

The Prologue of the Wife of Bath's Tale

- OAnti-feminist Tradition
- OLines 1-7

Experience—and no matter what they say
In books—is good enough authority
For me to speak of trouble in marriage.
For ever since I was twelve years of age,
Thanks be to God, I've had no less than five
Husbands at church door—if one may believe
I could be wed so often legally!

Wife of Bath's Defense, Line 9-13, 35-

Certainly it was told me, not long since,

That, seeing Christ had never more than once

Gone to a wedding (Cana, in Galilee)

He taught me by that very precedent

That I ought not be married more than once.

Lines 35-40, 44-45, 68-71, 75-78

"And what about that wise King Solomon:
I take it that he had more wives than one!
Now would to God that I might lawfully
Be solaced half as many times as he!
What a God-given gift that Solomon
Had for his wives!

Woman as Commodity?

Blessed by God that I have married five!

Here's to the sixth, whenever he turns up.

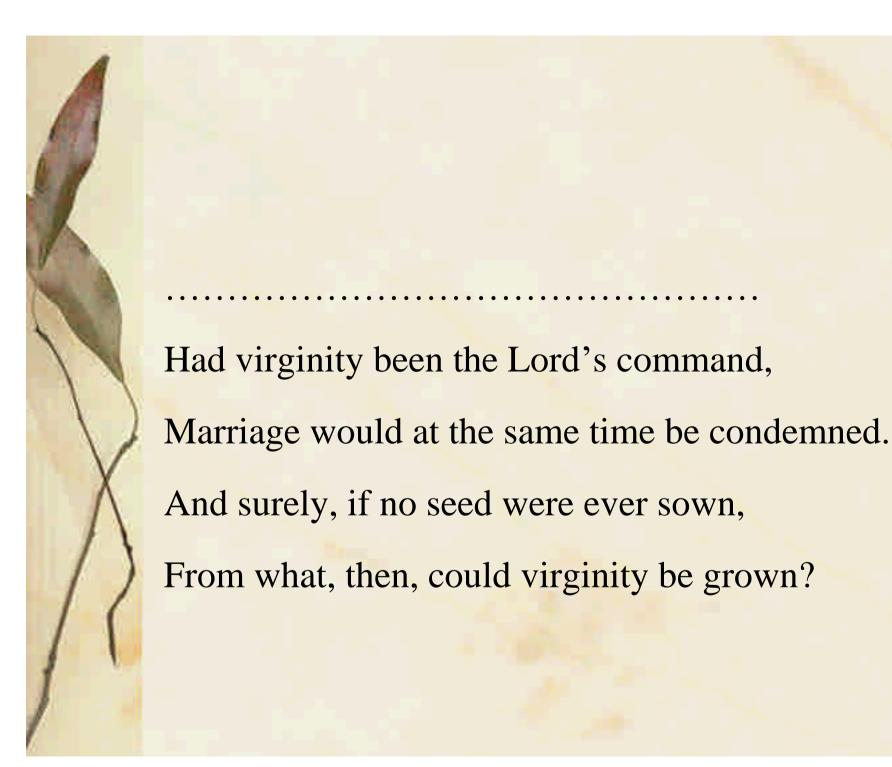
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Where was it He ordained virginity?

No fear, you know as well as I do, that

The Apostle, where he speaks of maidenhood,

Says he has got no firm precept for it.



The Wife of Bath could be the first feminist in the English literature. It is baffling that, while she claims to be uneducated, like most medieval women, she is evidently quite learned. She often quotes from books to defend herself and women. Can you explain why she pretends to be uneducated at the beginning?

Lines 101-10

"I grant all this; I've no hard feelings if

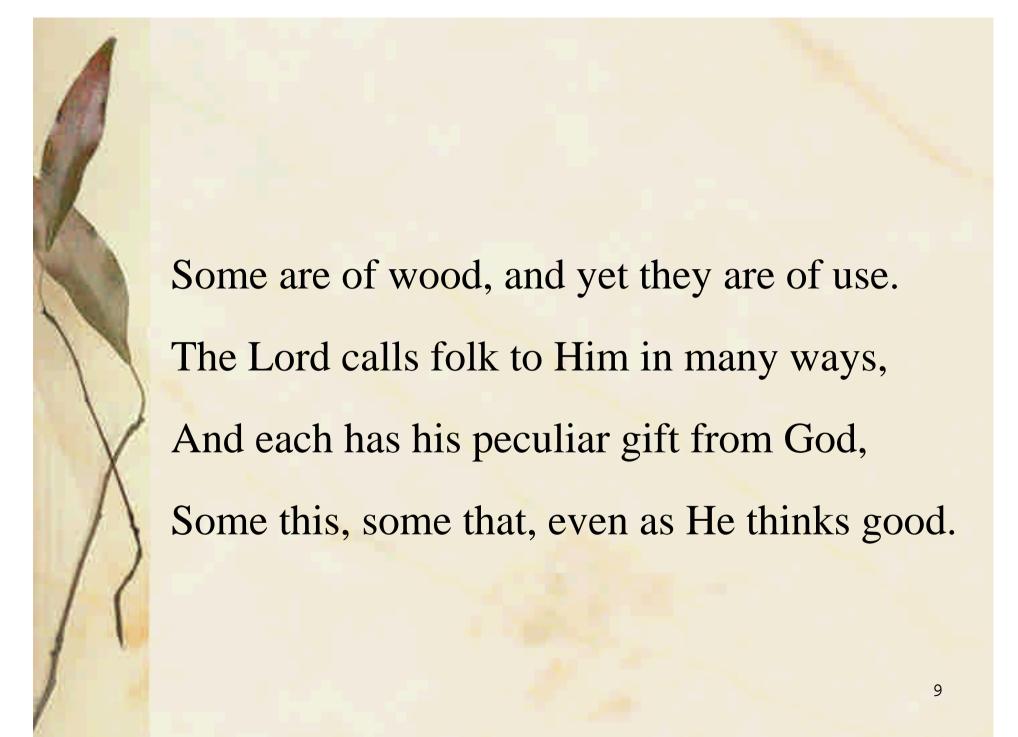
Maidenhood be set above remarriage.

