



**Sample Pages from
The Canterbury Tales**

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THE CANTERBURY TALES

A COMEDY IN TWO ACTS ADAPTED BY
Lindsay Price

FROM THE ORIGINAL BY
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Canterbury Tales

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Printed in the USA

Characters

The play is written so that it can have a cast of eight with doubling, or the cast can be larger by having a second group perform the stories that the pilgrims tell. In a case of doubling, I would suggest that masks be used in the stories to differentiate between the pilgrims and their story counterparts. If masks are being used, I would encourage cross-gendered casting to give the girls as much an opportunity to play the fun parts as the guys.

Although I have tried to remain true to the original, dramatic license has been taken in some cases in terms of gender and a need to make the stories fit the size of the cast.

Women

The Hostess: The owner of the Tabard Inn, where the pilgrims stay.
She travels with them to Canterbury.

With doubling also plays: Fox (*Prioress' Tale*), Queen (*Wife of Bath's Tale*), Eveline (*Franklin's Tale*), Agnes (*Pardoner's Tale*)

The Wife of Bath: She has been married five times and is searching for number six.
She is from Bath.

With doubling also plays: Hilde (*Reeve's Tale*), Bertha (*Wife of Bath's Tale*), Avaline (*Franklin's Tale*), Waitress (*Pardoner's Tale*)

The Cook: The cook at the Tabard Inn.

With doubling also plays: Pertelote (*Prioress' Tale*), Maude (*Reeve's Tale*), Eve (*Wife of Bath's Tale*), Joanne (*Franklin's Tale*)

The Prioress: The prioress is in charge of a priory (a monastery).

With doubling also plays: Allison (*Miller's Tale*), Mary (*Wife of Bath's Tale*), Dorigen (*Franklin's Tale*), Old Woman (*Pardoner's Tale*)

Men

The Reeve: The manager of a manor in the later medieval period.

With doubling also plays: John (*Miller's Tale*), Arviragus (*Franklin's Tale*), Jacob (*Pardoner's Tale*)

The Pardoner: The Pardoner sells religious forgiveness and relics for a fee.

With doubling also plays: Nicholas (*Miller's Tale*), Simekin (*Reeve's Tale*), Aurelius (*Franklin's Tale*)

The Miller: The miller operates a mill, which grinds grain (corn or wheat) into flour.

With doubling also plays: Knight (*Wife of Bath's Tale*), Astrologer (*Franklin's Tale*)

The Franklin: A Franklin is a property-owner, but not of noble birth.

With doubling also plays: Chanticleer (*Prioress' Tale*), Allain (*Reeve's Tale*), King (*Wife of Bath's Tale*), Harold (*Pardoner's Tale*)

The Voice of Chaucer: This should be taped by one of the other men in the cast.

The Tale Characters

	Women	Men
Prioress' Tale	Pertelote, Fox	Chanticleer
Miller's Tale	Allison	John, Nicholas
Reeve's Tale	Hilde, Maude	Simekin, Allain
Wife of Bath's Tale	Queen, Eve, Mary	Knight, King
Franklin's Tale	Dorigen, Joanne, Eveline, Avaline	Arviragus, Aurelius, Astrologer
Pardoner's Tale	Agnes, Waitress, Old Woman	Jacob, Harold

SCENE ONE

The setting for this play should be extremely simple. As the PILGRIMS are walking outside, there should be as much open space as possible. A landscape backdrop would be appropriate. There are benches and a table used in the tavern scene, which should be used the stories. Any props or set pieces should be flexible and interchangeable between the stories.

Lights come up on all of the characters in a tableau. Each character should hold a pose that reflects their personality. They remain frozen as they speak.

WIFE OF BATH: When April has showered sweetly with his rains...

HOSTESS: When the west wind has breathed so sweetly...

FRANKLIN: Through every grove and field...

COOK: When shoots and flowers...

MILLER: Have broken through the earth...

PARDONER: When the sun shines...

REEVE: And the birds sing...

PRIORESS: That is when good folk to Canterbury go.

ALL: To Canterbury!

They break free from their pose with a yell. The next section should be extremely lively and fun.

WIFE OF BATH: Pilgrims all.

PARDONER: Young, old, poor, rich.

MILLER: Knight and Plowman.

REEVE: Beggar and Franklin, lame and well.

FRANKLIN: Pilgrims all. Travelers all. Journeymen all.

ALL: Decide to take that first step.

They all stamp heavily on the ground.

ALL: To Canterbury!

HOSTESS: To see the shrine of Thomas Beckett. The murdered martyr.

PRIORESS: To see miracles.

REEVE: To heal what ill us so.

PARDONER: To ask forgiveness.

COOK: To plead for assistance.

WIFE OF BATH: To seek salvation.

FRANKLIN: To heal body and soul.

WIFE OF BATH: To give thanks.

ALL: To take that first step.

They all stamp heavily on the ground.

ALL: To Canterbury!

MILLER: Hang on a minute! I thought this was supposed to be fun. A celebration. Music. Singing. Carousing. I brought my bagpipes...

ALL: (*ignoring the MILLER*) To take that first step.

They all stamp heavily on the ground.

ALL: To Canterbury!

The next section is a mini-version of the actual journey to Canterbury and its perils. The group divides into three, except for the MILLER, who represents the pilgrim taking the journey.

The first group is the PRIORESS, the COOK and the FRANKLIN. They surround the MILLER.

PRIORESS: The road is treacherous, unpaved, full of mud, sludge, cracks, holes and tales of woe.

FRANKLIN: One man and his horse fell into a deep hole on pilgrim's road that had filled with rain. Both he and the horse drowned.

COOK: The perils of nature will leave you tired and sore and weary. Do you turn back?

ALL THREE: No! You go on.

They push the MILLER to the second group: the HOSTESS and the REEVE.

HOSTESS: There are many inns along the road. So many pilgrims travel to Canterbury that commerce thrives and innkeepers prosper.

REEVE: They charge triple the price and offer filthy mattresses, rats and fleas. Do you turn back?

The HOSTESS and REEVE are joined by the PRIORESS, the COOK and the FRANKLIN.

ALL: No! You go on.

They shove the MILLER to the third group: the PARDONER and the WIFE OF BATH.

PARDONER: And if you survive the road —

WIFE OF BATH: And the rats —

PARDONER: And the fleas —

WIFE OF BATH: You may not survive the men. Thieves, murderers and criminals wait in the woods for travelers to fall into their hungry arms.

PARDONER: Ready to beat, rob and leave pilgrims to die by the side of the road. Do you turn back?

ALL: No! You go on.

The PILGRIMS face front as if seeing the Canterbury Cathedral in front of them. They take on various poses as each PILGRIM reacts to the shrine.

PRIORESS: You go on to the end of the road.

ALL: The end of the journey. Canterbury.

FRANKLIN: The cathedral steps beckon, worn down by the weight of so many.

HOSTESS: The martyr calls from his coffin.

ALL: Here at the end of the road. Here at last you may ask, plead, pray, receive, find.

MILLER: I still think this is supposed to be fun.

