That with a staf birafte his wif hir lif deprived
For she drank win, though I hadde been his wif,
Ne sholde nat han daunted me fro drinke; frightened
And after win on Venus moste I think,
For also siker as cold engendreth hail, sure
A likerous mouth moste han a likerous tail:
In womman vinolent is no defence—
This knownen lechours by experience.

470 But Lord Crist, whan that it remembrith me
Upon my youthe and on my jolitee,
It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote—
That I have had my world as in my time.

480 But age, allas, that al wol envenime,
Hath me birafte my beautee and my pith—
Lat go, farewel, the devel go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is namore to telle:
But yit to be right merye wol I fonde.

485 Now wol I tellen of my ferthe housbonde.
I saye I hadde in herte greet despit
That he of any other hadde delit,
But he was quit, by God and by Saint Joce:
I made him of the same wode a croce—
Nat of my body in no foul manere—
But, certainly, I made folk swich cheere*
That in his owene grece I made him frye,
For angre and for verray jalousye.

By God, in erthe I was his purgatorye,
For which I hope his soule be in glorye.
For God it woot, he sat ful ofte and soong
Whan that his sho ful bitterly him wroong.
Ther was no wight save God and he that wiste
He deide whan I cam fro Jerusalem,
And lith ygrave under the roode-beem,*
Al* is his tombe nought so curious
As was the sepulcre of him Darius,
Which that Apelles wroughte subtilly:
It nis but wast to burye him preciously.
Lat him fare wel, God yve his soule reste;
He is now in his grave and in his cheste.
Now of my fiftieth housbonde wol I telle—
God lete his soule nevere come in helle—
And yit he was to me the moste shrewe:
That feele I on my ribbes al by rewe,*

8. When I look back.
9. Has taken away from me.
1. I made him a cross of the same wood. The proverb has much the same sense as the one quoted in line 493.
2. Pretended to be in love with others.
3. And lies buried under the rood beam (the crucifix beam running between nave and chancel).
4. Carefully wrought.
5. Accordingly to medieval legend, the artist Apelles decorated the tomb of Darius, king of the Persians.
7. In a row.
And evere shal unto myn ending day,
But in oure bed he was so fressh and gay,
And therewithal so wel coulde he me glose,®
When that he wolde han my bele chose,
That though he hadde me bet® on every boon,®
He coude winne again my love anoon.®
I trowe I loved him best for that he
Was of his love daungerous® to me.
We wommen han, if that I shal nat lie,
In this matere a quainte fantasye:?
Waite what! thing we may nat lightly® have,
Therewithal so wel coule he me glose;
Forbede us thing, and that desiren we;
Pressse on us feste, and thanne wol we flee.
With daunger oute we al oure chaffare:?
Greet prees® at market maketh dere® ware,
And too greet chepe is holden at litel pris.®
This knoweth every womman that is wis.
My fifthe housbonde—God his soule blesse!—
Which that I took for love and no richesse,
He somtime was a clerk at Oxenforde,
And hadde laft® scole and wente at hoom to boorde
With my gossib,® dwelling in oure town
God have hir soule!—hir name was Alisoun;
She knew myn herte and eek my privetee®,
Bet® than oure parissh preest, as mote I thee.®
To hire biwrayed® I my conseil® al,
For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wal,
Or doon a thing that sholde han cost his lif,
To hire,® and to another worthy wif,
And to my nece which I loved weel,
I wolde han told his conseil everydeel®
That made his face often reed® and hoot®,
For verray shame, and blamed himself for he
Hadde told to me so greet a privetee.
And so bifel that ones® in a Lente—
So often times I to my gossib wente,
For evere yit I loved to be gay,
And for to walke in March, Averil, and May,
From hous to hous, to heere sondry tales—
That Janekin clerk and my gossib dame Alis
And I myself into the feeldes wente.
Myn housbonde was at London al that Lente:
I hadde the better leiser for to playe,
And for to see, and eek for to be seye®
Of lusty folk—what wiste I wher my grace®
Was shapen® for to be, or in what place?

8. i.e., he played hard to get.
1. Whatever.

