
The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

The Wife of Bath is inimitable but not unprecedented. She is one of a number of sexually experienced older women in classical and medieval literature. Chaucer's largest debt to this tradition may be seen in the long speech of the Old Woman in the *Romance of the Rose*, from which he derived many of the Wife's traits and even a few of her lines.

The Wife's prologue is also built up from a vast medieval repertoire of antifeminist literature and debate. We include A. G. Rigg's translation of sections from the principal sources: Theophrastus, St. Jerome, and Walter Map. Various passages from the Bible, used not only by Jerome but by the Wife herself, are the central authorities for medieval ideas on marriage, remarriage, and widowhood. Further commentary may be found in Chaucer's Parson's own treatment of the sin of lechery and its remedy, which appears on pp. 295–306.

There are a number of analogues to the Wife's tale, the closest being the *Tale of Florent*, one of many *exempla* in the *Confessio Amantis* by Chaucer's friend John Gower. It has been argued that Chaucer based his tale on Gower's treatment alone, but many scholars believe he had a source now lost.

JEAN DE MEUN

From the *Romance of the Rose*†

[The Old Woman's Speech]

* * *

"Know then, that if only, when I was your age, I had been as wise about the games of Love as I am now! For then I was a very great beauty, but now I must complain and moan when I look at my face,

† From Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), pp. 222–33, 241–42, 247–48. Copyright © 1971 by Princeton University Press. Excerpts reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. The Old Woman (La Vieille) is advising a young lady on how to deal with men; the "son" she addresses is Fair Welcoming (Bel Accueil), a personification of part of the lady's psyche. This episode occurs in Jean de Meun's part of the poem, written ca. 1275. We know from the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* that Chaucer had himself "translated the Romance of the Rose"; but the surviving Middle English version is in three fragments, not all of them thought to be by Chaucer, and together they amount to only about one-third of the French poem. The Old Woman's speech translated here is not represented in the extant Middle English text, though we may be certain Chaucer knew it in its original French and nearly as certain he had once translated it himself.

which has lost its charms; and I see the inevitable wrinkles whenever I remember how my beauty made the young men skip. I made them so struggle that it was nothing if not a marvel. I was very famous then; word of my highly renowned beauty ran everywhere. At my house there was a crowd so big that no man ever saw the like. At night they knocked on my door: I was really very hard on them when I failed to keep my promises to them, and that happened very often, for I had other company. They did many a crazy thing at which I got very angry. Often my door was broken down, and many of them got into such battles as a result of their hatred and envy that before they were separated they lost their members and their lives. If master Algus, the great calculator, had wanted to take the trouble and had come with his ten figures, by which he certifies and numbers everything, he could not, however well he knew how to calculate, have ascertained the number of these great quarrels. Those were the days when my body was strong and active! As I say, if I had been as wise then as I am now, I would possess the value of a thousand pounds of sterling silver more than I do now, but I acted too foolishly.

"I was young and beautiful, foolish and wild, and had never been to a school of love where they read in the theory, but I know everything by practice. Experiments, which I have followed my whole life, have made me wise in love. Now that I know everything about love, right up to the struggle, it would not be right if I were to fail to teach you the delights that I know and have often tested. He who gives advice to a young man does well. Without fail, it is no wonder that you know nothing, for your beak is too yellow. But in the end, I have so much knowledge upon which I can lecture from a chair that I could never finish. One should not avoid or despise everything that is very old; there one finds both good sense and good custom. Men have proved many times that, however much they have acquired, there will remain to them, in the end, at least their sense and their customs. And since I had good sense and manners, not without great harm to me, I have deceived many a worthy man when he fell captive in my nets. But I was deceived by many before I noticed. Then it was too late, and I was miserably unhappy. I was already past my youth. My door, which formerly was often open, both night and day, stayed constantly near its sill.

"'No one is coming today, no one came yesterday,' I thought, 'unhappy wretch! I must live in sorrow.' My woeful heart should have left me. Then, when I saw my door, and even myself, at such repose, I wanted to leave the country, for I couldn't endure the shame. How could I stand it when those handsome young men came along, those who formerly had held me so dear that they could not tire themselves, and I saw them look at me sideways as they passed by, they who had once been my dear guests? They went by near me, bounding along without counting me worth an egg, even those who had loved me most; they called me a wrinkled old woman and worse before they had passed on by.