All the PILGRIMS leap up.

ALL: To Canterbury!

HOSTESS: But first...

Everyone changes his or her position to create a new picture. They are in a tavern.

ALL: A tavern. In Southwark. Night falls.

MILLER: We have all met here together.

ALL: And are agreed.

REEVE: We'll travel together tomorrow.

COOK: A company tomorrow.

ALL: But first...

The HOSTESS steps forward. This is her tavern.

HOSTESS: The rooms and the stables of my inn are spacious and wide.
Nary a flea nor a rat to be found as long as you don't look too closely.

WIFE OF BATH: We have made friends and fellowship.

PARDONER: To Canterbury together.

PRIORESS: But first...

Here we meet each of the PILGRIMS. Each character in turn steps forward to address the audience.

ALL: The Wife of Bath.

WIFE: Five times have I been down the aisle
Not to mention the company of youth.
I have dipped my toe in many a stream
From Rome to Spain and back again.
My face and stockings may be red
But respectable am I through and through.
And for those who wish to learn the dance of love
I can surely teach a step or two.

ALL: The Pardoner.

PARDONER: The road straight from Rome come I
Treasures fairly bursting from my sack.
For silver will I sing a pretty song
Or sell to you alone a bit of veil or sail
The very one from off St. Peter's boat.
In this bottle here I have some small pig bones.
But if you are a simple parson fair
They become a sacred relic you can own.

ALL: The Prioress.

PRIORESS: My name is Madame Eglantine.
 I believe in dignity and a conscious heart
 And careful eating too. No speck of grease
 Will you ever see on my cup or lip.
 I believe in modesty, charity and kindness
 And making sure my dogs are fed.
 Nothing but the best for them.
 Roasted meat and milk and fine white bread.

ALL: The Miller.

MILLER: First prize is mine in every wrestling match
 I'm sure you can see why.
 I carry the mighty sword in one hand
 The mighty bagpipe in the other.
 A bag of tricks and jokes is always by my side.
 The biggest trick of all is the corn that I will steal
 And sell back to all at triple the price
 As if it were the greatest deal!

ALL: The Reeve.

REEVE: Near Badeswell do I manage a farm.
 I know every inch of land, every grain
 Every cow, every chicken, swine and horse.
 I know all the tricks of every bailiff,
 Herdsman and worker, and they know I know.
 They call me irritable but never to my face.
 They say severity keeps my hair so trim —
 But fear me they do, they know their lowly place.

ALL: The Franklin.

FRANKLIN: A life of delight is every man's right.
 Food and drink never lack at my house.
 The table stands covered from end to end
 And all are welcome to pick it clean.
 Fattened partridge, meat pies, fish and fowl,
 It keeps the cook always on his toes.
 A life of pleasure is every man's right,
 With so much food that it practically snows!

ALL: The Cook.

COOK: I'm a cook.
 I can boil a chicken on its bones.
 I can roast and broil and fry.
 I can make a pretty good stew.

I can bake a pie.
What else did you expect?

ALL: Last but not least our Hostess. Hostess!

Everyone raises up a cry of cheer and breaks their picture to turn and face the HOSTESS. They should all have mugs nearby, ready to raise a toast as the HOSTESS raises her mug to her guests.

HOSTESS: Welcome one and all to my table and my tavern! Here shall you sit to supper. Here is the best food and the best wine for you all. You are welcome truly and heartily.

Everyone raises another cheer. Some sit as the HOSTESS moves in-between her guests.

HOSTESS: By my word I have not seen so happy a company of all the travelers I have witnessed in this inn. I will be so pleased to make my way with you tomorrow. *(everyone raises a cheer)* Your faces have just given me an idea. I have a proposal, which will amuse us all and cost not a penny. *(everyone makes an appreciative noise at the prospect)*

PARDONER: Not a penny? I'm for that!

HOSTESS: And if it doesn't make you merry I'll give you my head on a platter.

Most of the PILGRIMS laugh. The COOK makes an "Eep!" sound. The FRANKLIN comforts her.

FRANKLIN: There, there. I'm sure it won't be necessary.

HOSTESS: But first, before I go on, I want you to raise your hands. *(there is a moment of question as the guests look at each other, wondering what this is about)* Our time together is not long so there is no point in arguing. One and all raise your right hands. *(everyone laughs and raises their right hands)* In order to shorten the journey to Canterbury, I order that everyone here shall tell a tale.

PRIORESS: What kind of tale?

HOSTESS: Whatever kind you like! Tell tales of significance and pleasure. Adventures that have befallen you or that you know have befallen others.

REEVE: Is it wise to make fun of another's folly?

WIFE OF BATH: Only if it's funny.

HOSTESS: And the best story shall have a meal at our expense.

MILLER: I thought this wasn't costing me a penny!

HOSTESS: Now by your right hands say that you will be ruled by me in all respects.

ALL: We will be ruled by you in all respects.

HOSTESS: Wonderful. But first we eat! (*everyone raises a cheer*)
And drink! (*everyone raises a cheer*) We will leave tomorrow in tomorrow's hands.

*Everyone cheers and they start to sing as they exit.
The lights fade.*

SCENE TWO

The lights come up pale. It is early morning. The FRANKLIN, COOK, and PARDONER enter. The other PILGRIMS enter in small groups. The PILGRIMS enter slowly and cautiously. They are all wearing traveling cloaks. The FRANKLIN is in the middle of a story.

FRANKLIN: ...and the four knights fell on the archbishop, hacking at him with their swords. One smote him across the crown splattering Thomas Beckett's blood and brains across the cathedral floor.

COOK: I'm going to be sick.

FRANKLIN: You did ask.

COOK: But I didn't expect... brains.

PARDONER: How else are martyrs murdered? You think they get tickled to death with a feather?

MILLER: (*yawning*) How long is this going to take?

FRANKLIN: Four days.

In a different conversation the WIFE OF BATH is speaking to the PRIORESS and the REEVE. The PRIORESS is looking at the medallions on the WIFE OF BATH's collar.

PRIORESS: You've been on so many pilgrimages.

WIFE OF BATH: I have the palm from Jerusalem, the key from Rome, the scallop shell from Compostella, I only need the vial of blood from Canterbury.

MILLER: It's not his real blood.

WIFE OF BATH: Who's to say whether it is or it isn't?

REEVE: There are those that do believe.

FRANKLIN: Belief is a powerful thing! It has been said that those who come in contact with Beckett's blood witness miracles.

COOK: What kind of miracles?

FRANKLIN: A man dipped his shirt in the blood, took it home to his wife and she was able to walk again.

PRIORESS: You really think that could happen?

FRANKLIN: Anything is possible. That is why we go, is it not?

The HOSTESS enters.

HOSTESS: Good morrow good friends!

FRANKLIN: Good morrow Hostess.

HOSTESS: I hope none of you have forgotten the promise you made to share your lives and stories.

FRANKLIN: (*clapping his hands together and speaking loudly*) The fires of creativity have been stoked!

PARDONER: (*holding his head*) Must you yell so loudly?

COOK: I was up all night and could not think of one.

