‘Wommen desyren to have sovereyntee
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
This is your moste desyr, thogh ye me kille,
Doth as yow list, I am hear at your wille.’
In al the court ne was ther wyf ne mayde,
Ne widwe, that contraried that he sayde,
But sayden, ‘he was worthy han his lyf;
And with that word up stirte the olde wyf,
Which that the knight saugh sittinge in the grene:
‘Mercy,’ quod she, ‘my sovereyn lady quene!
Er that your court departe, do me right;
1040 I taughte this answere un-to the knight;
For which he plighte me his trouthe there,
The firste thing I wolde of him requere,
He wolde it do, if it lay in his might.
Bifore the court than preye I thee, sir knight,
Quod she, ‘that thou me take un-to thy wyf;
For wel thou wost that I have kept thy lyf.
If I sey fals, say nay, up-on thy fey!’
This knight answere, ‘allas! and weylawey!
I woot right wel that swich was my biheste.’

1060 For goddes love, as chees a newe requeste;
‘Tak al my good, and lat my body go.’
‘Nay than,’ quod she, ‘I shrewe us bothe two!
For thogh that I be foul, and old, and pore,
I nolde for al the metal, ne for ore,
That under erthe is grave, or lyth above,
But—if thy wyf I were, and eek thy love.’
‘My love?’ quod he; ‘nay, my damncioun!
Allas! that any of my nacioun
Sholde ever so foule disparaged be!’
[The knight agrees to marry her]

1080 For prively he wedded hir on a morwe,
And al day after hidde him as an oule;
So wo was him, his wyf looked so foule.
Greet was the wo the knight hadde in his thoght,
Whan he was with his wyf a-bedde y-broght;
He walweth, and he turneth to and fro.
His olde wyf lay smylinge evermo,
And seyde, ‘o dere housbond, benedicite!
Fareth every knight thus with his wyf as ye?
Is this the lawe of king Arthures hous?
Is every knight of his so dangerous?’
I am your owene love and eek your wyf;  
And certes, yet dide I yow never unright;  
Why fare ye thus with me this firste night?  
Ye faren lyk a man had lost his wit;  
What is my gilt? for goddes love, tel me it,  
And it shal been amended, if I may.’  
‘Amended?’ quod this knight, ‘allas! nay, nay!  
It wol nat been amended never mo!  
Thou art so loothly, and so old also,  
And ther-to comen of so lowe a kinde,”  
That litel wonder is, thogh I walwe and winde.  
So wolde god myn herte wolde breste!”  
‘Is this,’ quod she, ‘the cause of your unreste?’  
‘Ye, certainly,’ quod he, ‘no wonder is.’  
‘Now, sire,’ quod she, ‘I coude amende al this,  
If that me liste, er it were dayes three,  
So wel ye mighte here yow un-to me.”  
But for ye speken of swich gentillesse°

1207 Now, sire, of elde° ye repreve me;  
And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee°  
Were in no book, ye gentils of honour  
Seyn that men sholde an old wight doon favour,  
And clepe him fader, for your gentillesse;  
And auctours shal I finden, as I gesse.  

Now ther ye seye, that I am foul and old,  
Than drede you noght to been a cokewold;°  
For filthe and elde, al-so mooot I thee;”  
Been grete wardeyns up-on chastitee.  
But nathelees, sin I knowe your dyslyt,  
I shal fulfille your worldly appertyt.  
Chese now,’ quod she, ‘oon of thise thinges tweye,  
To han me foul and old til that I deye,  
And be to yow a trewe humble wyf,  
And never yow displese in al my lyf,’  
Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,  
And take your aventure of the repair  
That shal be to your hous, by-cause of me,  
Or in som other place, may wel be.  
Now chese your-selven, whether that yow ‘lyketh.’  
This knight avyseth° him and sore syketh,  
But atte laste he seyde in this manere,  
‘My lady and my love, and wyf so dere,  
I put me in your wyse governance;  
Cheseth your-self, which may be most plesance,  
And most honour to yow and me also.  
I do no fors° the whether of the two;  
For as yow lyketh, it suffiseth me.”  
‘Thanne have I gete of yow maistrye,’ quod she,  
‘Sin I may chese, and governe as me lest?’  
‘Ye, certes, wyf,’ quod he, ‘I holde it best.’  
‘Kis me,’ quod she, ‘we be no lenger wrothe;°  
For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe,  
This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good.  
I prey to god that I mot sterven wood,”  
But I to yow be al-so good and trewe

lowe a kinde low-born ancestry  
breste burst  
yow un-to me behave towards me  
gentillesse nobility  
elde age  
auctoritee written authority  
cokewold cuckold  
thee thrive  
avyseth considered do  
no fors care not  
suffiseth me is sufficient for me  
wothe in disagreement  
sterven wood die mad
As ever was wyf, sin that the world was newe.
And, but I be to-morn as fair to sene
As any lady, emperyce, or quene,
That is bitwixe the est and eke the west,
Doth with my lyf and deeth right as yow lest.
Cast up the curtin, loke how that it is.’

1250 And whan the knight saugh verrailly al this,
That she so fair was, and so yong thereto,
For Ioye he hente hir in his armes two,
His herte bathed in a bath of blisse;
A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hir kisse.
And she obeyed him in every thing
That mighte doon him plesance or lyking.
And thus they live, un-to hir lyves ende,
In parfit Ioye; and Iesu Crist us sende Housbondes meke, yonge, and fresshe a-bedde,

1260 And grace toverbye hem that we wedde.
And eek I preye Iesu shorte hir lyves
That wol nat be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nigardes of dispence,
God sende hem sone verray pestilence.

**hente** took  **a-rewe** in succession  **gan** began to  **toverbye** to survive  **nigardes** misers
Endnotes


3 The Wife of Bath’s disability is first described here, as “som-del deef” and “scathe,” with “but” serving to contrast these with her description as “good” in the line above. The manuscript variants for The General Prologue show one variant for this line. The Trinity College (Cambridge) R.3.15 reads “and” instead of “but,” suggesting a correlation between her goodness and her disability rather than a contrast.


5 In this line, the Alisoun describes how Jankyn hit her on her ear, presumably causing her partial deafness. The manuscript variants show an important variant on this line. Cambridge University Dd.4.24, Cambridge University Gg.4.27, Harley 7334, and Helmingham read “with his fist” instead of “on the lyst,” emphasizing his role in the attack rather than her consequences.

6 Alisoun explicitly mentions her own disability here, observing that one of her ears is deaf because of Jankyn’s blow. The manuscript variants show an important variant on this line. Corpus Christi 198, Lansdowne 851, and Petworth read “eren wexen” instead of “ere wex,” indicating both ears went deaf instead of one.