Purity in body and in heart

May please some—as for me, I make no boast.

For, as you know, no master of a household

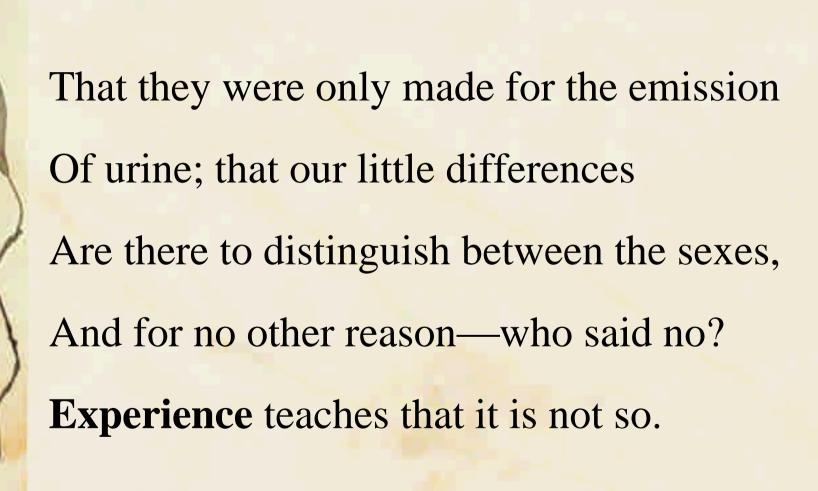
Has all of his utensils made of gold;



Lines 121-30

"And tell me also, what was the intention
In creating organs of generation,
When man was made in so perfect a fashion?
They were not made for nothing, you can bet!

Twist it how you like and argue up and down



Žižek talks of an advertisement, in which a woman turns a frog into a beautiful prince while a man turns a woman into a bottle of beer. Does this advertisement shed some light on Chaucer or his wife of Bath?

The Pardoner Interrupts, Lines 169-

Up leapt the pardoner—"Now then, madam,
I swear to you by God and by St John,
You make a splendid preacher on this theme.
I was about to wed a wife—but then
Why should my body pay a price so dear?
I'll not wed this nor any other year!"
"You wait!" said she. "My tale has not begun.

Wife of Bath's Husbands, Lines 199-214

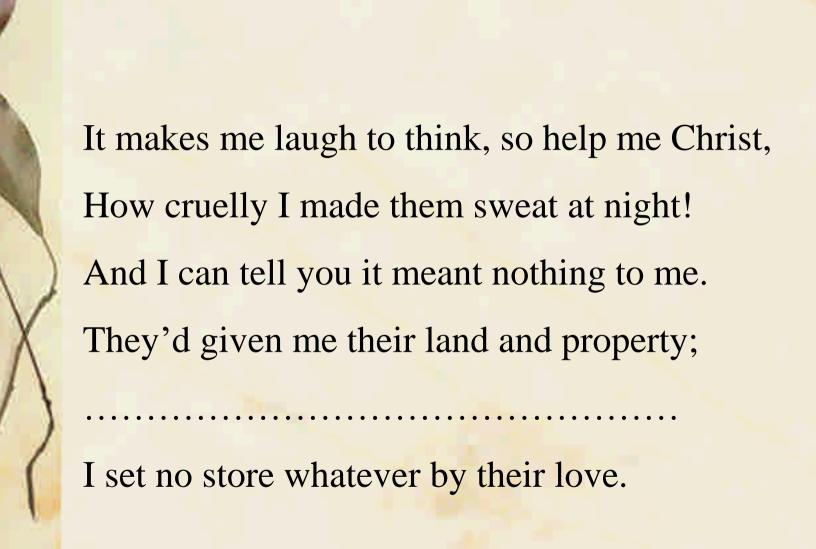
"And now, sir, now, I will begin my tale.

May I never touch a drop of wine or ale

If this be not the truth! Of those I had,

Three were good husbands, two of them were bad,

The three good ones were very rich and old;



In a society of sexual discrimination, women are mostly silent, even though men exploit and objectify them. The wife of Bath's remark above can annoy her male listeners. Anyway, do you think that Chaucer simply speaks for women through the wife of Bath, or is it possible that Chaucer is also partly an antifeminist?