"Besides, my pretty child, no one, unless he were very attentive or

had experienced great sorrows, would think or know what grief gripped my heart when in my thought I remembered the lovely speeches, the sweet caresses and pleasures, the kisses and the deeply delightful embraces that were so soon stolen away. Stolen? Indeed, and without return. It would have been better for me to be imprisoned forever in a tower than to have been born so soon. God! Into what torment was I put by the fair gifts which had failed me, and how wretched their remnants had made me! Alas! Why was I born so soon? To whom can I complain, to whom except you, my son, whom I hold so dear? I have no other way to avenge myself than by teaching my doctrine. Therefore, fair son, I indoctrinate you so that, when instructed, you will avenge me on those good-for-nothings; for if God pleases, he will remind you of this sermon when he comes. You know that, because of your age, you have a very great advantage in retaining the sermon so that it will remind you. Plato said: 'It is true of any knowledge that one can keep better the memory of what one learns in one's infancy.'

"Certainly, dear son, my tender young one, if my youth were present, as yours is now, the vengeance that I would take on them could not rightly be written. Everywhere I came I would work such wonders with those scoundrels, who valued me so lightly and who vilified and despised me when they so basely passed by near me, that one would never have heard the like. They and others would pay for their pride and spite; I would have no pity on them. For with the intelligence that God has given me—just as I have preached to you—do you know what condition I would put them in? I would so pluck them and seize their possessions, even wrongly and perversely, that I would make them dine on worms and lie naked on dunghills, especially and first of all those who loved me with more loyal heart and who more willingly took trouble to serve and honor me. If I could, I wouldn't leave them anything worth one bud of garlic until I had everything in my purse and had put them all into poverty; I would make them stamp their feet in living rage behind me. But to regret it is worth nothing; what has gone cannot come. I would never be able to hold any man, for my face is so wrinkled that they don't even protect themselves against my threat. A long time ago the scoundrels who despised me told me so, and from that time on I took to weeping. O God! But it still pleases me when I think back on it. I rejoice in my thought and my limbs become lively again when I remember the good times and the gay life for which my heart so strongly yearns. Just to think of it and to remember it all makes my body young again. Remembering all that happened gives me all the blessings of the world, so that however they may have deceived me, at least I have had my fun. A young lady is not idle when she leads a gay life, especially she who thinks about acquiring enough to take care of her expenses.

* * *

"O fair, most sweet son," said the Old Woman, "O beautiful tender flesh, I want to teach you of the games of Love so that when you have

learned them you will not be deceived. Shape yourself according to my art, for no one who is not well informed can pass through this course of games without selling his livestock to get enough money. Now give your attention to hearing and understanding, and to remembering everything that I say, for I know the whole story.

"Fair son, whoever wants to enjoy loving and its sweet ills which are so bitter must know the commandments of Love but must beware that he does not know love itself. I would tell you all the commandments here if I did not certainly see that, by nature, you have overflowing measure of those that you should have. Well numbered, there are ten of them that you ought to know. But he who encumbers himself with the last two is a great fool; they are not worth a false penny. I allow you eight of them, but whoever follows Love in the other two wastes his study and becomes mad. One should not study them in a school. He who wants a lover to have a generous heart and to put love in only one place has given too evil a burden to lovers. It is a false text, false in the letter. In it, Love, the son of Venus, lies, and no man should believe him; whoever does will pay dearly, as you will see by the end of my sermon.