2. (Meeting) with reserve, we spread out our merchandise.
3. Too good a bargain is held at little value.
Therefore I made my visitacions
To vigiles⁴ and to processiouns,
To preching eek, and to thise pilgrimages,
To playes of miracles and to mariages,

₅₆₅ And wered upon⁵ my gaye scarlet gites⁶—
   This wormes ne thise mothes ne thise mites,
   Upon my peril⁷ frete⁸ hem neveradeel:
   And woostou why? For they were used weel.
   Now wol I tellen forth what happed me.

₅₇₀ I saye that in the feeldes walked we,
   Til trewely we hadde swich daliaunce,⁹
   This clerk and I, that of my purveyaunce¹⁰
   I spak to him and saide him how that he,
   If I were widwe, sholde wedde me.

₅₇₅ For certainly, I saye for no bobaunce,¹¹
   Yit was I nevere withouten purveyaunce
   Of mariage n'of othere thinges eek:
   I holde a mouses herte nought worth a leek
   That hath but oon hole for to sterte¹² to,

₅₈₀ And if that faile thanne is al ydo."¹³
   I bar him on hand¹⁴ he hadde enchantéd me
   (My dame¹⁵ taughte me that subtiltee);
   And eek I saide I mette¹⁶ of him al night:
   But as I folwed ay my dames²° lore²¹

₅₈₅ As wel of that as othere thinges more.
   But now sire—lat me see, what shal I sayn?
   Aha, by God, I have my tale again.
   Whan that my ferthe housbonde was on beere,¹⁷
   I weep,¹⁸ algate,¹⁹ and made sory cheere,

₅₉₀ As wives moten,²² for it is usage,²³
   And with my coverchief covered my visage;
   But for I was purveyed²⁴ of a make;²⁵
   I wepte but smale, and that I undertake.²⁶

₅₉₅ To chirche was myn housbonde born amorwe;²⁷
   With neighebores that for him maden sorwe,
   And Janekin oure clerk was oon of tho.
   As help me God, whan that I saw him go
   After the beere, me thoughte he hadde a paire
   Of legges and of feet so clene¹ and faire,

₆₀₀ That al myn herte I yaf unto his hold.²⁸
   He was, I trowe,²⁹ twenty winter old,
   And I was fourty, if I shal saye sooth—
   But yit I hadde alway a coltes tooth:²⁹

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4. Evening service before a religious holiday.
5. Wore.
6. On peril (to my soul), an oath.
7. I.e., the game is up; it's all over.
8. I pretended to him.
9. In the morning.
10. I.e., neat.
11. I.e., youthful appetites.
3. Gap-toothed women were considered to be amorous.
4. Print, i.e., a birthmark.
5. Latin for “because”; another euphemism for a sexual organ.
7. My birth sign was the constellation Taurus, a sign in which Venus is dominant.
8. I.e., horoscope.
9. I.e., the contrary.
10. Just because he saw her bareheaded.

Gat-toothed was I, and that bicam me weel;
I hadde the prente of Sainte Venus seele.

As help me God, I was a lusty oon,
And fair and riche and yong and wel-bigoon,
And trewely, as mine housbondes tolde me,
I hadde the beste quoniam mighte be.

For certes I am al Venerien
In feeling, and myn herte is Marcien:
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardinesse.
Myn ascendent was Taur° and Mars therinne—
Allas, allas, that evere love was sinne!

I folwed ay° my inclinacioun
By vertu of my constellacioun;
That made me I coulde nought withdrawe
My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.

Yit have I Martes° merk upon my face,
And also in another privee place.
For God so wis° be my savacioun,
I loved nevere by no discreetioun,
But evere folwedde myn appetit,

Al were he short or long or blak or whit;
I took no keep° so that he liked° me,
How poore he was, ne eek of what degree.
What sholde I saye but at the monthes ende
This joly clerk Janekin that was so hende
Hath wedded me with greet solempnitee,
And to him yaf I al the land and fee
That evere was me yiven therbifore—
But afterward repented me ful sore:
He nolde suffre no thing of my list.