Men's Attitudes toward Women, Lines 254-74

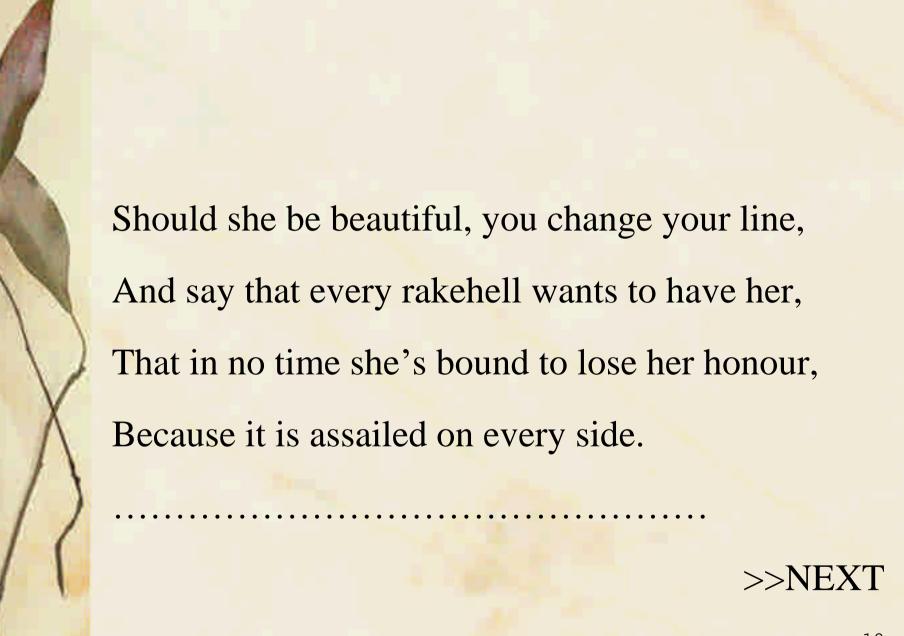
What a great shame—just think of the expense—

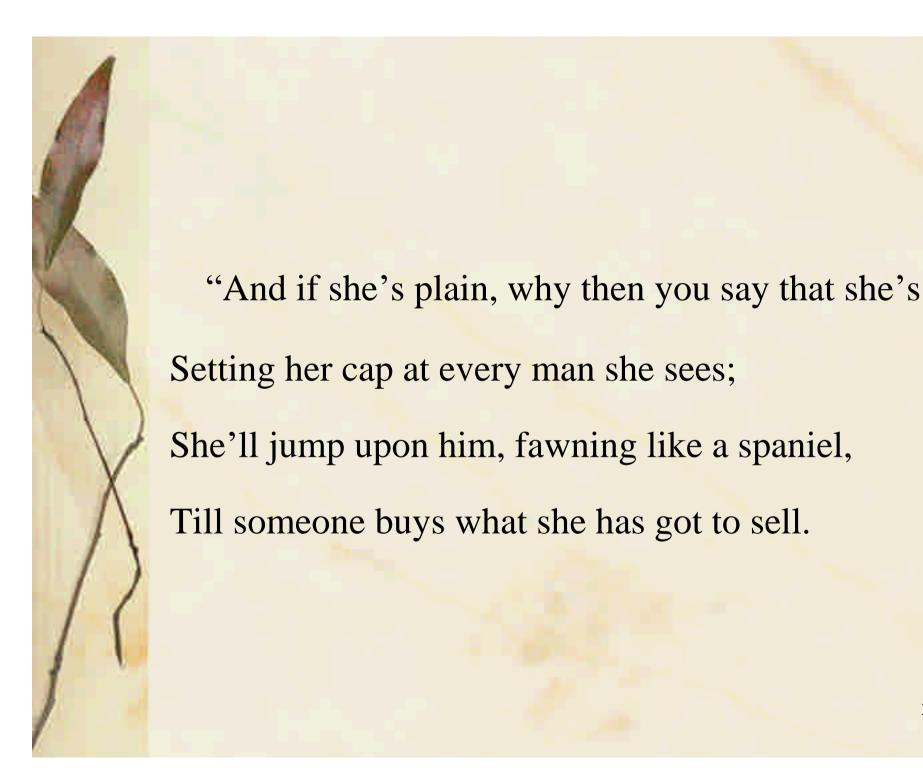
To marry a poor woman, so you tell me,

And if she's rich, and comes of a good family,

It's hell, you say, to put up with her pride,

And her black moods and fancies. Then, you swine,





Wife of Bath's Tactics, Lines 390-96

- O Lord! The pain I gave them, and the woe,
- OAnd they, heaven knows, quite innocent of course.
- For I could bite and whinny like a horse.
- OI'd scold them even when I was at fault,
- OFor otherwise I'd often have been dished.
- OWho comes first to the mill, is first to grind;

OWhat do the Wife of Bath's attacks against men reveal about the medieval society? Or about sexual relationship in the medieval society?

Lines 531-39

"My fifth husband—may God bless his soul! Whom I took on for love, and not for gold, Was at one time a scholar at Oxford, But had left college, and come home to board With my best friend, then living in our town: God keep her soul! Her name was Alison.