"Fair son, never be generous; and keep your heart in several places, never in one. Don't give it, and don't lend it, but sell it very dearly and always to the highest bidder. See that he who buys it can never get a bargain: no matter how much he may give, never let him have anything in return; it were better if he were to burn or hang or maim himself. In all cases keep to these points: have your hands closed to giving and open to taking. Certainly, giving is great folly, except giving a little for attracting men when one plans to make them one's prey or when one expects such a return for the gift that one could not have sold it for more. I certainly allow you such giving. The gift is good where he who gives multiplies his gift and gains; he who is certain of his profit cannot repent of his gift. I can indeed consent to such a gift. * * *

"But I can tell you this much: if you want to choose a lover, I advise you to give your love, but not too firmly, to that fair young man who so prizes you. Love others wisely, and I will seek out for you enough of them so that you can amass great wealth from them. It is good to become acquainted with rich men if their hearts are not mean and miserly and if one knows how to pluck them well. Fair Welcoming may know whomever he wishes, provided that he gives each one to understand that he would not want to take another lover for a thousand marks of fine milled gold. He should swear that if he had wanted to allow his rose, which was in great demand, to be taken by another, he would have been weighed down with gold and jewels. But, he should go on, his pure heart was so loyal that no man would ever stretch out his hand for it except that man alone who was offering his hand at that moment.

"If there are a thousand, he should say to each: 'Fair lord, you alone will have the rose; no one else will ever have a part. May God fail me if I ever divide it.' He may so swear and pledge his faith to them. If he

perjures himself, it doesn't matter; God laughs at such an oath and pardons it gladly.

"Jupiter and the gods laughed when lovers perjured themselves; and many times the gods who loved *par amour* perjured themselves. When Jupiter reassured his wife Juno, he swore by the Styx to her in a loud voice and falsely perjured himself. Since the gods give them, such examples should assure pure lovers that they too may swear falsely by all the saints, convents, and temples. But he is a great fool, so help me God, who believes in the oaths of lovers, for their hearts are too fickle. Young men are in no way stable—nor, often times, are the old—and therefore they belie the oaths and faith that they have given.

"Know also another truth: he who is lord of the fair should collect his market-toll everywhere; and he who cannot at one mill—Hey! to another for his whole round! The mouse who has but one hole for retreat has a very poor refuge and makes a very dangerous provision for himself. It is just so with a woman: she is the mistress of all the markets, since everyone works to have her. She should take possessions everywhere. If, after she had reflected well, she wanted only one lover, she would have a very foolish idea. For, by Saint Lifard of Meun, whoever gives her love in a single place has a heart neither free nor unencumbered, but basely enslaved. Such a woman, who takes trouble to love one man alone, has indeed deserved to have a full measure of pain and woe. If she lacks comfort from him, she has no one to comfort her, and those who give their hearts in a single place are those who most lack comfort. In the end, when they are bored, or irritated, all these men fly from their women.

* * *

"Briefly, all men betray and deceive women; all are sensualists, taking their pleasure anywhere. Therefore we should deceive them in return, not fix our hearts on one. Any woman who does so is a fool; she should have several friends and, if possible, act so as to delight them to the point where they are driven to distraction. If she has no graces, let her learn them. Let her be haughtier toward those who, because of her hauteur, will take more trouble to serve her in order to deserve her love, but let her scheme to take from those who make light of her love. She should know games and songs and flee from quarrels and disputes. If she is not beautiful, she should pretty herself; the ugliest should wear the most coquettish adornments.

* * *

"If she has a lovely neck and white chest, she should see that her dressmaker lower her neckline, so that it reveals a half foot, in front and back, of her fine white flesh; thus she may deceive more easily. And if her shoulders are too large to be pleasing at dances and balls, she should wear a dress of fine cloth and thus appear less ungainly. And if, because of insect bites or pimples, she doesn't have beautiful, well-kept hands, she should be careful not to neglect them but should remove the spots with a needle or wear gloves so that the pimples and scabs will not show.

"If her breasts are too heavy she should take a scarf or towel to bind

them against her chest and wrap it right around her ribs, securing it with needle and thread or by a knot; thus she can be active at her play.

"And like a good little girl she should keep her chamber of Venus tidy. If she is intelligent and well brought up, she will leave no cobwebs around but will burn or destroy them, tear them down and sweep them up, so that no grime can collect anywhere.

"If her feet are ugly, she should keep them covered and wear fine stockings if her legs are large. In short, unless she's very stupid she should hide any defect she knows of.

"For example, if she knows that her breath is foul she should spare no amount of trouble never to fast, never to speak to others on an empty stomach, and, if possible, to keep her mouth away from people's noses.

