THE MONK'STALE.

THE PROLOGUE

WHEN ended was my tale of Melibee, And of Prudence and her benignity, Our Hoste said, "As I am faithful man, And by the precious corpus Madrian, <1> I had lever* than a barrel of ale, *rather That goode lefe* my wife had heard this tale; *dear For she is no thing of such patience As was this Meliboeus' wife Prudence. By Godde's bones! when I beat my knaves She bringeth me the greate clubbed staves, And crieth, 'Slay the dogges every one, And break of them both back and ev'ry bone.' And if that any neighebour of mine Will not in church unto my wife incline, Or be so hardy to her to trespace,* *offend When she comes home she rampeth* in my face, *springs And crieth, 'False coward, wreak* thy wife *avenge By corpus Domini, I will have thy knife, And thou shalt have my distaff, and go spin.' From day till night right thus she will begin. 'Alas!' she saith, 'that ever I *destined To wed a milksop, or a coward ape, That was shape* will be overlad* with every wight! *imposed on Thou darest not stand by thy wife's right.'

"This is my life, *but if* that I will fight; *unless And out at door anon I must me dight,* *betake myself Or elles I am lost, but if that I Be, like a wilde lion, fool-hardy. I wot well she will do* me slay some *make Some neighebour and thenne *go my way;* day *take to flight* For I am perilous with knife in hand, Albeit that I dare not her withstand; For she is big in armes, by my faith! That shall he find, that her misdoth or saith. <2> But let us pass away from this mattere. My lord the Monk," quoth he, "be merry of cheer, For ye shall tell a tale truely. Lo, Rochester stands here faste by. Ride forth, mine owen lord, break not our game. But by my troth I cannot tell your name; Whether shall I call you my lord Dan John, Or Dan Thomas, or elles Dan Albon? Of what house be ye, by your father's kin? I vow to God, thou hast a full fair skin; It is a gentle pasture where thou go'st; Thou art not like a penant* or a ghost. *penitent Upon my faith thou art some officer, Some worthy sexton, or some cellarer. For by my father's soul, *as to my dome,* *in my judgement* Thou art a master when thou art at home; No poore cloisterer, nor no novice, But a governor, both wily and wise, And therewithal, of brawnes* and of bones, *sinews A right well-faring person for

the nonce. I pray to God give him confusion That first thee brought into religion. Thou would'st have been a treade-fowl* aright; *cock Hadst thou as greate leave, as thou hast might, To perform all thy lust in engendrure,* *generation, begettting Thou hadst begotten many a creature. Alas! why wearest thou so wide a cope? <3> God give me sorrow, *if Not only thou, but every mighty but, an* I were pope, man, Though he were shorn full high upon his pan,* <4> Should have a wife; for all this world is lorn;* *undone, ruined Religion hath ta'en up all the corn Of treading, and we borel* men be shrimps: *lay Of feeble trees there come wretched imps.* *shoots <5> This maketh that our heires be so slender And feeble, that they may not well engender. This maketh that our wives will assay Religious folk, for they may better pay Of Venus' payementes than may we: God wot, no lusheburghes <6> paye ye. But be not wroth, my lord, though that I play; Full oft in game a sooth have I heard say."

This worthy Monk took all in patience, And said, "I will do all my diligence, As far as *souneth unto honesty,* *agrees with good manners* To telle you a tale, or two or three. And if you list to hearken hitherward, I will you say the life of Saint Edward; Or elles first tragedies I will tell, Of which I have an hundred in my cell. Tragedy *is to say* a certain story, *means* As olde bookes maken us memory, Of him that stood in great prosperity, And is y-fallen out of high degree In misery, and endeth wretchedly. And they be versified commonly Of six feet, which men call hexametron; In prose eke* be indited many a one, *also And eke in metre, in many a sundry wise. Lo, this declaring ought enough suffice. Now hearken, if ye like for to hear. But first I you beseech in this mattere, Though I by order telle not these things, Be it of popes, emperors, or kings, *After their ages,* as men written find, *in chronological order* But tell them some before and some behind, As it now cometh to my remembrance, Have me excused of mine ignorance."

Notes to the Prologue to The Monk's Tale

- 1. The Corpus Madrian: the body of St. Maternus, of Treves.
- 2. That her misdoth or saith: that does or says any thing to offend her.
- 3. Cope: An ecclesiastcal vestment covering all the body like a cloak.
- 4. Though he were shorn full high upon his pan: though he were tonsured, as the clergy are.

- 5. Imps: shoots, branches; from Anglo-Saxon, "impian," German, "impfen," to implant, ingraft. The word is now used in a very restricted sense, to signify the progeny, children, of the devil.
- 6. Lusheburghes: base or counterfeit coins; so called because struck at Luxemburg. A great importation of them took place during the reigns of the earlier Edwards, and they caused much annoyance and complaint, till in 1351 it was declared treason to bring them into the country.