THE TALE. <1>

In olde dayes of the king Arthour, Of which that Britons speake great honour, All was this land full fill'd of faerie;* *fairies The Elfqueen, with her jolly company, Danced full oft in many a green mead This was the old opinion, as I read; I speak of many hundred years ago; But now can no man see none elves mo', For now the great charity and prayeres Of limitours,* and other holy freres, *begging friars <2> That search every land and ev'ry stream As thick as motes in the sunne-beam, Blessing halls, chambers, kitchenes, and bowers, Cities and burghes, castles high and towers, Thorpes* and barnes, shepens** and dairies, *villages <3> **stables This makes that there be now no faeries: For *there as* wont to walke was an elf. *where* There walketh now the limitour himself, In undermeles* and in morrowings**, *evenings <4> **mornings And saith his matins and his holy things, As he goes in his limitatioun.* *begging district Women may now go safely up and down, In every bush, and under every tree; There is none other incubus <5> but he; And he will do to them no dishonour.

And so befell it, that this king Arthour Had in his house a lusty bacheler, That on a day came riding from river: <6> And happen'd, that, alone as she was born, He saw a maiden walking him beforn, Of which maiden anon, maugre* her head, *in spite of By very force he reft her maidenhead: For which oppression was such clamour, And such pursuit unto the king Arthour, That damned* was this knight for to be dead *condemned By course of law, and should have lost his head; (Paraventure such was the statute tho),* *then But that the queen and other ladies mo' So long they prayed the king of his grace, Till he his life him granted in the place, And gave him to the queen, all at her will To choose whether she would him save or spill* *destroy The queen thanked the king with all her might; And, after this, thus spake she to the knight, When that she saw her time upon a day. "Thou standest yet," quoth she, "in such array,* *a position That of thy life yet hast thou no surety; I grant thee life, if thou canst tell to me What thing is it that women most desiren: Beware, and keep thy neck-bone from the iron* *executioner's axe And if thou canst not tell it me anon, Yet will I give thee leave for to gon A twelvemonth and a day, to seek and lear* *learn An answer suffisant* in this mattere. *satisfactory And surety will I have, ere that thou pace,* *go Thy body for to yielden in this place." Woe was the knight, and sorrowfully siked;* *sighed But what? he might not do all as him liked. And at the last he chose him for

to wend,* *depart And come again, right at the yeare's end, With such answer as God would him purvey:* *provide And took his leave, and wended forth his way.

He sought in ev'ry house and ev'ry place, Where as he hoped for to finde grace, To learne what thing women love the most: But he could not arrive in any coast, Where as he mighte find in this mattere Two creatures *according in fere.* *agreeing together* Some said that women loved best richess, Some said honour, and some said jolliness, Some rich array, and some said lust* a-bed, *pleasure And oft time to be widow and be wed. Some said, that we are in our heart most eased When that we are yflatter'd and y-praised. He *went full nigh the sooth,* I will not lie; *came very near A man shall win us best with flattery; the truth* And with attendance, and with business Be we y-limed,* bothe more *caught with bird-lime And some men said that we do love the best For to be free, and do *right as us lest,* *whatever we please* And that no man reprove us of our vice, But say that we are wise, and nothing nice,* *foolish <7> For truly there is none among us all, If any wight will *claw us on the gall,* *see note <8>* That will not kick, for that he saith us sooth: Assay,* and he shall find it, that so do'th. *try For be we never so vicious within, We will be held both wise and clean of sin. And some men said, that great delight have we For to be held stable and eke secre,* *discreet And in one purpose steadfastly to dwell, And not bewray* a thing that men us tell. *give away But that tale is not worth a rake-stele.* *rake-handle Pardie, we women canne nothing hele,* *hide <9> Witness on Midas; will ye hear the tale? Ovid, amonges other thinges smale* *small Saith, Midas had, under his longe hairs, Growing upon his head two ass's ears; The whiche vice he hid, as best he might, Full subtlely from every man's sight, That, save his wife, there knew of it no mo'; He lov'd her most, and trusted her also; He prayed her, that to no creature She woulde tellen of his disfigure. She swore him, nay, for all the world to win, She would not do that villainy or sin, To make her husband have so foul a name: She would not tell it for her owen shame. But natheless her thoughte that she died, That she so longe should a counsel hide; Her thought it swell'd so sore about her heart That needes must some word from her astart And, since she durst not tell it unto man Down to a marish fast thereby she ran, Till she came there, her heart was all afire: And, as a bittern bumbles* in the mire, *makes a humming noise She laid her mouth unto the water down "Bewray me not, thou water, with thy soun'" Quoth she, "to thee I tell it, and no mo', Mine husband hath long ass's eares two! Now is mine heart all whole; now is it out; I might no longer keep it, out of doubt." Here may ye see, though we a time abide, Yet out it must, we can no counsel hide. The remnant of the tale,