"When she has the impulse to laugh, she should laugh discreetly and prettily, so that she shows little dimples at the corners of her mouth. She should avoid puffing her cheeks and screwing her face up in grimaces. Her lips should be kept closed and her teeth covered; a woman should always laugh with her mouth closed, for the sight of a mouth stretched like a gash across the face is not a pretty one. If her teeth are not even, but ugly and quite crooked, she will be thought little of if she shows them when she laughs.

"There is also a proper way to cry. But every woman is adept enough to cry well on any occasion, for, even though the tears are not caused by grief or shame or hurt, they are always ready. All women cry; they are used to crying in whatever way they want. But no man should be disturbed when he sees such tears flowing as fast as rain, for these tears, these sorrows and lamentations flow only to trick him. A woman's weeping is nothing but a ruse; she will overlook no source of grief. But she must be careful not to reveal, in word or deed, what she is thinking of.

"It is also proper to behave suitably at the table. Before sitting down, she should look around the house and let everyone understand that she herself knows how to run a house. Let her come and go, in the front rooms and in back, and be the last to sit down, being sure to wait a little before she finally takes her seat. Then, when she is seated at table, she should serve everyone as well as possible. She should carve in front of the others and pass the bread to those around her. To deserve praise, she should serve food in front of the one who shares her plate. She should put a thigh or wing before him, or, in his presence, carve the beef or pork, meat or fish, depending upon what food there happens to be. She should never be niggardly in her servings as long as there is anyone unsatisfied. Let her guard against getting her fingers wet up to the joint in the sauce, against smearing her lips with soup, garlic, or fat meat, against piling up too large morsels and stuffing her mouth. When she has to moisten a piece in any sauce, either *sauce verte*, *cameline*, or *jauce*, she should hold the bit with her fingertips and bring it carefully up to her mouth, so that no drop of soup, sauce, or pepper falls on her breast. She must drink so neatly that she doesn't spill anything on herself, for anyone who happened to see her

spill would think her either very clumsy or very greedy. Again, she must take care not to touch her drinking cup while she has food in her mouth. She should wipe her mouth so clean that grease will not stick to the cup, and should be particularly careful about her upper lip, for, when there is grease on it, untidy drops of it will show in her wine. She should drink only a little at a time, however great her appetite, and never empty a cup, large or small, in one breath, but rather drink little and often, so that she doesn't go around causing others to say that she gorges or drinks too much while her mouth is full. She should avoid swallowing the rim of her cup, as do many greedy nurses who are so foolish that they pour wine down their hollow throats as if they were casks, who pour it down in such huge gulps that they become completely fuddled and dazed. Now a lady must be careful not to get drunk, for a drunk, man or woman, cannot keep anything secret; and when a woman gets drunk, she has no defenses at all in her, but blurts out whatever she thinks and abandons herself to anyone when she gives herself over to such bad conduct.

"She must also beware of falling asleep at the table, for she would be much less pleasant; many disagreeable things can happen to those who take such naps. There is no sense in napping in places where one should remain awake, and many have been deceived in this way, have many times fallen, either forward or backward or sideways, and broken an arm or head or ribs. Let a woman beware lest such a nap overtake her; let her recall Palinurus, the helmsman of Aeneas's ship. While awake, he steered it well, but when sleep conquered him, he fell from the rudder into the sea and drowned within sight of his companions, who afterward mourned greatly for him.

"Further, a lady must be careful not to be too reluctant to play, for she might wait around so long that no one would want to offer her his hand. She should seek the diversion of love as long as youth deflects her in that direction, for, when old age assails a woman, she loses both the joy and the assault of Love. A wise woman will gather the fruit of love in the flower of her age. The unhappy woman loses her time who passes it without enjoying love. And if she disbelieves this advice of mine, which I give for the profit of all, be sure that she will be sorry when age withers her. But I know that women will believe me, particularly those who are sensible, and will stick to our rules and will say many paternosters for my soul, when I am dead who now teach and comfort them. I know that this lesson will be read in many schools.

"O fair sweet son, if you live—for I see well that you are writing down in the book of your heart the whole of my teaching, and that, when you depart from me, you will study more, if it please God, and will become a master like me—if you live I confer on you the license to teach, in spite of all chancellors, in chambers or in cellars, in meadow, garden, or thicket, under a tent or behind the tapestries, and to inform the students in wardrobes, attics, pantries, and stables, if you find no more pleasant places. And may my lesson be well taught when you have learned it well!