MILLER: Not one?

PARDONER: Someone has blown out your fire.

WIFE OF BATH: When our dear Hostess proposed this venture a hundred stories came to mind.

COOK: A hundred?

REEVE: I'm sure the good lady is exaggerating.

WIFE OF BATH: I know the good lady is not. The stories of my five husbands alone could take up the entire trip. Marriage is truly an adventure of which I am an expert.

PRIORESS: I hope that the gentlemen will restrain their bawdy natures in their choice of subject matter. Myself, I will be telling a story of good virtue.

WIFE OF BATH: Where's the fun in that?

REEVE: I believe the Lady Prioress makes an excellent point. It is not necessary to engage in frivolity at every second of the day.

FRANKLIN: Oh I disagree completely.

PRIORESS: (*looking around for her dog*) Where did my petite chien go? Où est my petite puppy?

FRANKLIN: Frivolity keeps a man young. I engage in frivolity as often as possible. (*to all*) Let's be off! The morning sun rises faster than our feet!

COOK: This is so exciting!

MILLER: (*a little too loudly*) Off we go! Off to our destination!

There are loud cries of "Huzzah!" and "Off we go!" as the PILGRIMS get ready to go.

FRANKLIN: That's the spirit!

PARDONER: Will everyone please stop shouting?

MILLER: We have to talk loudly! The louder you speak the more you feel the merriment in your bones! (*he takes a drink from a flask*)

REEVE: I suspect there is something else filling up your bones.

The PILGRIMS move together as a group. They are walking along a country road.

ALL: Off we go! Off to our destination!

The PARDONER groans and grabs his head.

HOSTESS: Who shall tell the first tale? Who will make the time pass with their words?

ALL: Who shall tell the first tale?

HOSTESS: Who will tell us a tale to make our hearts glad?

ALL: Who shall tell the first tale?

COOK: Not !!

HOSTESS: Shall we draw lots?

PARDONER: I am not yet awake.

FRANKLIN: (*clapping the PARDONER on the back*) Rise and Shine good Sir! There are miles to go and adventures to unfold! We all must become pilgrims into the world of our imagination!

PARDONER: (*with a groan*) Somebody stop him.

ALL: Who shall tell the first tale?

WIFE OF BATH: This was your notion Hostess, you should pick the first.

HOSTESS: All right.

COOK: (*more to herself*) Please don't pick me... please don't pick me... please don't pick me.

HOSTESS: My Lady Prioress, by your leave, I deem that you should be the first, if you are so willing.

PRIORESS: Gladly Hostess.

COOK: Oh thank goodness!

FRANKLIN: The Prioress will go!

MILLER: It is too early for virtue...

REEVE: What was that?

MILLER: Nothing.

STORY ONE: THE PRIORESS' TALE

The PRIORESS comes to a spot downstage where she will stand to narrate the story. This should be the same spot in which all of the PILGRIMS tell their tales. Those PILGRIMS not participating in the story (if the doubling option is used) should either exit or remain as much in the corner as possible.

PRIORESS: There once was an old widow who lived in a small cottage with her two daughters. For all of her life this widow passed her days in a simple and true fashion. Few extravagances she took and few possessions she had; thus she was well provided for with three pigs, three cows, a sheep, two dogs, seven hens and a rooster.

CHANTICLEER the rooster enters and gives a loud 'cock-a-doodle-do.' He's very vain, and proud of himself. He struts around as the PRIORESS talks.

PRIORESS: Chanticleer was his name. The self-declared mayor of the yard. Never more a handsome bird would you see: A comb as red as coral. A bill of jet black. Legs the colour of gold. And a voice, a voice finer than any organ.

CHANTICLEER begins to sing, showing off his lovely voice. This brings PERTELOTE, the hen, to his side. She is very much in love with CHANTICLEER and coos at him as he sings.

CHANTICLEER: (*singing*) Hey trolly loly lo, maid where do you go?
I go to the meadow to milk my cow.

PRIORESS: More often than not Chanticleer could be found in the yard, with his wings open wide, on the tips of his toes, with his neck stretched and his eyes closed making beautiful music.

PERTELOTE: My dearest sweetheart, that was ever so beautiful.

CHANTICLEER: Thank you lady Pertelote. The notes come out so because they are all for you.

The two coo at each other.

PRIORESS: Living the life of regal poultry Chanticleer had seven wives, but his true love was Pertelote. In her, there was never a more courteous, discreet, debonair, and compatible chicken.

PERTELOTE: (*to the PRIORESS, a bit snappy*) Hen.

PRIORESS: Sorry. Hen. But alas, a life of harmonious perfection was not to be for Chanticleer and Pertelote. One morning as the two sat regally on their favourite perch, a groan from the depths of despair flung itself from Chanticleer's throat.

CHANTICLEER gives such a groan.

PERTELOTE: My darling dear! What noise is this? What ails you to groan so?

CHANTICLEER: Dear madam, it is not grief that causes me to groan.

PERTELOTE: Oh thank heavens my sweet.

CHANTICLEER: It is something much worse than grief.

PERTELOTE: (*screeching like a chicken*) Beloved! (*she clears her throat*)
Beloved. What could be worse than grief?

CHANTICLEER: I dreamt last night that a loathsome beast came into
the yard.

*There is the sound of a loathsome beast growling.
CHANTICLEER looks around nervously.*

CHANTICLEER: The sound alone froze me to the spot as it leaped
from the darkness and attack me!

The sound of the loathsome beast gets a little louder.

CHANTICLEER: I awoke in the middle of the night drenched in the
sweat of horror. I cannot remove that dream from my conscious
mind. It is with me wherever I go. I move to the left, it is there.
I move to the right, it is there! Now my body is locked in a foul
prison! Now dread fear has lodged itself in my throat. That is
what causes me to groan with despair.

*CHANTICLEER gives a particularly spectacular groan,
which gets cut off when he sees PERTELOTE is looking
at him in disbelief.*

PERTELOTE: You are afraid of a dream?

CHANTICLEER: Yes.

PERTELOTE: A dream?

CHANTICLEER: It was a particularly scary dream.

PERTELOTE: And what did this monster look like?

CHANTICLEER: I am not sure. It was dark. It sounded extremely scary
though. It sounded as if it were going to rip me to shreds!

*CHANTICLEER tries again to give a groan but the
groan is cut off when PERTELOTE gives a snort of
disbelief.*

CHANTICLEER: Surely you do not want your Chanticleer to be ripped
to shreds.

PERTELOTE: (*turning away*) You have lost my love!

CHANTICLEER: (*trying to draw her back*) My Cherub!

PERTELOTE: Do not touch me, my once true passion.

CHANTICLEER: But why?

PERTELOTE: I cannot love a coward.

CHANTICLEER: I am no coward.

*A not-so-scary noise sounds from behind them and
CHANTICLEER jumps with a little scream.*

PERTELOTE: Scaredy-cat! Scaredy-cat!

CHANTICLEER: Dear heart, how can you say that to me?