if ye will hear, Read in Ovid, and there ye may it lear.*
*learn

This knight, of whom my tale is specially, When that he saw he might not come thereby, That is to say, what women love the most, Within his breast full sorrowful washis ghost.* *spirit But home he went, for he might not sojourn, The day was come, that homeward he must turn. And in his way it happen'd him to ride, In all his care,* under a forest side, *trouble, anxiety Where as he saw upon a dance go Of ladies four-andtwenty, and yet mo', Toward this ilke* dance he drew full yern,** *same **eagerly <10> The hope that he some wisdom there should learn; But certainly, ere he came fully there, Y-vanish'd was this dance, he knew not where; No creature saw he that bare life, Save on the green he sitting saw a wife, A fouler wight there may no man devise.* *imagine, tell Against* this knight this old wife gan to rise, *to meet And said, "Sir Knight, hereforth* lieth no way. *from here Tell me what ye are seeking, by your fay. Paraventure it may the better be: These olde folk know muche thing." quoth she. My leve* mother," quoth this knight, "certain, *dear I am but dead, but if* that I can sayn *unless What thing it is that women most desire: Could ye me wiss,* I would well *quite your hire."* *instruct <11> "Plight me thy troth here in mine hand," quoth she, *reward you* "The nexte thing that I require of thee Thou shalt it do, if it be in thy might, And I will tell it thee ere it be night." "Have here my trothe," quoth the knight; "I grant." "Thenne," quoth she, "I dare me well avaunt,* *boast, affirm Thy life is safe, for I will stand thereby, Upon my life the queen will say as I: Let see, which is the proudest of them all, That wears either a kerchief or a caul, That dare say nay to that I shall you teach. Let us go forth withoute longer speech Then *rowned she a pistel* *she whispered a secret* And bade him to be glad, and have in his ear, no fear.

When they were come unto the court, this knight Said, he had held his day, as he had hight,*

*promised And ready was his answer, as he said. Full many a noble wife, and many a maid, And many a widow, for that they be wise, -- The queen herself sitting as a justice, -- Assembled be, his answer for to hear, And afterward this knight was bid appear. To every wight commanded was silence, And that the knight should tell in audience, What thing that worldly women love the best. This knight he stood not still, as doth a beast, But to this question anon answer'd With manly voice, that all the court it heard, "My liege lady, generally," quoth he, "Women desire to have the sovereignty As well over their husband as their love And for to be in mast'ry him above. This is your most desire, though ye me kill, Do as you list, I am here at your will." In all the court there was no wife nor maid Nor

widow, that contraried what he said, But said, he worthy was to have his life. And with that word up start that olde wife Which that the knight saw sitting on the green.

"Mercy," quoth she, "my sovereign lady queen, Ere that your court departe, do me right. I taughte this answer unto this knight, For which he plighted me his trothe there. The firste thing I would of him requere, He would it do, if it lay in his might. Before this court then pray I thee, Sir Knight," Quoth she, "that thou me take unto thy wife, For well thou know'st that I have kept* thy life. *preserved If I say false, say nay, upon thy fay."* *faith This knight answer'd, "Alas, and well-away! I know right well that *promise For Godde's love choose a new such was my behest.* request Take all my good, and let my body go." "Nay, then," quoth she, "I shrew* us bothe two, *curse For though that I be old, and foul, and poor, I n'ould* for all the metal nor the ore, *would not That under earth is grave,* or lies above *buried But if thy wife I were and eke thy love." "My love?" quoth he, "nay, my damnation, Alas! that any of my nation Should ever so foul disparaged be. But all for nought; the end is this, that he Constrained was, that needs he muste wed, And take this olde wife, and go to bed.