"A woman should be careful not to stay shut up too much, for while she remains in the house, she is less seen by everybody, her beauty is less well-known, less desired, and in demand less. She should go often to the principal church and go visiting, to weddings, on trips, at games, feasts, and round dances, for in such places the God and Goddess of Love keep their schools and sing mass to their disciples.

"But of course, if she is to be admired above others, she has to be well-dressed. When she is well turned out and goes through the streets, she should carry herself well, neither too stiffly nor too loosely, not too upright nor too bent over, but easily and graciously in any crowd. She should move her shoulders and sides so elegantly that no one might find anyone with more beautiful movements. And she should walk daintily in her pretty little shoes, so well made that they fit her feet without any wrinkles whatever.

* * *

"And what I say about the black mare, about the sorrel horse and mare and the gray and black horses, I say about the cow and bull and the ewe and ram; for we do not doubt that these males want all females as their wives. Never doubt, fair son, that in the same way all females want all males. All women willingly receive them. By my soul, fair son, it is thus with every man and every woman as far as natural appetite goes. The law restrains them little from exercising it. A little! but too much, it seems to me, for when the law has put them together, it wants either of them, the boy or the girl, to be able to have only the other, at least as long as he or she lives. But at the same time they are tempted to use their free will. I know very well that such a thing does rise up, only some keep themselves from it because of shame, others because they fear trouble; but Nature controls them to that end just as she does the animals that we were just speaking of. I know it from my own experience, for I always took trouble to be loved by all men. And if I had not feared shame, which holds back and subdues many hearts, when I went along the streets where I always wanted to go—so dressed up in adornments that a dressed-up doll would have been nothing in comparison—I would have received all or at least many of those young boys, if I had been able and if it had pleased them, who pleased me so much when they threw me those sweet glances. (Sweet God! What pity for them seized me when those looks came toward me!) I wanted them all one after the other, if I could have satisfied them all. And it seemed to me that, if they could have, they would willingly have received me. I do not except prelates or monks, knights, burgers, or canons, clerical or lay, foolish or wise, as long as they were at the height of their powers. They would have jumped out of their orders if they had not thought that they might fail when they asked for my love; but if they had known my thought and the whole of our situations they would not have been in such doubt. And I think that several, if they had dared, would have broken their marriages. If one of them had had me in private he would not have remembered to be faithful. No man would have kept his situation, his faith, vows, or re-

ligion unless he were some demented fool who was smitten by love and loved his sweetheart loyally. Such a man, perhaps, would have called me paid and thought about his own possessions, which he would not have given up at any price. But there are very few such lovers, so help me God and Saint Amand; I certainly think so. If he spoke to me for a long time, no matter what he said, lies or truth, I could have made him move everything. Whatever he was, secular, or in an order, with a belt of red leather or of cord, no matter what head-dress he wore, I think that he would have carried on with me if he thought that I wanted him or even if I had allowed him. Thus Nature regulates us by inciting our hearts to pleasure. For this reason Venus deserves less blame for loving Mars.