By God, he smoot° me ones on the list
For that I rente° out of his book a leef,
That of the strook° myn ere weex° al deef.
Stibourne° I was as is a leonesse,
And of my tonge a verray jangleresse,

And walke I wolde, as I hadde doon biforn,
From hous to hous, although he hadde it sworn;
For which he often times wolde preche,
And me of olde Romain geestes° teche.
How he Simplicius Gallus lafte° his wif,
And hire forsook for terme of al his lif,
Nought but for open-heveded he hire sey!
Looking out at his dore upon a day.
Another Romain tolde me by name
That, for his wif was at a someres° game
Withouten his witing,\(^5\) he forsook hire eke;
And thanne wolde he upon his Bible seek
That ilke proverbe of Ecclesiaste\(^2\)
Where he comandeth and forbedeth faste\(^6\)
Man shal nat suffre his wif go roule\(^8\) aboute;
Thanne wolde he saye right thus withouten doute:
“Whoso that buildeth his hous al of salwes,\(^9\)
And priketh\(^8\) his blinde hors over the falwes,\(^8\)
And suffreth\(^8\) his wif to go seeken halwes,\(^9\)
Is worthy to be hanged on the galwes,\(^o\)
But al for nought—I sette nought an hawe\(^4\)
Of his proverbes n’of his olde sawe;
N’ I wolde nat of him corrected be:
I hate him that my vices telleth me,
And so doon mo, God woot, of us than I.
This made him with me wood al outrely:\(^o\)
I nolde nought forbere\(^8\) him in no cas.
Now wol I saye you sooth, by Saint Thomas,
Why that I rente\(^8\) 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 disport\(^8\) he wolde rede alway.
He cleped it Valerie\(^5\) and Theofraste,
At which book he lough\(^8\) alway ful faste;
And eek ther was somtime a clerk at Rome,
A cardinal, that highte Saint Jerome,
That made a book\(^8\) again\(^8\) Jovinian;
In which book eek ther was Tertulan,
Crysippus, Trotula, and Helouis,\(^7\)
That was abbesse nat fer fro Paris;
And eek the Parables of Salomon,
Ovides Art,\(^8\) and bookes many oon—
And alle thise were bounden in oo volume.
And every night and day was his custume,
Whan he hadde leiser and vacacioun\(^7\)
From other worldly occupacioun,
To reden in this book of wikked wives.
He knew of hem mo legendes and lives
Than been of goode wives in the Bible.
For trusteth wel, it is an impossible\(^o\)
That any clerk wol speke good of wives,
But if it be of holy saintes lives,
N’of noon other womman nevere the mo—

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2. Ecclesiastics (25.25).
3. Plowed land.
4. I did not rate at the value of a hawthorn berry.
5. “Valerie”, i.e., the Letter of Valerius Concerning Not Marrying, by Walter Map; “Theofraste”: Theophrastus’s Book Concerning Marriage. Medieval manuscripts often contained a number of different works, sometimes, as here, dealing with the same subject.
7. “Tertulan”: i.e., Tertullian, author of treatises on sexual modesty. “Crysippus”: mentioned by Jerome as an antifeminist. “Trotula”: a female doctor whose presence here is unexplained. “Helouis”: i.e., Eloise, whose love affair with the great scholar Abelard was a medieval scandal.
8. Ovid’s Art of Love. “Parables of Salomon”: the biblical Book of Proverbs.
Who painted the leon, tel me who? By God, if wommen hadden writen stories, As clerkes han within hir oratories. They wolde han writen of men more wikkednesse Than al the merk of Adam may redresse. The children of Mercurye and Venus Been in hir werking ful contrarious. Mercurye loveth wisdom and science, And Venus loveth riot and dispense; And for hir diverse disposicioun Each falleth in otheres exaltacioun, And thus, God woot, Mercurye is desolat

In Pisces wher Venus is exaltat, And Venus falleth ther Mercurye is raised: Therfore no womman of no clerk is praised. The clerk, whan he is old and may nought do Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho, Thanne sit he down and writ in his dotage That wommen can nat keepe hir mariage. But now to purpose why I tolde thee That I was beten for a book, pardee: Upon a night Janekin, that was our sire, Redde on his book as he sat by the fire Of Eva first, that for hir wikkednesse Was al mankinde brought to wrecchednesse, For which that Jesu Crist himself was slain That boughte us with his herte blood again— Lo, heer expres of wommen may ye finde Tho redde he me how Sampson loste his heres: Sleeping his leman’ kitte with hir sheres, Thurgh which treson loste he both his yén. Tho redde he me, if that I shal nat lien, Of Erquales and of his Dianire; That caused him to sette himself afire. No thing forgat he the sorwe and wo That Socrates hadde with his wives two— How Xantippa caste pisse upon his heed: This sely man sat stille as he were deeed: He wiped his heed, namore dorste he sayn But "Er that thonder stinte, comth a rain.” Of Pasiphae that was the queene of Crete— For shrewednesse him thoughte the tale sweete— Fy, speek namore, it is a grisly thing