Earlier the miller has told a tale about how a carpenter was cuckolded: his young wife, Alison, betrayed him with an Oxford student. Don't you find the resonation between the wife of Bath's tale and the miller's strange? Can you explain this resonation?

About Anti-feminist Literature, Lines 688-702

And night and morning it was his custom,
Whenever he had leisure and freedom
From any other worldly occupation,
To read in it concerning wicked women.
He knew more lives and legends about them
Than there are of good women in the Bible.



Make no mistake, it is impossible

That any scholar should speak good of women,

Unless they're saints in the hagiologies;

Not any other kind of woman, no!

Who drew the picture of the lion? Who?

"Can the Subaltern Speak?"

My God, had women written histories

Like cloistered scholars in oratories,

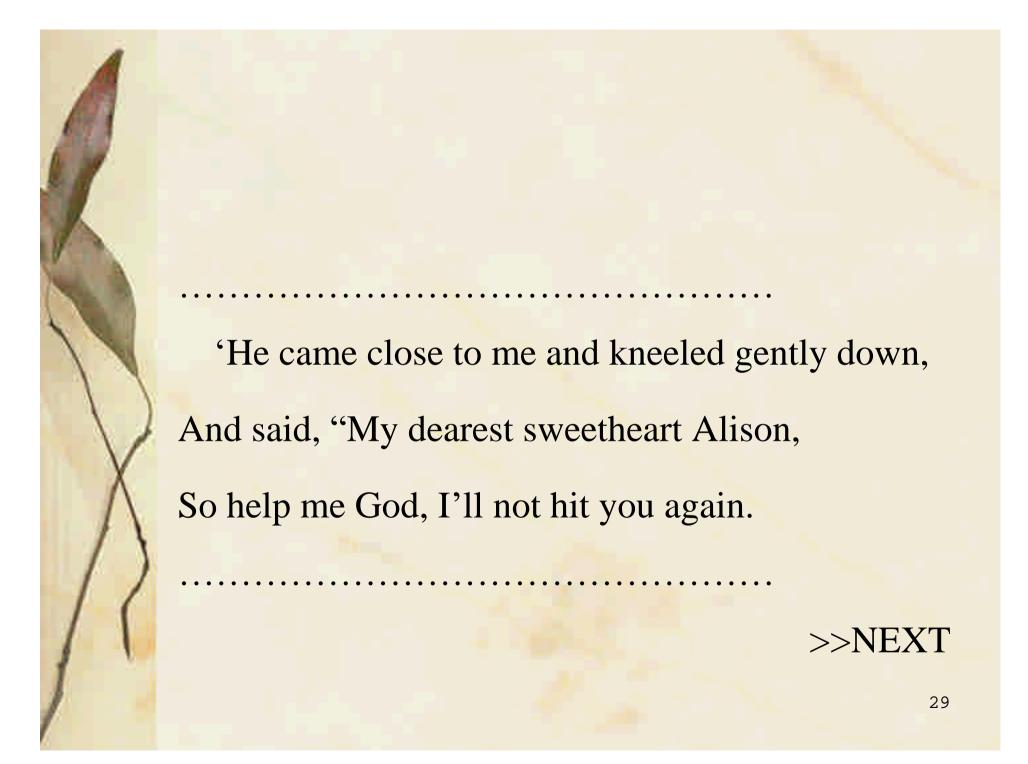
They'd have set down more of men's wickedness

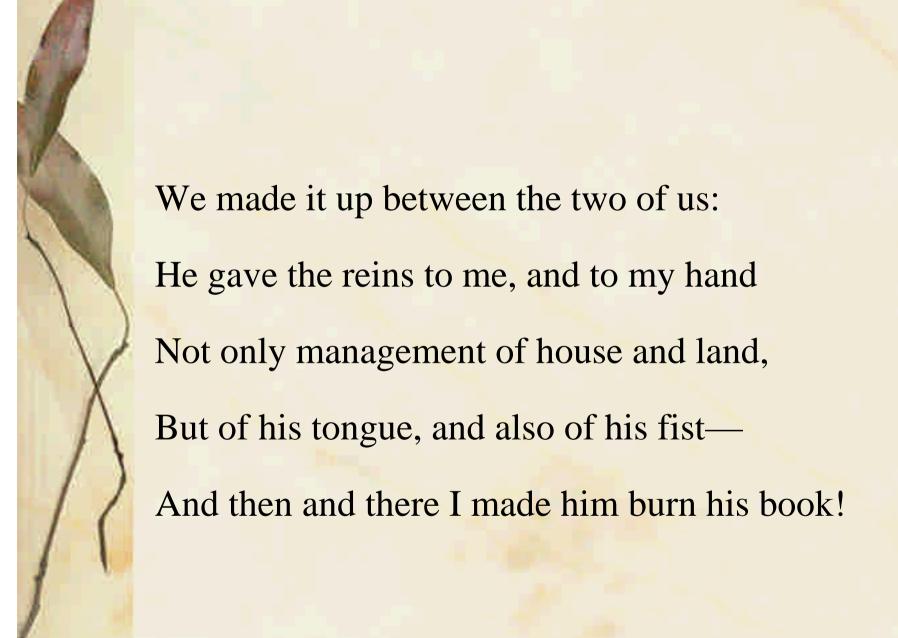
Than all the sons of Adam could redress.