PERTELOTE: Every chick – *(she clears her throat)* every hen dreams of the day that she can marry a rooster who is hardy, wise, trustworthy, not a fool and not afraid of dreams. *(she screeches the last few words like a chicken then clears her throat)* Have you not a man's heart?

CHANTICLEER: Of course I do.

PERTELOTE: Then how can you fear a harmless dream?

CHANTICLEER: But if you had heard the noise of the loathsome beast you...

PERTELOTE: Everyone knows that dreams are not to be taken seriously. They are caused by problems elsewhere in the body. Surely this bad dream is nothing but a case of indigestion.

CHANTICLEER: Really my pet? Do you think so?

PERTELOTE: Indigestion has caused many a man to groan and cry in the middle of the night. Sir Chanticleer, fly from this perch at once. Do not groan; take a laxative.

CHANTICLEER: Madam I thank you for your words. Nonetheless, no man should be so reckless as to dismiss his dreams. It has been said dreams foretell the future for heroes. This dream could be a warning, a hero's warning.

PERTELOTE laughs. She pretends it's a cough.

PERTELOTE: My darling, dearest, dear. Take my advice. Take the appropriate herbal seasonings. Purge your innards and you will have these dreams no longer.

CHANTICLEER: Love of my life. Pearl of my oysters. Peach among plums. I honour your words with every breath in my body. However, I put no trust in laxatives. They taste funny.

PERTELOTE: But my treasure...

CHANTICLEER: Let us talk no more of this. For at this very moment I have no need of any herbal purging. With one look at your beautiful face, all my fears instantly vanish. It has often been said, and in Latin too, that a woman is a man's joy and all his bliss. With you by my side I am filled with such joy and such bliss; I will groan no more and think not of dreams.

PERTELOTE: What a sweet thing to say.

CHANTICLEER: I defy all dreams and visions!

PRIORESS: And with a regal swoop of his wings Chanticleer swept off the perch and into the yard for he had spied some corn for his hens to eat. Later that day, their relationship fully restored, Chanticleer walked the grounds with the lovely Pertelote at his side.

CHANTICLEER: Do you see the fresh flowers my lady Pertelote? See how they spring from the ground? And do you hear the birds? Listen how they sing for you.

PERTELOTE: Oh my dear.

CHANTICLEER: My darling.

PERTELOTE: Oh my dearest darling.

CHANTICLEER: My darling dear!

PRIORESS: But all was not well. For hidden in the corner of the yard out of sight and out of mind there lay another animal. A beast hidden in the shadows. Lurking in the shadows. One who watched every step Chanticleer took. One who listened to every word from Chanticleer's throat.

FOX: Never a more delectable throat have I seen.

PRIORESS: A coal fox had stolen into the yard and was biding its time to attack the rooster.

FOX: I can wait all day and night if need be as killers wait in ambush to murder men.

PRIORESS: (*in a wailing fashion*) O false murderer lurking in your den! O false dissembler! O new Iscariot! O Greek Sinon who betrayed the Trojans with his wooden horse and brought them all to sorrow! Sorrow. Sorrow! Sooooorrrroooooow!!!! O accursed Chanticleer! Why did you listen to your wife and not your dreams? Why did you not listen to your dreams?! Run Chanticleer! You are in terrible danger! Run! Run! Run...

By this time everyone onstage is looking at the PRIORESS, whose last line peters out when she realizes that she has gone a bit overboard.

PRIORESS: Sorry. Got a bit carried away. Now, where was I?

Everyone moves back into position. CHANTICLEER breaks out into a little song for PERTELOTE.

CHANTICLEER: (*singing*) Her skin as soft as the finest silk,
 Hey nonny, hey nonny no.
 Of colour so like the whitest milk,
 Hey nonny, nonny, Hey nonny nonny.
 Hey nonny, nonny, nonny, no.

PERTELOTE: Oh my dearest, dear of a darling. It is so lovely to lie here in the sand and listen to you singing merrier than a mermaid in the sea.

CHANTICLEER: And I, my turtle dove, would love to sing for you all day and all night, sitting in the sand, singing like a mermaid.

The two give a lovers' sigh and coo at each other.

PRIORESS: All of a sudden Chanticleer caught something moving out of the corner of his eye.

CHANTICLEER: What's that?

PERTELOTE: What?

CHANTICLEER: That!

PERTELOTE: Where?

CHANTICLEER: There!

PERTELOTE: I don't see anything my pet.

CHANTICLEER looks carefully and gives a loud cry.

PRIORESS: All of a sudden Chanticleer wasn't feeling so merry or so mermaid-like.

CHANTICLEER: Fox! Fox! Fox!

The FOX advances from the shadows. PERTELOTE gives a scream and runs away. Before CHANTICLEER has a chance to follow, the FOX speaks.

FOX: Good Sir, be not afraid of me. Will you run away so soon? I am no enemy of yours.

CHANTICLEER: How so?

FOX: Why, the only reason I have come so close is to hear you sing.

CHANTICLEER: What me?

FOX: Oh yes.

CHANTICLEER: You appreciate music, Master Fox?

FOX: Truly your voice is finer than all the angels in heaven. You sing with such feeling, it is clear that you sing from the heart. It does bring a tear to my eye.

PRIORESS: As one accustomed to much flattery, Chanticleer fell completely and utterly under the spell of the fox's words.

CHANTICLEER: Thank you my dear Sir! Of course I suspect no treachery from you. It is only tradition that teaches a rooster to fear a fox.

FOX: We must break with tradition at times.

CHANTICLEER: You are quite right! Traditionally a fox would want to eat a rooster.

FOX: No!

CHANTICLEER: Yes.

FOX: Never.

CHANTICLEER: It's true.

FOX: How could I eat one with such a velvet voice?

CHANTICLEER: Velvet? You really think so?

FOX: I do.

CHANTICLEER: I don't believe anyone has described my voice as velvet before.

FOX: Sir, I have a small request.

CHANTICLEER: Please, call me Chanticleer.

FOX: Oh I couldn't.

CHANTICLEER: Please do!

FOX: Chanticleer, I have a small request.

CHANTICLEER: Anything!

FOX: Oh I couldn't.

CHANTICLEER: Ask away!

FOX: Would you perform the greatest honour and sing for me?

CHANTICLEER: Oh! (*he gives a deep bow*) I would be delighted to, Sir Fox.

FOX: And would you sing that note, that beautiful note, where you stretch your wings out wide, step onto your toes, close your eyes, and stretch out your luscious, er, your long neck? Would you do that for me?

CHANTICLEER: With pleasure.

PRIORESS: And so, Chanticleer spread his wings, stood on tiptoe, closed his eyes, stretched his neck and...

With a cry the FOX jumps on to CHANTICLEER and drags him off. PERTELOTE runs on.

PERTELOTE: Chanticleer's been taken by the fox! Chanticleer's been taken by the fox! (*she shrieks like a chicken*) Help! Help!

She runs off.

PRIORESS: Everyone came at once! The widow, her daughters, three pigs, three cows, a sheep, two dogs, and seven hens all came running. They saw the fox disappear into the forest and took up the chase.

PERTELOTE runs back on.