* * *

"By my soul, if I had been wise, I would have been a very rich lady, for I was acquainted with very great people when I was already a coy darling, and I certainly was held in considerable value by them, but when I got something of value from one of them, then, by the faith that I owe God or Saint Thibaut, I would give it all to a rascal who brought me great shame but pleased me more. I called all the others lover, but it was he alone that I loved. Understand, he didn't value me at one pea, and in fact told me so. He was bad—I never saw anyone worse—and he never ceased despising me. This scoundrel, who didn't love me at all, would call me a common whore. A woman has very poor judgment, and I was truly a woman. I never loved a man who loved me, but, do you know, if that scoundrel had laid open my shoulder or broken my head, I would have thanked him for it. He wouldn't have known how to beat me so much that I would not have had him throw himself upon me, for he knew very well how to make his peace, however much he had done against me. He would never have treated me so badly, beaten me or dragged me or wounded my face or bruised it black, that he would not have begged my favor before he moved from the place. He would never have said so many shameful things to me that he would not have counseled peace to me and then made me happy in bed, so that we had peace and concord again. Thus he had me caught in his snare, for this false, treacherous thief was a very hard rider in bed. I couldn't live without him; I wanted to follow him always. If he had fled, I would certainly have gone as far as London in England to seek him, so much did he please me and make me happy. He put me to shame and I him, for he led a life of great gaiety with the lovely gifts that he had received from me. He put none of them into saving, but played everything at dice in the taverns. He never learned any other trade, and there was no need then for him to do so, for I gave him a great deal to spend, and I certainly had it for the taking. Everybody was my source of income, while he spent it willingly and always on ribaldry; he burned everything in his lechery. He had his mouth stretched so wide that he did not want to hear anything good. Living never pleased him except when it was passed in idleness and pleasure. In the end I saw him in a bad situation as a result, when gifts were lacking for us. He became poor and begged his bread, while

I had nothing worth two carding combs and had never married a lord. Then, as I have told you, I came through these woods, scratching my temples. May this situation of mine be an example to you, fair sweet son; remember it. Act so wisely that it may be better with you because of my instruction. For when your rose is withered and white hairs assail you, gifts will certainly fail."

* * *

THEOPHRASTUS

From *The Golden Book on Marriage*†

[Theophrastus was a Greek philosopher (371–287 B.C.E.), who succeeded Aristotle as head of the Peripatetic school. He wrote many works on philosophy but is best known for his *Characters*, brief sketches of types of men. His work *On Marriage* has not survived in the original but has been preserved in translation into Latin in Jerome's treatise *Against Jovinian* (see pp. 359–73). It is better to treat it as a separate work from Jerome's in that it presents a purely pagan attitude toward the subject of marriage. The introductory words are by Jerome.]

* * *

[JEROME] I feel that in my catalogue of women [see p. 370], I have exceeded the customary space given to examples, and may rightly be censured by a critical reader. But what else can I do, when women of our own time attack the authority of Paul, and, when the funeral of their first husband is not yet over, start to recite arguments for a second marriage?¹ As they despise belief in Christian chastity, let them at any rate learn chastity from the pagans. There is a book by Theophrastus on the subject of marriage, called *The Golden Book*, in which he discusses whether the wise man should take a wife. After concluding that if the woman is beautiful and virtuous, her parents noble, and the husband healthy and rich, then a wise man may sometimes marry, he immediately adds:

[THEOPHRASTUS] However, it is very unusual for all these conditions to be present in a marriage, and therefore the philosopher² ought not to take a wife. Firstly, the pursuit of Philosophy is impeded: no one can serve both books and a wife at the same time.³ There are many things which women require—fine clothes, gold, jewels, money, maid-servants, all kinds of furniture, litters, and gilded coaches. And then

† This excerpt and the ones from St. Jerome and Walter Map following were prepared for this Norton Critical Edition by A. G. Rigg. Because of the length and complexity of these texts, Professor Rigg has used a combination of summary, translation, and annotation to present them to the reader.

1. Cf. the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* 587 ff. (hereafter cited as *WBP*) and Deschamps, *Miroir de Mariage* (cited in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1941], p. 220).
2. In all these discussions, "wise man, philosopher," etc. (Lat. *sapiens*) are equivalent to the Middle English *clerk* (i.e., Jankyn, the Wife's fifth husband).
3. The remark is echoed by Cicero, cited by both Jerome and Walter Map (below pp. 370, 376).

there is the ceaseless chatter and grumbling all through the night—"So-and-so has smarter clothes to go out in than I do. Everyone admires *her*, but when I meet other women they all look down on me, poor thing. Why were you looking at the girl next door? What were you saying to our serving girl? What did you bring me from the market?"⁴

We are not allowed a friend or companion, for she suspects that friendship for another means hatred of her.⁵ If a learned lecturer is at some nearby city, we can neither leave our wives behind nor burden ourselves with them. It is difficult to look after a poor wife, but torture to put up with a rich one.⁶