Lines 794-822

'When I realized he'd never make an end But read away in that damned book all night, All of a sudden I got up and tore Three pages out of it as he was reading, And hit him with my fist upon the cheek So that he tumbled back into our fire,

And up he jumped just like a raging lion, And punched me with his fist upon the head Till I fell to the floor and lay for dead. And when he saw how motionless I lay, He took alarm, and would have run away, Had I not burst at last out of my swoon, "You've murdered me, your dirty thief!" I said, >>NEXT





OChaucer speaks for women through the Wife of Bath. Still, has he done a good job? Or do you not believe that he is on the side of women?



Lines 835-53

The dispute between the Summoner and the Friar

The friar laughed, when he had heard all this.

'Oh indeed, Mister Summoner, is that so?' Returned the friar. 'My word, before I go I'll tell a tale or two about a summoner, And raise a laugh from everybody here!' 'Try it and see, Friar,' said the summoner, 'And damn your eyes! And damn my own as well If I've not got two or three tales to tell Concerning friars.....

Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale"

- O"The Miller's Tale" and
- OFabliau/ fable: justice
- OParody/ pastiche
- O"The Miller's Tale" a Parody of the Knight's Romance

Earlier the Knight told a romance about how two knights were in love with a beautiful lady. Now the Miller decides to tell a story in which two ordinary men try to cuckold a carpenter. Do you see any significance in the Miller's decision?

From "The Miller's Prologue"

OLines 1-19

And when at last the knight's tale had been told,

There was not one among us, young or old,

Who did not say it was a noble story,

Well worth remembering; especially

All of the better sort. Laughing, our host



Transition

The miller, half-seas over, was so pale
With drink that he could barely keep his seat
Upon his horse; his manners were quite lost

I've got a splendid tale for the occasion

To pay the knight out with, and cape his tale."

Lines 59-68

In short, the miller would not curb his tongue

Or language for the sake of anyone,

But told his vulgar tale in his own way.

I'm sorry that I must repeat it here.

>>NEXT

And therefore, I entreat all decent folk For God's sake don't imagine that I speak With any evil motive, but because I'm bound to tell, for better or for worse, All of their stories, or else falsify

39

OIn which way is *The Canterbury Tale* a story-telling contest? Do not forget that Chaucer himself is one of the story-tellers. You may try to answer this question after you are finished with "The Nun's Priest's Tale".

The Old Husband, Lines 79-84

At one time there was living at Oxford A rich old gaffer, carpenter by trade, Who took in paying guests; and he'd a lodger Living with him, a needy hard-up scholar Learned in the liberal arts; but all his fancy Turned to the study of astrology:

Nicholas the Scholar, Lines 91-95

Fly Nicholas was what they called this scholar.

For love sub rosa, pleasing, or for pleasure

In bed or out of it, he'd a great knack'

And he was wily too, and close as wax,

Although he looked as demure as a maid.

Alison the Young Wife, Lines 113-18

The carpenter had a new-wedded wife.

And he loved her; he loved her more than life;

She was no more than eighteen years of age.

Jealous he was, and kept her closely caged,

For she was wild and young, and he was old,

And thought she'd likely make him a cuckold.

The Use of Similes, Lines 125-29

Young, comely was this wife; a lovely girl;

Her body slim and supple as a weasel.

She wore a cross-striped sash, all made of silk;

An apron also, white as morning milk,

She wore about her loins, gored to flare.

Lines 135-40

And certainly she'd a come-hither eye.

Plucked to a slender line were her eyebrows,

And they were arched, and black as any sloes.