PERTELOTE: Hurry! Hurry! (*she swoons and runs off*)

PRIORESS: They made such a noise that the fox stopped his getaway to see what the racket was about.

The FOX enters. He has a tight grip on CHANTICLEER.

FOX: Fools. They will never catch me.

CHANTICLEER: Sir Fox, may I be permitted to say something?

FOX: Of course dear Chanticleer. We are all gentlemen here.

CHANTICLEER: Well, seeing as I'm going to die and you are going to do the traditional thing and eat me... If I were in your place

and I was being chased by an entire household... a widow, her daughters, three pigs, three cows, a sheep, two dogs, and seven hens... Well, if it were me I would taunt them Sir.

FOX: Taunt them?

CHANTICLEER: Oh yes. (*as if speaking to the chasers*) Turn back you stupid peasants! A pox and a curse upon you all! You'll never find me here in the dark wood. The rooster is mine and I'm going to eat him and you can't stop me. (*like a child's insult*) Na, na, na, na,na, na. (*to the FOX*) Something like that.

FOX: Bravo! That is good.

CHANTICLEER: Thank you. I've had some time to think about it.

FOX: In faith it shall be done.

PRIORESS: The fox whirled around to face his chasers. But as soon as he let Chanticleer go to utter the curse, the rooster flew up into the nearest tree.

CHANTICLEER lets out a really loud cock-a-doodle-do!

FOX: Dear Chanticleer, I believe we may have had a misunderstanding. I wasn't going to eat you.

CHANTICLEER: No?

FOX: No. Come down here and I will explain the whole thing.

CHANTICLEER: I don't think so. Never again will you get me to close my eyes and sing. For those who close their eyes when they should see will never prosper.

FOX: And those who talk too much should learn to hold their tongues. For it is reckless to trust in flattery.

CHANTICLEER: Oh yeah?

FOX: Yeah!

CHANTICLEER: Well I would take my leave, Sir, before those chasers come along to talk to you of tongues. I believe they might relieve you of yours.

FOX: Oh yeah? (*he turns to look offstage as if to see the crowd approaching*) Uh oh.

The FOX exits. PERTELOTE enters in a dramatic damsel fashion.

PERTELOTE: Chanticleer! I thought that you were surely dead!

CHANTICLEER: No fear. As any hero would, I took care of the fox single... well... *(he gives a sheepish shrug and hugs PERTELOTE)* It's a really good thing you came along!

CHANTICLEER and PERTELOTE exit.

PRIORESS: And so perhaps you hold this as a tale of foolery about a rooster, fox, and chicken.

PERTELOTE: *(offstage cry)* Hen!

PRIORESS: But every story written well has something useful to share. Take the moral fruit and let the chaff life where it may. Thus ends my story here today.

The lights change and everyone moves back to their walking formation.

SCENE THREE

The HOSTESS breaks out with applause.

HOSTESS: Bravo! Bravo! An excellent story to start off our journey. See the countryside fairly flies past as we move along.

MILLER: *(in an unsteady voice)* Zounds! The ground moves for you too?

PRIORESS: I believe you are quite right Hostess. I hope the listening was as enjoyable as the telling. I did get right into it!

FRANKLIN: What is the moral of the tale Prioress?

PARDONER: When your wife tells you to take a laxative, don't listen.

PRIORESS: That's not quite right.

WIFE OF BATH: Never marry a man more beautiful than you.

PRIORESS: I'm not sure that's it either.

REEVE: And what qualities should a woman look for in a husband?

WIFE OF BATH: Old and rich.

MILLER: You found five old rich men who agreed to marry you?
Zounds!

WIFE OF BATH: Of course not. But of all my husbands, the best ones were very old and very rich. That's what I'm looking for in husband number six if any here qualify.

PARDONER: I was just going to propose dear lady, but my qualifications are sorely lacking.

WIFE OF BATH: Don't take yourself out of the running just yet. My heart is easily swayed.

PARDONER: Lucky for me.

There is much laughter and merriment.

HOSTESS: You see? I told you this would make us all merry. Now the bag has been unbuckled and the game has begun! Who shall be next? Who shall tell a tale? Sir Franklin? My Lady of Bath? Dear Cook, have you come up with a story to regale us? Something better than our Prioress, perhaps?

COOK: What? Me? No! Not yet! I'm not ready! Let someone else go.

MILLER: (*very loudly*) By blood and bones I know a noble tale to tell!

PARDONER: How about a quiet tale?

FRANKLIN: Sir Miller, perhaps another will go next.

COOK: Wait! I got one! Oh that's no good.

MILLER: No one will go but I. I have a tale to beat the one before.

WIFE OF BATH: Let him go, he only makes a fool of himself.

REEVE: His wit is too much overdone.

PARDONER: Too much time in the creativity fire.

MILLER: If you don't let me go then I will leave you and travel to Canterbury alone.

HOSTESS: Tell on then.

REEVE: If the Miller wants to go on alone, why should we stop him?

PARDONER: When's the next tavern I wonder?

MILLER: Zounds! Before I start I must tell you all that I am not altogether well. I am not straight in my boots. I know it because I sound like I am off to one side. (*he leans over then rights himself*)

REEVE: Oh shut up and let another go. This is a disgraceful way to behave in front of ladies.

PRIORESS: I agree.

WIFE OF BATH: Speak for yourself.

PARDONER: There's naught wrong with a little disgrace.

COOK: I've got one! No. Sorry. Never mind.

FRANKLIN: Come friends. Men should not be so serious when in a game. Is that not right? *(to the MILLER)* Give us your story.

REEVE: Tell on. I can hardly wait.

STORY TWO: THE MILLER'S TALE

The lights change. The MILLER moves into the same spot occupied by the PRIORESS.

MILLER: There once was a rich man who was a carpenter in trade and took in borders on the side. This particular rich man took on a particular border who's name was Nicholas. *(he waits for a second, but when nothing happens he calls offstage)* Oye! Hurry up! I'm not going to wait all day!

A slightly dishevelled looking NICHOLAS runs onstage. He gives a pained look to the MILLER.

MILLER: *(to NICHOLAS)* Well... say something you motley-minded malt-worm!

NICHOLAS: *(at a bit of a loss, after all he's not the storyteller)* My name is Nicholas?

MILLER: Get out of the way. Hopeless. Despite a complete lack of imagination, I know toadstools that could think quicker, Nicholas was a handy clever clerk with a sharp mind, a keen interest in astronomy and a taste for the good life.

JOHN, the carpenter, enters with a flourish. His wife ALLISON is on his arm.

JOHN: Welcome to your...

MILLER: *(yelling at JOHN)* Hang on! I'm not ready for you yet! Get off!

JOHN and ALLISON exit on the run.

MILLER: Now the rich carpenter had a name. He's name was... his name was... was... *(he calls offstage)* Oye! What's your name?

JOHN: *(offstage)* John.

MILLER: Of course it is. I knew that. It's my story isn't it? Now. The carpenter, who's name was John. *(calling offstage)* All right you can

come out now! John had just married a very very young woman whose name was... don't tell me... Allison.