Now woulde some men say paraventure That for my negligence I do no cure* *take no pains To tell you all the joy and all th' array That at the feast was made that ilke* day. *same To which thing shortly answeren I shall: I say there was no joy nor feast at all, There was but heaviness and muche sorrow: For privily he wed her on the morrow; And all day after hid him as an owl, So woe was him, his wife look'd so foul Great was the woe the knight had in his thought When he was with his wife to bed y-brought; He wallow'd, and he turned to and fro. This olde wife lay smiling evermo', And said, "Dear husband, benedicite, Fares every knight thus with his wife as ye? Is this the law of king Arthoures house? Is every knight of his thus dangerous?* *fastidious, niggardly I am your owen love, and eke your wife I am she, which that saved hath your life And certes yet did I you ne'er unright. Why fare ye thus with me this firste night? Ye fare like a man had lost his wit. What is my guilt? for God's love tell me it, And it shall be amended, if I may." "Amended!" quoth this knight; "alas, nay, nay, It will not be amended, never mo'; Thou art so loathly, and so old also, And thereto* comest of so lowa kind, *in addition That little wonder though I wallow and wind;* *writhe, turn about So woulde God, mine hearte woulde brest!"* *burst "Is this," quoth she, "the cause of your unrest?" "Yea, certainly," quoth he; "no wonder is." "Now, Sir," quoth she, "I could amend all this, If that me list, ere it were dayes three, *So well ye mighte bear you unto me.* *if you could conduct But, for ye

```
speaken of such gentleness
                                         yourself well As is descended out of
old richess,
                            towards me* That therefore shalle ye be
gentlemen; Such arrogancy is *not worth a hen.*
                                                               *worth
nothing Look who that is most virtuous alway, *Prive and apert,* and most
                   *in private and public* To do the gentle deedes that he
intendeth aye
can; And take him for the greatest gentleman. Christ will,* we claim of him
                      *wills, requires Not of our elders* for their old richess.
our gentleness,
*ancestors For though they gave us all their heritage, For which we claim to
be of high parage,*
                             *birth, descent Yet may they not bequeathe, for
no thing, To none of us, their virtuous living That made them gentlemen
called to be, And bade us follow them in such degree. Well can the wise poet
of Florence, That highte Dante, speak of this sentence:*
*sentiment Lo, in such manner* rhyme is Dante's tale.
                                                                     *kind of
'Full seld'* upriseth by his branches smale
                                                         *seldom Prowess of
man, for God of his goodness Wills that we claim of him our gentleness;'
<12> For of our elders may we nothing claim But temp'ral things that man
may hurt and maim. Eke every wight knows this as well as I, If gentleness
were planted naturally Unto a certain lineage down the line, Prive and apert,
then would they never fine*
                                          *cease To do of gentleness the fair
office Then might they do no villainy nor vice. Take fire, and bear it to the
darkest house Betwixt this and the mount of Caucasus, And let men shut
the doores, and go thenne,*
                                         *thence Yet will the fire as fair and
lighte brenne*
                            *burn As twenty thousand men might it behold;
*Its office natural aye will it hold,*
                                          *it will performits On
                                                                       peril
of my life, till that it die.
                                          natural duty* Here may ye see
well how that gentery*
                               *gentility, nobility Is not annexed to
possession, Since folk do not their operation Alway, as doth the fire, lo, *in
              *from its very nature* For, God it wot, men may full often find
its kind*
A lorde's son do shame and villainy. And he that will have price* of his
                *esteem, honour For* he was boren of a gentle house,
gent'ry,
*because And had his elders noble and virtuous, And will himselfe do no
gentle deedes, Nor follow his gentle ancestry, that dead is, He is not gentle,
be he duke or earl; For villain sinful deedes make a churl. For gentleness is
but the renomee*
                                      *renown Of thine ancestors, for their
high bounte,*
                      *goodness, worth Which is a strange thing to thy
person: Thy gentleness cometh from God alone. Then comes our very*
                                    *true It was no thing bequeath'd us
gentleness of grace;
with our place. Think how noble, as saith Valerius, Was thilke* Tullius
Hostilius,
                                  *that That out of povert' rose to high Read
in Senec, and read eke in Boece, There shall ye see express, that it no drede*
             *doubt That he is gentle that doth gentle deedes. And therefore,
leve* husband, I conclude,
                                     *dear Albeit that mine
                                                                   ancestors
were rude, Yet may the highe God, -- and so hope I, -- Grant me
```

His grace to live virtuously: Then am I gentle when that I begin To live virtuously, and waive* sin.