9. In one of Aesop’s fables, the lion, shown a picture of a man killing a lion, asked who painted the picture. Had a lion been the artist, of course, the roles would have been reversed.
1. Mark, sex.
2. I.e., clerks and women, astrologically ruled by Mercury and Venus, respectively.
3. Because of their contrary positions (as planets), each one descends in the belt of the zodiac as the other rises, hence one loses its power as the other becomes dominant.
4. I.e., Mercury is deprived of power in Pisces (the sign of the Fish), where Venus is most powerful.
5. My husband.
6. The stories of wicked women Chaucer drew mainly from St. Jerome and Walter Map.
7. Deianira unwittingly gave Hercules a poisoned shirt, which hurt him so much that he committed suicide by fire.
8. Pasiphae, who had intercourse with a bull.
Of hir horrible lust and hir liking,°
Of Clytermistra° for hir lecherye
That falsly made hir housbonde for to die,
He rede it with ful good devocioun.
He tolde me eek for what occasioun
Amphiorax at Thebes loste his lif:
Myn housbonde hadde a legende of his wif
Eriphylem, that for an ouce° of gold
Hath prively unto the Greekes told
Wher that hir housbonde hidde him in a place,
For which he hadde at Thebes sory grace.
Of Livia tolde he me and of Lucie;°
They bothe made hir housbondes for to die,
That oon for love, that other was for hate;
Livia hir housbonde on an even late
Empoisoned hath for that she was his fo;
Lucia likerous° loved hir housbonde so
That for° he sholde alway upon hire thynke,
She yaf him swich a manere love-drinke
That he was deed er it were by the morwe,³
And thus algates° housbondes han sorwe.
Thanne tolde he me how oon Latumius
Complained unto his felawe Arrius
That in his garden growed swich a tree,
On which he saide how that his wives three
Hanged hemself for herte despitous,⁴
"O leve® brother," quod this Arrius, dear
"Yif me a plante of thilke blessed tree,
And in my gardin planted shal it be."
Of latter date of wives hath he red
That some han slain hir housbondes in hir bed
And lete hir lechour dighte³ hire al the night,
Whan that the cors® lay in the floor upright;
Some han driven nailes in hir brain
Whil that they sleepe, and thus they han hem slain;
He spak more harm than herte may bithinke,⁵
And therewithal he knew of mo proverbes
Than in this world ther growen gras or herbes:
"Bet is," quod he, "thy habitacioun
Be with a leon or a foul dragoun
Than with a womman using° for to chide."
"Bet is," quod he, "hye in the roof abide
Than with an angry wif down in the hous:
They been so wikked° and contrarious,
They haten that hir housbondes loveth ay."