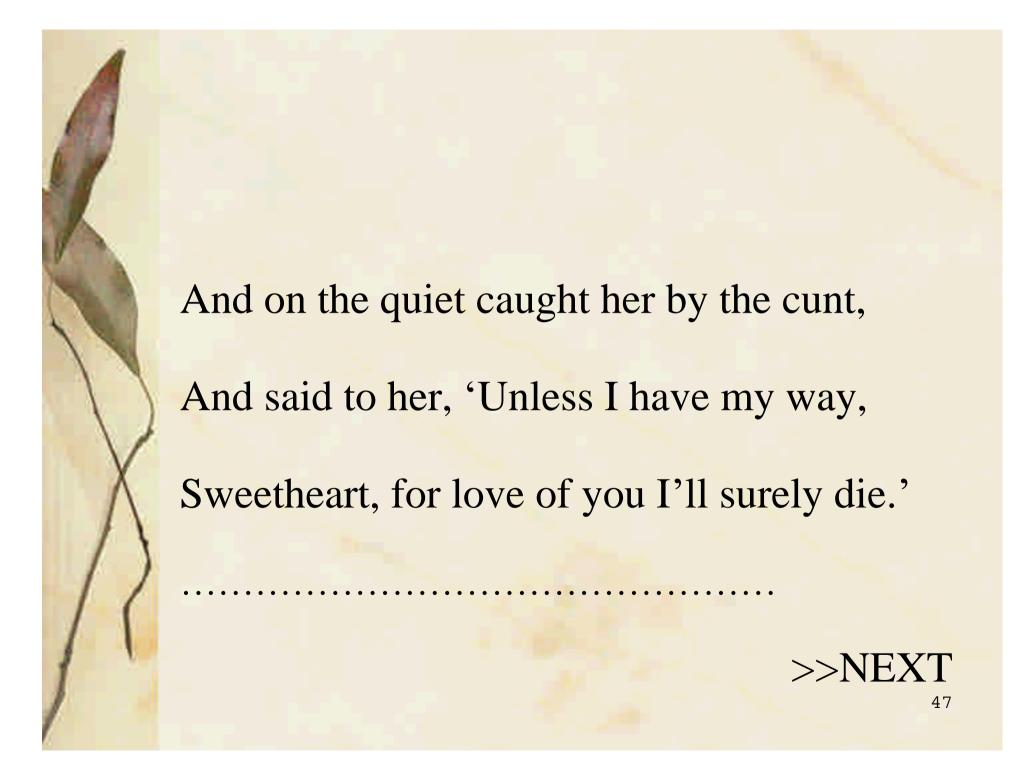
Sweeter was she by far to look upon

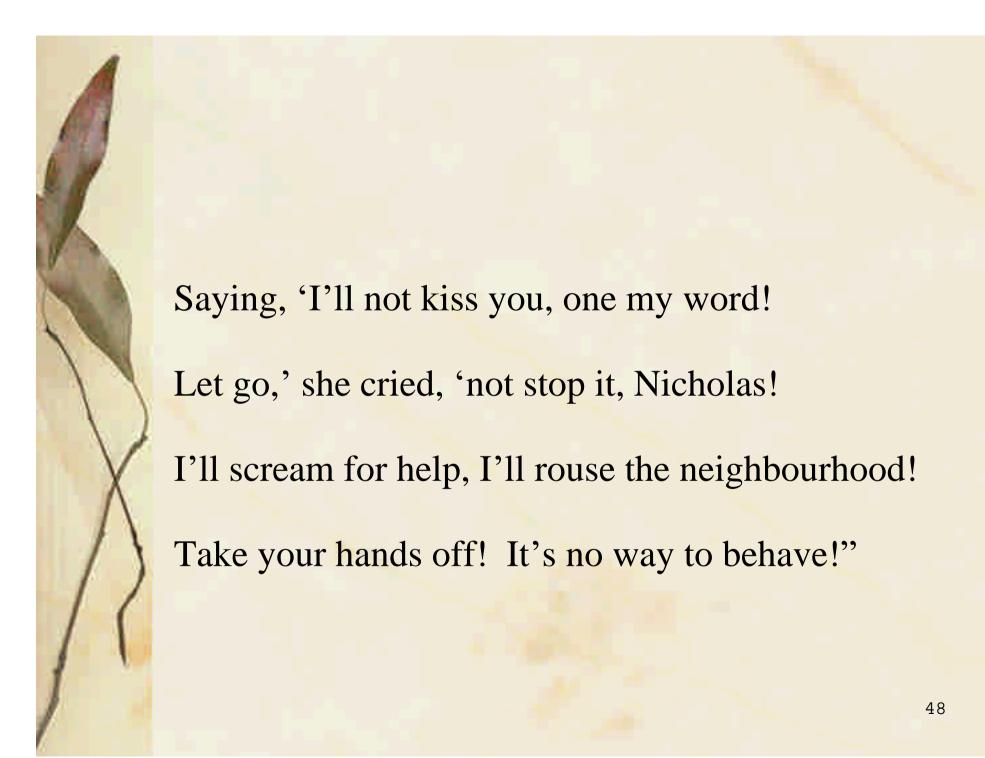
Than is a pear-tree in its early bloom;

And softer than the wool upon a wether.

Alison Accepts, Lines 163-80

Now sir, and again sir! It so fell out
That this Fly Nicholas began one day
To flirt and play about with this young wife,
Her husband having gone off to Osney
(These scholars are so artful, and so sly!)





Absolon the Mimic, Lines 204-24

Now in that church there was a parish clerk

Who answered to the name of Absolon.

His hair was curly, and like gold it shone,

And stuck out wide and broad, just like a winnowing

Fan from each side of a straight, even parting.

His face was red, his eyes grey as a goose.