JOHN and ALLISON enter again.

JOHN: (to ALLISON) Welcome to your new home.

ALLISON makes a noise as if she's not too happy with the arrangements.

MILLER: John the carpenter had a new wife and her name was Allison. Now. His new wife was young and wild, and young and beautiful and young and young. Her mouth was sweet and she was young, her skin shone and she was young, her body was soft and she was young. She was young, young, very, very, very, very young. But most importantly of all, she was just as young as her new husband was old. So you can imagine just how old that makes him. (to the audience) You can imagine, can't you? (pointing back at NICHOLAS) You've got a better imagination than this dimwit, don't you? I'm not going through all that again just to draw you a map as to what's going on in this here marriage. Pay attention! And though John the OLD carpenter tried whatever he could to keep his new YOUNG wife all to himself, all locked up, clever Nicholas found the key.

During the above NICHOLAS and ALLISON steal glances and wave at one another behind JOHN's back. They seem to be forming a relationship and JOHN is none the wiser.

MILLER: And one day while the carpenter was away at Oseneye... (to JOHN) Wake up! You're away. Get off! Oye, it's hard to get good help.

JOHN stalks off, glaring at the MILLER. ALLISON looks as if she is also going to exit. NICHOLAS grabs hold of her hand.

NICHOLAS: If I have my way, you will love me with everything you have.

ALLISON: I will not.

NICHOLAS: Kiss me so. (he goes to kiss her, she stops him)

ALLISON: I will not kiss you. Let me be, Nicholas, or I will cry out.

NICHOLAS: Not until you promise me your love. (he chases her)

ALLISON: My husband is very jealous. I know well enough that I'll be dead if we get caught. (*NICHOLAS starts to turn away but she pulls him back*) So it's best if we don't get caught.

NICHOLAS: There is nothing to worry about. A poor scholar I would be if I could not pull the wool over the eyes of a carpenter.

He gives ALLISON a kiss and she giggles and goes off. NICHOLAS then sits himself down with a wild look. There is a moment of silence. NICHOLAS loses his wild look and stares at the MILLER, who seems to be asleep on his feet.

NICHOLAS: (*clearing his throat*) A-hem. (*he does it again*) A-hem! (*he waits a moment and then calls out loudly*) Hey!

The MILLER wakes with a start.

MILLER: What! Who! Where am I! Who took my drink? Sorry. I am so sorry good folk, I was so enrapt in the story that I did indeed forget my place. Where are we? (*he looks at NICHOLAS*) What already? Zounds! You work fast Sir. Excellent, excellent well. Both Nicholas and Allison agreed they would wait until the moment was right to carry on their affair and fool the carpenter. Give him the biggest splinter, so to speak. Nicholas wasted no time when John returned home the next day to start the trickery.

JOHN enters and sees NICHOLAS sitting and staring into space.

JOHN: By Saint Thomas, Nicholas we have not seen you for a day and a night. What is wrong with you? My servant boy says you are just sitting here in your chamber as if you were staring on the new moon. You neither speak, nor move nor eat. (*he gives a big sniff*) Nor bathe. (*he pokes NICHOLAS with his cane*) By Saint Thomas he has had some fit. (*he pokes NICHOLAS again. NICHOLAS falls over*) It is this astronomy you study by Saint Frideswide. There will be no more of that. (*clapping and stamping by NICHOLAS' ear*) What Nicholas! What ho! Look about! You have been bewitched! The stars have bewitched you! (*waving his cane over NICHOLAS and dancing about, looking generally foolish*) I defend thee from elves and evil spirits! I banish all from my threshold! Bless this house from every wicked thing! (*still dancing about*) Hey ho! Hey ho!

MILLER: When does Allison come back? I like her.

NICHOLAS: (*with a deep and heavy sigh*) Alas.

JOHN: Nicholas! Speak again boy.

NICHOLAS: Shall all the world be lost again so soon?

JOHN: What are you talking about?

NICHOLAS: (*grabbing hold of JOHN's shirt*) I must speak with you in private. Are we in private? There is a thing that touches us all and I will tell no other man but you.

JOHN: (*looking around and taking NICHOLAS very seriously*) Steady son we are truly alone.

NICHOLAS: (*making sure they are alone*) John. My host. My life and dear. Swear to me that you shall tell no one, NO ONE, what I am about to share with you.

JOHN: I swear.

NICHOLAS: On your life!

JOHN: On my life!

NICHOLAS: For if you tell another soul you will be utterly lost. If you betray me, vengeance will rain down upon you and make you mad.

JOHN: Merciful heaven!

NICHOLAS: Do you understand me, John?

JOHN: I do. I swear. I do not tell tales or secrets. You can ask any man. Say what you will, I will never tell it to anyone, not even to my wife.

NICHOLAS: That is deep swearing indeed. (*He looks around again and brings JOHN downstage. He speaks in a loud whisper*) I do not lie John when I say I have found in my astrology, when I have looked into the bright moon, that on Monday next, at nine o'clock at night... (*he stops and looks around again. JOHN also does this*) On Monday next, at nine o'clock at night there shall fall a rain so wild and fierce it will rival the rains that fell on Noah.

JOHN: No!

NICHOLAS: Yes! In less than an hour the whole world will be wet from this hideous shower. All mankind shall be drowned. All mankind shall lose their lives.

JOHN: No!

NICHOLAS: Yes!

JOHN: Merciful heavens! And my wife? My poor Allison, will she be drowned too?

NICHOLAS: Is she part of all mankind?

JOHN: I fear she is.

NICHOLAS: Then the answer is, yes.

JOHN: No!

NICHOLAS: Now you know why I sit here without a wink of sleep, nor a morsel of food can I eat. (*he sniffs his armpit*) I could bathe though; you're right about that.

JOHN: Is there no way to save ourselves? There must be something we can do!

NICHOLAS: There is John. (*he looks around and moves JOHN to the other side of the stage*) But you must not follow your instincts. You must not act on what your logic tells you to do. If you follow my instructions you will not be sorry. If you follow my advice to the letter and not deviate from it one inch, I will save you and Allison and me.

JOHN: (*embracing NICHOLAS in a bear hug*) Bless you, bless you, bless you! You are a good man Nicholas! A good man indeed. What must we do?

NICHOLAS: First let me go.

JOHN: Oh! Sorry man.

NICHOLAS: Next, go right away into your house and fetch three wooden buckets, one for each of us. See that they are large enough so when the time comes we may float away.

JOHN: Excellent plan!

NICHOLAS: Then, you must gather food and drink enough for one day.

JOHN: One day? Won't we need much more than that?

NICHOLAS: Oh I'm fairly sure the water will drain away quite quickly. Remember! There is no logic here! Remember! No one must know about this. Not your serving boy, nor you maid.

JOHN: No one.

NICHOLAS: Do not ask me why there is such secrecy. Unless you want to make yourself mad, you'll follow me to the letter.

JOHN: I will, I will. Anything to save my dear, sweet, beautiful Allison.

MILLER: Don't forget young.