Moreover, there is no choice in the matter of a wife: one has to take whatever comes along. If she's nagging, stupid, ugly, proud, smelly—whatever fault she has, we find out *after* marriage. Now a horse, an ass, a cow, a dog, the cheapest slaves, clothes, kettles, a wooden chair, a cup, a clay pot—all these are tested first, and *then* purchased. Only a wife is not put on display—in case her faults are discovered before we take her.⁷

We always have to be noticing her appearance and praising her beauty, in case she thinks that we don't like her if we ever look at another woman. She has to be called "Madam"; we have to celebrate her birthday and make oaths by her health, saying "Long may you live!" We have to honor her nurse, her old nanny, her father's servant, her foster son, her elegant follower, her curly-haired go-between, some eunuch (cut short for the sake of a long and carefree pleasure!)—all of them are adulterers under another name. Whoever has her favors, you have to love them, like it or not.⁸

If you give the whole management of the house to her, she complains "I'm just a servant"; if you keep any part of it to yourself, "You don't trust me!"⁹ She begins to hate you and quarrel with you, and if you don't watch out she'll be mixing poison. If you allow into the house old dames, sooth-sayers, fortune-tellers, and gem-setters and silkworkers, she says, "You're endangering my virtue!"; but if you don't, "Why are you so suspicious?" But what good is it to keep a careful watch over her?—if a wife is unchaste, she can't be guarded, and if she isn't she doesn't need guarding. In any case, the compulsion to be chaste is an untrustworthy guard—the woman really to be called "chaste" is the one who could sin if she wanted to. Men are quick to desire a beautiful woman: an ugly one is herself lecherous. It is difficult to guard what everyone is after: it is misery to possess what no one thinks worth having. However, there's less misery in having an ugly wife than in trying to keep a beautiful one. Nothing is safe which the whole population has set its heart on—one man uses his handsome figure to court her, another his intellect, another

4. WBP, 235–42.

5. Chaucer seems to have taken this as part of the woman's speech.

6. WBP, 248–52.

7. WBP, 282–92.

8. WBP, 293–306.

9. WBP, 308–10.

his witticisms, another his generosity: some day, in some way, the castle besieged on all sides must surrender.¹

Now some people marry in order to have someone to run the home, or to cheer them up, or to avoid loneliness: but (i) a faithful servant, obedient to his master's authority and conforming to his wishes, is a better majordomo than a wife, who only considers herself mistress of the house if she goes against her husband's wishes; that is, she does what she pleases, not what she's told. (ii) At the side of a sick man friends, and servants bound by ties of old benefits, do more good than a wife: she puts her tears on our charge sheet, and sells her flood of tears in the hope of the inheritance: by her show of solicitude she upsets the sick man's temper by her despair. On the other hand, if our wife herself is sick, we have to be sick in sympathy and are never allowed to leave her bedside. Or, if she is a good and gentle wife (a rare bird!), then we suffer agony with her in her birthpangs, and are in anguish when she is in danger. (iii) The philosopher can never be alone: he has with him all men who are or ever were good, and can send his free mind where he wishes. What he cannot reach in the flesh, he embraces in contemplation. And if there is a shortage of men, he speaks with God. He will never be less lonely than when he is alone.

Further, to take a wife in order to have children, either to make sure that our name survives, or to have supports in our old age and be sure of having heirs—this is the most stupid of all. For what does it matter to us as we leave this world if someone else has the same name as we did? The son does not immediately assume his father's name (?),² and there are countless people who are called by the same name. Why bring up at home aids for your old age, who may either die before you, or may turn out to have bad characters (or at the least, when your son reaches maturity, he will certainly think you are taking a long time to die)? Better and more certain heirs are your friends and neighbors whom you can choose judiciously, than heirs whom you have to have, whether you like it or not. Even if your heredity is sufficiently secure, it is better to use up your wealth while you still live, rather than to abandon to uncertain uses what you have collected by your own hard work.

ST. JEROME

From *Against Jovinian*†

[This treatise, written ca. 393 C.E., was the principal source for the medieval Church in its arguments for clerical celibacy. It is referred to by the *Wife of Bath* thus:

1. WBP, 253–72 (with the arguments in a different order).

2. Translation doubtful.

† Prepared for this volume by A. G. Rigg; see footnote, p. 357.