*forsake

"And whereas ye of povert' me repreve,* *reproach The highe God, on whom that we believe, In wilful povert' chose to lead his life: And certes, every man, maiden, or wife May understand that Jesus, heaven's king, Ne would not choose a virtuous living. *Glad povert'* is an honest thing, certain; *poverty cheerfully This will Senec and other clerkes sayn endured* Whoso that *holds him paid of* his povert', *is satisfied with* I hold him rich though he hath not a shirt. He that coveteth is a poore wight For he would have what is not in his might But he that nought hath, nor coveteth to have, Is rich, although ye hold him but a knave.* *slave, abject wretch *Very povert' is sinne,* properly. only true poverty is sin* Juvenal saith of povert' merrily: The poore man, when he goes by the way Before the thieves he may sing and play <13> Povert' is hateful good, <14> and, as I guess, A full great *bringer out of business:* *deliver from trouble* A great amender eke of sapience To him that taketh it in patience. Povert' is this, although it seem elenge* *strange <15> Possession that no wight will challenge Povert' full often, when a man is low, Makes him his God and eke himself to know Povert' a spectacle* is, as thinketh me *a pair of spectacles Through which he may his very* friendes see. *true And, therefore, Sir, since that I you not grieve, Of my povert' no more me repreve.* *reproach "Now, Sir, of elde* ye repreve me: *age And certes, Sir, though none authority* *text, dictum Werein no book, ye gentles of honour Say, that men should an olde wight honour, And call him father, for your gentleness; And authors shall I finden, as I guess. Now there ye say that I am foul and old, Then dread ye not to be a *cuckold For filth, and elde, all so may I the,* cokewold.* *thrive Be greate wardens upon chastity. But natheless, since I know your delight, I shall fulfil your wordly appetite. Choose now," quoth she, "one of these thinges tway, To have me foul and old till that I dey,* *die And be to you a true humble wife, And never you displease in all my life: Or elles will ye have me young and fair, And take your aventure of the repair* *resort That shall be to your house because of me, -- Or in some other place, it may well be? Now choose yourselfe whether that you liketh.

This knight adviseth* him and sore he siketh,**

*considered **sighed But at the last he said in this mannere; "My lady and my love, and wife so dear, I put me in your wise governance, Choose for yourself which may be most pleasance And most honour to you and me also; I *do no force* the whether of the two:

*care not For as you liketh, it sufficeth me." "Then

have I got the mastery," quoth she, "Since I may choose and govern as me lest."* *pleases "Yea, certes wife," quoth he, "I hold it best." "Kiss me," quoth she, "we are no longer wroth,* *at variance For by my troth I will be to you both; This is to say, yea, bothe fair and good. I pray to God that I may*sterve wood,* *die mad* But* I to you be all *unless As ever was wife since the world so good and true, *unless As was new; And but* I be to-morrow as fair to seen, any lady, emperess or queen, That is betwixt the East and eke the West Do with my life and death right as you lest.* *please Cast up the curtain, and look how it is."

And when the knight saw verily all this, That she so fair was, and so young thereto, For joy he hent* her in his armes two:

*took His hearte bathed in a bath of bliss, A thousand times *on row* he gan her kiss:
in succession And she obeyed him in every thing That mighte do him pleasance or liking. And thus they live unto their lives' end In perfect joy; and Jesus Christ us send Husbandes meek and young, and fresh in bed, And grace to overlive them that we wed. And eke I pray Jesus to short their lives, That will not be governed by their wives. And old and angry niggards of dispence,*

*expense God send them soon a very pestilence!