NICHOLAS: When you have the three vats, hang them from the roof as high as you can, so no man will see what we are doing.

JOHN: But wait! Why do we need three boats? Allison and I will be in the same one.

NICHOLAS: NO! No, no, no!

JOHN: Why?

NICHOLAS: You must not. We all must be in separate boats. That is the most important part of the plan.

JOHN: But...

NICHOLAS: There is a higher power that wants it so and you must not ask any more questions! Remember...

JOHN: Yes, yes, do not use logic. How stupid of me!

NICHOLAS: And one more thing. Once the time has come and we are in our makeshift boats, none of us may speak a word. Not a word, John. Do you understand?

JOHN: Yes, silence is a virtue, right?

NICHOLAS: Right. You are such a wise man John. I knew I would be able to count on you. Now go and Godspeed.

JOHN: Godspeed to you as well Nicholas. I thank the heavens that you are in my house this day.

MILLER: John went straight to his wife and told the story from beginning to end. Among her list of young talents, pretending she was going to die was one of them.

ALLISON: (to JOHN) Alas, go forth your way. Help us to escape or we are all lost. I am your true wedded wife. Alas, go and help save our life. Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh.

ALLISON runs off.

MILLER: Maybe not so talented. And so the carpenter spent the day running from secret place to secret place. Looking out for unexpected drops of rain. The tubs were found and he took them to the roof himself. Then he filled the tubs with bread and cheese

and good ale in a jug. Finally it came to be Monday night and the time drew close to nine.

There is the sound of a clock tower bell chiming nine o'clock. The three begin to sneak across the stage.

MILLER: Out of their rooms each person crept.

NICHOLAS: Shhh!

ALLISON: Shhh!

JOHN: Shhh!

JOHN trips loudly as he sneaks. ALLISON and NICHOLAS turn to stare at him.

NICHOLAS & ALLISON: Shhhhhhh!!!!

The three sit separately on the stage as if they are in their wooden tubs.

MILLER: Each into their separate tubs they crept. *(to the audience)* You can't see the tubs but they're there. You're not going to doubt me now are you? Not when I've been telling this story for so long! What a long story. A man should have a reward for telling such a story. Think on that will you? *(he clears his throat)* Now. John sat in silence waiting for rain.

JOHN: Alas! Alas! Ohhhhh Alas!

MILLER: THAT'S NOT SILENT! *(there is a pause)* Better. Zounds! John was so upset and filled with blind panic as he waited for the flood that he fell instantly asleep. Soon his snores filled the tub.

JOHN droops and falls asleep. He lets out a loud snore. ALLISON and NICHOLAS stand up as quietly as possible and exit. NICHOLAS tickles ALLISON and she giggles.

MILLER: Allison and Nicholas entertained themselves with much revelry and merrymaking all the night through until morning came.

There is the sound of a cock-a-doodle-do. NICHOLAS and ALLISON creep back onstage.

NICHOLAS: Shhh!

ALLISON: Shhh!

JOHN gives a huge snore.

MILLER: At the exact same time as Allison and Nicholas were sneaking through the house, a young man named Absolom was walking by the cottage. *(to the audience)* You didn't know there would be another person in the story did you? Fooled you! Ha! Absolom too was completely in love with young beautiful Allison and he thought to try and steal a kiss before the old carpenter awoke. *(there is a pause)* Where is he? Where's Absolom?

NICHOLAS and ALLISON shake their head and shrug. They don't know where he is.

MILLER: You people are imaginary! You're supposed to do whatever I want. Arrgh! Do I have to do everything myself? *(he gives a big growl)* All right, all right. Get out of my way.

The MILLER charges over to where ALLISON and NICHOLAS are standing.

MILLER: *(to ALLISON and NICHOLAS)* Move over, move over, give a man room! *(to the audience)* I am calling through a window. Got it? *(he changes his voice so that it is high and sweet)* Oh Allison! Oh honeycomb! My little birdie! Oh sweet cinnamon stick! Arise, awake, and speak to your fair Absolom! My love for you is so full that I am sweating. I'm drenched with sweat!

ALLISON: Ewwwwwwwww!

NICHOLAS: *(whispering)* Who is this rube?

MILLER: *(still as ABSOLOM)* I love you like a turtle... No, that's not it... I love you like a turtledove. I love you so much that I cannot eat! *(as himself)* Ugh. What a toad.

ALLISON: *(to NICHOLAS)* I have an idea! Stand back and you will get such a laugh. *(to ABSOLOM)* Oh Absolom... come to the window and I will let you kiss me.

MILLER: *(as ABSOLOM)* You will??

ALLISON: Oh yes! But you must do it quick so the neighbours don't see. And you must close your eyes!

MILLER: Oh sweet bird, here I come!

ABSOLOM leans forward with his eyes closed to kiss ALLISON. She turns her back to ABSOLOM and leans over so that ABSOLOM kisses her behind. ABSOLOM

jumps back with a start. NICHOLAS and ALLISON dissolve into hoots of laughter.

MILLER: (as ABSOLOM) What is this!

NICHOLAS: A trick! A trick!

ALLISON: Now go away from the window you Jack-fool!

ABSOLOM moves away wiping his mouth as fast and as furiously as possible.

MILLER: (as ABSOLOM) Ew, ew, ug, agh, yuck, yuck, phooey! Huh! How dare they! No one makes a fool of Absolom! My love for that woman has completely vanished! Gone! Departed! My love is nowhere to be found. I will have my revenge! (*he trips and falls*) I will still have my revenge! Ah ha! What's this? A fire poker smouldering in the coals? Right here in the middle of nowhere? How very convenient! This will do just the trick!

ABSOLOM takes the poker and moves back towards ALLISON and NICHOLAS.

MILLER: (as ABSOLOM) Oh Allison... yoo hoo!

ALLISON: Not again.

NICHOLAS: He doesn't give up.

MILLER: (as ABSOLOM) I have something to show you. A ring that was my mother's that I would like for you to have. I will give it to you if you will give me another kiss.

NICHOLAS: (*whispering*) Let me. (*in a falsetto to ABSOLOM*) All right Absolom, I will let you have your kiss. But you must close your eyes.

MILLER: (as ABSOLOM) Oh sweet bird, here I come!

NICHOLAS turns his back and leans his behind towards ABSOLOM who promptly jabs NICHOLAS in the behind with the poker.

NICHOLAS gives a huge scream, runs around the stage holding his behind.

NICHOLAS: Help! Water! Water! Help ho! Waaaaaater!!!!!!!

ALLISON: Help ho! Water!

JOHN: (*waking up*) Water? Water? Help ho? The flood has come! The flood has come!

MILLER: At that the carpenter cut the rope, which sent the tub careening off the bone-dry roof. John tumbled end over end and landed in a heap on the bone-dry floor.

*There is the sound of thumping and a heavy crash.
JOHN tumbles and ends up spread-eagle on the stage.*

NICHOLAS: Help!

ALLISON: Help ho!

JOHN: What happened?

MILLER: All the neighbours came to gape at the rich old carpenter sprawled out in his yard surrounded by bread and cheese and ale. Afterwards there was much made of the incident.