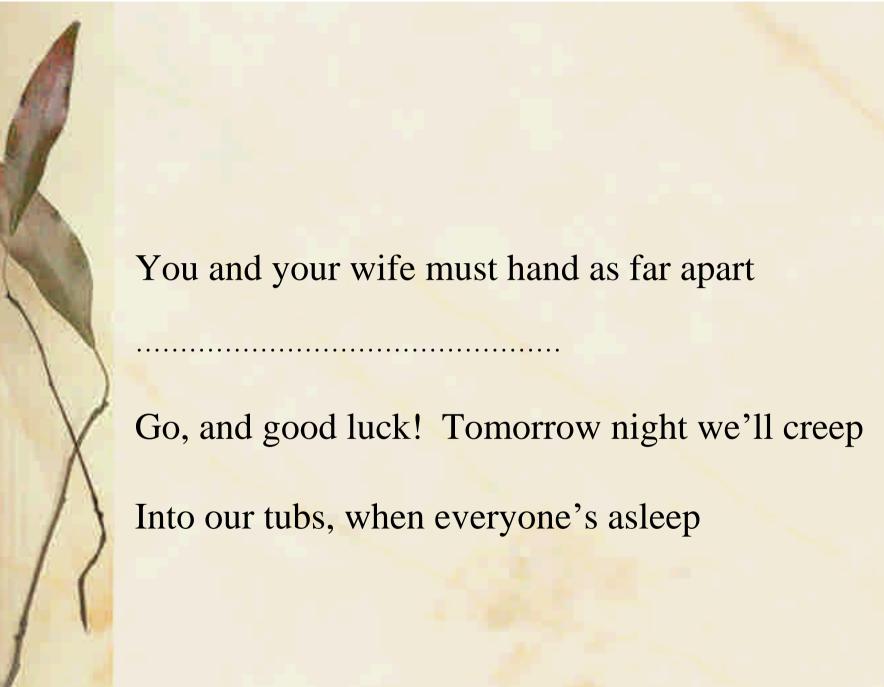


• What does the Miller's tale reveal about himself?



Nicholas's Plan, Lines 475-86

'But there's one thing I must warn you about;
You'd better bear in mind that on the night
The three of us are embarked on shipboard,
Not one of us must speak a single word,
Call or cry out, but pray to God instead,
For that is the commandment of the Lord.



What happened at that night?

OAbsolon came to the window of Alison's bedroom...

OThe first time:

• The second time:

OA fabliau usually consists of stereotyped characters. In which way is Chaucer's/the miller's tale offbeat with the common fabliaux?



OThe Medieval literature is moral literature. Can you justify the punishment of each character in the Miller's tale?

The Nun's Priest's Tale

- OA Tale Attacking Pride
- OAn Allegory
- ODream Vision: Piers Plowman
- OBird Debate: "The Owl and the Nightingale"



- A hard-up widow, getting on in age,
- Once on a time lived in a small cottage,
- Beside a coppice, standing in a dale,
- OShe had three pigs—three good-sized sows in all—
- OThree cows, besides a sheep that she called Moll
- OHer bed and living-room was thick with soot,

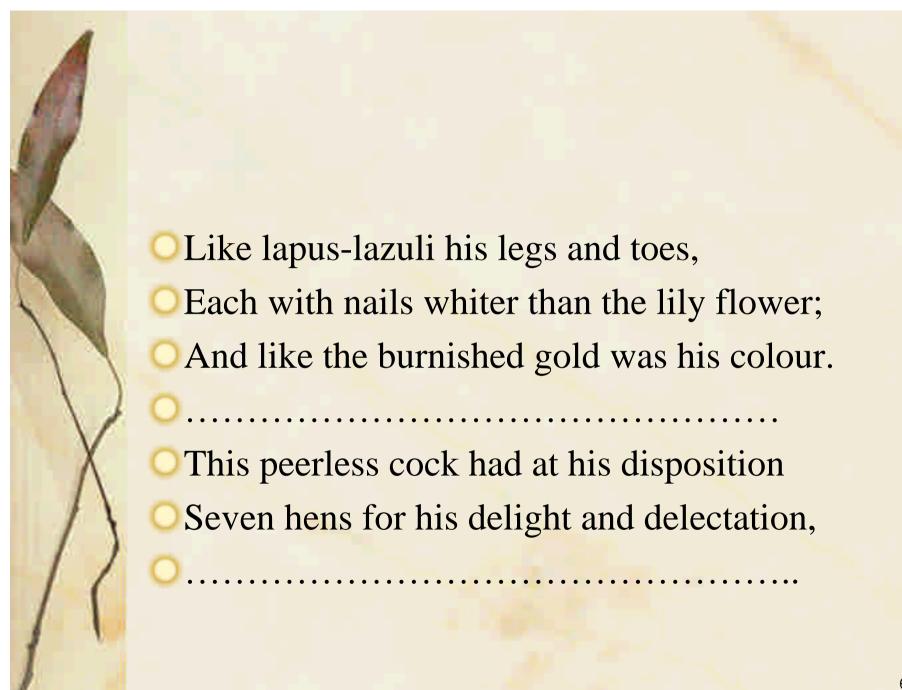


- And in it many's the scanty meal she ate.
- OShe had no need of any piquant sauce,
- No dainty morsel ever passed her lips;
- OHer diet matched the cottage where she lived,
- OSo too much eating never made her sick,
- OHer only medicine was a temperate diet,
- And exercise, and a contented heart.

OThe beginning of the Nun's Priest's tale seems suggestive. Can you compare the widow in his tale with the prioress in the General Prologue?

Chanticleer and Pertelote, Lines 27-29, 39-44, 45-50

- She had a closed yard that was fenced about
- With Wooden palings, a dry ditch without,
- In which she kept a cock called Chanticleer.
- O.....
- OHis comb was redder than the choicest coral,
- And crenellated like a castle wall;
- OHis beak was black, and like jet its gloss;





- And the one with the brightest-feathered throat
- Was called the lovely lady Pertelote.