9. Clytemnestra, who, with her lover, Aegisthus, slew her husband, Agamemnon.
1. Amphiaraus, betrayed by his wife, Eriphyle, and forced to go to the war against Thebes.
2. Livia murdered her husband on behalf of her lover, Sejanus. "Lucie": i.e., Lucilla, who was said to have poisoned her husband, the poet Lucretius, with a potion designed to keep him faithful.
3. He was dead before it was near morning.
4. For malice of heart.
5. Have intercourse with.
He saide, "A womman cast\textsuperscript{6} hir shame away
When she cast of\textsuperscript{7} hir smok,\textsuperscript{8} and ferthermo,
A fair womman, but she be chast also,
Is like a gold ring in a sowes nose."
Who wolde weene,\textsuperscript{9} or who wolde suppose
The wo that in myn herte was and pine?\textsuperscript{10}
And whan I sawgh he wolde neveere fine\textsuperscript{11}
To reden on this cursed book al night,
Al sodeinly three leves have I plight\textsuperscript{12}
Out of his book right as he redde, and eke
I with my fist so took\textsuperscript{13} him on the cheeke
That in oure fir he fil\textsuperscript{14} bakward adown.
And up he sterte as dooth a wood\textsuperscript{15} leoun,
And with his fist he smoot me on the heed\textsuperscript{16}
That in the floor I lay as I were deed.\textsuperscript{17}
And whan he sawgh how stille that I lay,
He was agast, and wolde have fled his way,
Til atte laste out of my swough\textsuperscript{18} I braide:\textsuperscript{19}
"O hastou slain me, false thief? I saide,
"And for my land thus hastou mordred\textsuperscript{20} me?
Er I be deed yit wol I kisse thee."
And neer he cam and kneeled faire adown,
And saide, "Dere suster Alisoun,
As help me God, I shal thee neveere smite.
That I have doon, it is thyself to wite.\textsuperscript{21}
Foryif it me, and that I thee biseeke.\textsuperscript{22}
And yit eftsoones I hitte him on the cheeke,
And saide, "Thief, thus muchel am I wreke.\textsuperscript{23}
Now wol I die: I may no lenger speke."
But at the laste with muchel care and wo
We fille\textsuperscript{24} accorded by us selven two.
He yaf me al the bridel\textsuperscript{25} in myn hand,
To han the governance of hous and land,
And of his tonge and his hand also;
And made\textsuperscript{26} him brenne\textsuperscript{27} his book anoonright tho.
And whan that I hadde geten unto me
By maistrye\textsuperscript{28} al the sovereinetee,\textsuperscript{29}
And that he saide, "Myn owene trewe wif,
Do as thee last\textsuperscript{30} the termes of al thy lif;
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estat,"
After that day we hadde neveere debat.
God help me so, I was to him as kinde
As any wif from Denmark unto Inde,\textsuperscript{31}
And also trewe, and so was he to me.
I praye to God that sit\textsuperscript{32} in majestee,
So blesse his soule for his mercy dere.
Now wol I saye my tale if ye wol heere.
835 The Frere loughed when he had heard all this: “Now dame,” quod he, “so have I joye or blis, This is a long preamble of a tale.”
And when the Somnour herde the Frere gale, “Lo,” quod the Somnour, “Goddess armes two,
A frere wol entremette him! everemo!
Lo, good men, a flye and eek a frere
Wol falle in every dish and eek matere.
What spekestou of preambulacioun?
What, amble or trotte or pisse or go sitte down!
840 Thou lettest our disport in this manere.”
“Ye, woltou so, sire Somnour?” quod the Frere. “Now by my faith, I shal er that I go
Telle of a somnour swich a tale or two
That al the folk shal laughen in this place.”
845 ‘Now elles, Frere, I wol bishrewe thy face,” quod this Somnour, “and I bishrewe me,
But if I telle tales two or three
Of freres, er I come to Sidingborne, That I shal make thyn herte for to moorne—
For wel I woot thy pacience is goon.”
Oure Hoste cride, “Pees, and that anoon!”
And saide, “Lat the womman telle hir tale:
Ye fare as folk that dronken been of ale.
Do, dame, tel forth your tale, and that is best.”
850 “Al redy, sire,” quod she, “right as you lest— If I have licence of this worthy Frere.”
“Yis, dame,” quod he, “tel forth and I wol heere.”

The Tale

As was suggested in the headnote to The Man of Law’s Epilogue, Chaucer may have originally written the fabliau that became The Shipman’s Tale for the Wife of Bath. If so, then he replaced it with a tale that is not simply appropriate to her character but that develops it even beyond the complexity already revealed in her Prologue. The story survives in two other versions in which the hero is Sir Gawain, whose courtesy contrasts sharply with the behavior of the knight in the Wife’s tale. (For excerpts from The Marriage of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, see “King Arthur” in the NAEL Archive.) As Chaucer has the Wife tell it, the tale expresses her views about the relations of the sexes, her wit and humor, and her fantasies. Like Marie de France’s lay Lanval (see p. 171), the Wife’s tale is about a fairy bride who seeks out and tests a mortal lover.

In th’olde dayes of the King Arthour,
Of which that Britouns spoken greet honour,
865 Al was this land fulfull of fairy: The elf-queene with hir joly compaignye
Daunced ful ofte in many a greene mede— queen of the fairies
London). 2. Sittingbourne (a town forty miles from 3. i.e., filled full of superratural creatures.