Bird Debate, Lines 62-67

- And it so came about, one early morning,
- OAs Chanticleer was sitting among all
- OHis wives upon the perch inside the hall,
- OAnd next to him the pretty Pertelote,
- OHe groaned, and went on groaning in his throat,
- Like a man badly troubled in his dream.

Bird Debate, from Pertelote, Lines 100-49

- Have you no man's heart, and yet wear a beard?
- OAlas! and can you be afraid of dreams?
- ODreams come from overeating, flatulence,
- OFrom temperamental change, which happens if
- One of the body humours is excessive.
- O.....
- Look at Cato, who was so wise a man,



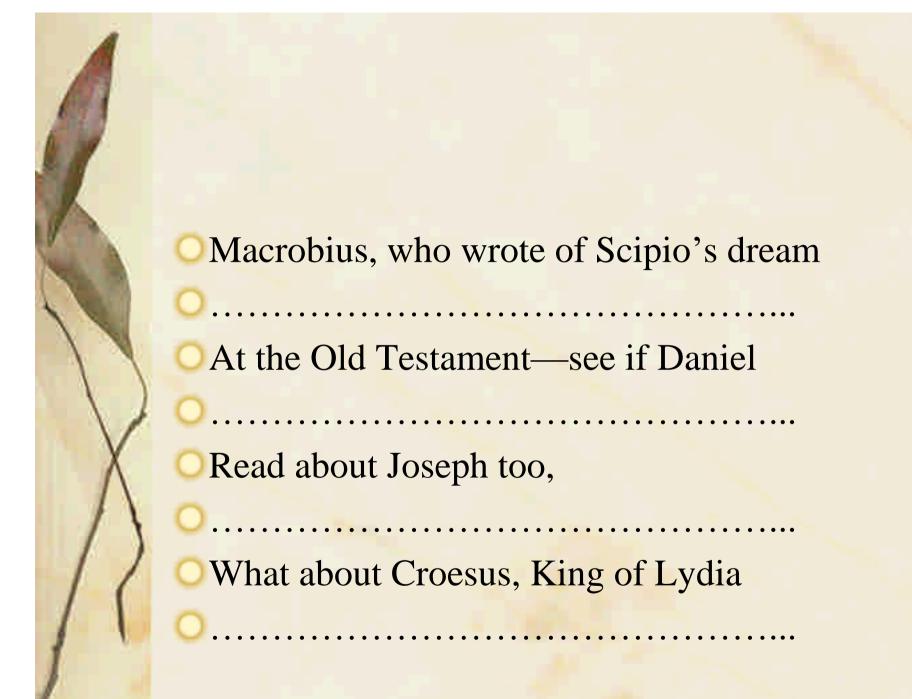
- ODidn't he say, "Take no account of dreams?"
- O.....
- 'Now sir,' said she, 'when we fly from these beams,
- OYou'll take, for goodness' sake, some laxative:

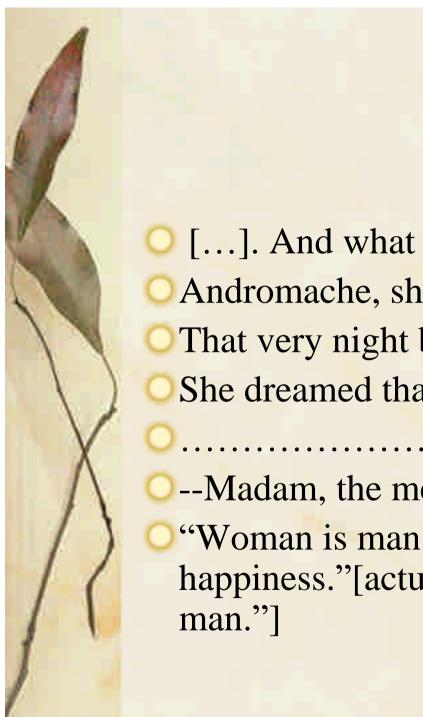
Four Humours

Fire	Water	Earth	Air
Yellow Bile	Phlegm	Black Bile	Blood
Choleric	Phlegmatic	Melancholy	Sanguine

Bird Debate, from Chanticleer, Lines 164-352

"One of our greatest authors, Cicero, Writes thus: Once on a time two friends set out "Thus we can see that dreams are to be feared. "What about Kenelm's dream [Kenelm: an English saint]





- [...]. And what of her,
- Andromache, she who was Hector's wife?
- That very night before he was to die
- She dreamed that Hector was to lose his life
- -- Madam, the meaning of this Latin is,
- "Woman is man's whole joy and happiness." [actually, "Woman is the ruin of

The Fox and Chantileer, Lines 367-71

- Now when the month in which the world began,
- OThe month called March, when God first created man,
- <u>Q</u>......
- It chanced that Chanticleer, in all his pride

OWe can see that Chanticleer, Pertelote, and the fox resonate with Adam, Eve, and Satan. What can be the significance of this resonation?

OThe Nun's Priest is a complicated character. His tale touches on the issues of gender and free will, too. Can you try to characterize this person?