NICHOLAS: I always thought the old man was odd. But I didn't think he was that odd!

ALLISON: How could I be married to a man who thought the world was coming to an end?

NICHOLAS and ALLISON laugh at JOHN, who looks very sheepish. They all exit.

MILLER: And so the carpenter was held mad by all the town, and so young Allison escaped the cage of the old man's making, and so clever Nicholas was not clever enough to escape being branded on the behind. And so my tale is done. God save the whole bunch of us!

SCENE FOUR

The lights change. Everyone is in the walking formation. They all stop to laugh at the MILLER's story. Everyone, except for the REEVE, who looks extremely foul.

FRANKLIN: (*laughing*) A branded behind! A branded behind! I can just picture it!

PRIORESS: That's what an old man gets for marrying so young.

WIFE OF BATH: Not all old men are so foolish as to believe a clerk.

PARDONER: The moral of that tale is to never keep buckets in the house large enough to sleep in.

FRANKLIN: *(still laughing)* A branded behind!

The REEVE gives a humpft of disgust.

HOSTESS: Sir, you did not enjoy the Miller's tale?

REEVE: I did not.

WIFE OF BATH: You did not! I have not heard such humour for quite some time. I am going to have to change my story to compete.

COOK: Change? You're going to change your story?

FRANKLIN: You look so foul. What is your name good Sir Reeve?

REEVE: Osewald.

FRANKLIN: And why Osewald did you not enjoy the Miller's words?

REEVE: It's obvious.

PARDONER: Is it?

REEVE: Absolutely obvious.

PRIORESS: How so?

REEVE: It's clear as day.

HOSTESS: Perhaps you could enlighten those of us who are still in the dark.

REEVE: The man in the story was a carpenter. I was a carpenter in my youth. The Miller heard me say so last night when we were at sup. The man in the story is old. I am old. This story is clearly a slight against me and my person.

PRIORESS: I'm sure that's not true.

FRANKLIN: Impossible!

COOK: How can that be so?

HOSTESS: Good Miller, dispute this claim.

MILLER: Weeeeeeeell.

REEVE: I have no doubt the slight is against me. No doubt in the slightest. The joke is always against the old and the industrious. I have always known my time was running out. As soon as I was

born, death turned fast the tap of life; soon I will be drained into a puddle on the ground.

PARDONER: That's pleasant.

REEVE: The stream of Osewald is nearly dry. The riverbed no longer bubbles with the vigour of youth. The...

MILLER: I don't know why you're so upset. It's just a story.

HOSTESS: Sir Reeve, surely you do not wish to sermonize. Be the next to tell your tale and waste no time about it.

REEVE: All right I shall. I hope you will not think ill of me if I fight fire with fire against our dear friend the Miller. He has scorned me and I will repay the scorn.

STORY THREE: THE REEVE'S TALE

The lights change. The REEVE moves downstage. He rolls up his sleeves ready for the fight.

REEVE: At Trumpington, a place not too far from Cambridge, there lived a proud, lying, deceitful, sneaky, slovenly, sly, bullying, bossy, Miller.

The MILLER tries to come at the REEVE but he is held back.

MILLER: Why you!

REEVE: Is there a problem friend? 'tis just a story. Step back, Sir, you've had your turn.

The REEVE gestures the MILLER back, the other PILGRIMS pull the MILLER back.

REEVE: This Miller went by the name of Simekin.

SIMEKIN enters and stands proudly.

SIMEKIN: I can fish and mend a net and play the pipes and...

REEVE: And steal. Stealing was his specialty. He would steal the corn and meal and no man would dare challenge him.

SIMEKIN: (*speaking to an unseen foe*) WHAT? You dare suggest me of stealing? YOU DARE? You had better walk away friend before I take you to task; first with this sword by my side, next with this dagger in my belt, and last with this knife in my hose.

As the REEVE speaks, the wife (HILDE) and daughter (MAUDE) enter. The three form a family picture and freeze.

REEVE: A wife he had of questionable lineage and a daughter they had of questionable looks. But when the three walked through town, not one brave nor stupid soul made joke. Not a snicker nor a peep nor a giggle nor a laugh. Not when the Miller had a sword at his side, a dagger in his belt and a knife in his hose. One of the Miller's customers was a college in Cambridge known as Soler Hall. The Miller ground all of the corn for the college.

SIMEKIN: Keeping a bushel or two for myself of course. I am merely a poor Miller trying to make ends meet. It's the least that my customers can do.

REEVE: No one at the college believed Simekin was merely a poor Miller, but what were they to do when the man has a sword, a dagger, and a knife at his disposal?

ALLAIN enters. He paces back and forth.

ALLAIN: This Miller cheats us at every turn and no one will say a word! Why should we be cheated out of what is rightfully ours? It's monstrous! It makes me so agitated I shall surely burst! *(he stops suddenly, a new thought has come to him)* No. No I shall not burst. I shall deal with this monstrous Miller – man to man! Face to face! This very day I will convince the warden to let me ride to the mill and see the college's corn ground personally. I'll bet my very life that he will not be able to steal one grain away from me!

ALLAIN squares his shoulders, grabs two bags of corn, and crosses to where SIMEKIN is standing.

SIMEKIN: *(moving forward)* Do my eyes deceive me? Why, hello Allain! How are you my fine fellow?

The two shake hands as if they are friends.

ALLAIN: Good morrow Simekin! How are your wife and daughter?

SIMEKIN: Excellent well, excellent well. What's a poor simple clerk like yourself doing away from the college?

ALLAIN: Our warden, who is near death (some say his teeth ache in his head) has asked me to come have our corn ground and bring it back again.

SIMEKIN: It will be done good fellow. It will be done. Pray, what shall you do in the meanwhile?

ALLAIN: Why good Miller, I have never seen corn ground into flour.
It is something every poor simple clerk should see, do you not think?

SIMEKIN: Well...

ALLAIN: I plan to stand right beside the hopper the entire time and watch every step.

SIMEKIN: You do?

ALLAIN: Oh yes! Every single, solitary step. I'm really quite excited about it!

SIMEKIN stops and steps back away from ALLAIN at this comment.

SIMEKIN: (*coolly*) I see. (*as he calls out to his daughter, his voice and manner become friendly again*) Maudy!

MAUDE: Yes Papa?

SIMEKIN: Take young Allain into the mill will you? I'll be there by and by.

MAUDE steps forward and helps ALLAIN with his bags.

MAUDE: Right this way, Sir Clerk. Can I ask you something, Sir Clerk?

ALLAIN: Anything you like.

MAUDE: Do you like cows?

ALLAIN: Cows?

MAUDE: I love cows. I have three of them as pets! I love their big eyes, and their soft skin and the way they go moooooooooo.

ALLAIN: How fascinating.

MAUDE: You think so Sir Clerk? No one's ever shared my love of cows before. Maybe we were made for each other! Moooooooooooooo.

MAUDE practically drags ALLAIN offstage, who doesn't look too happy about it. HILDE steps forward and SIMEKIN moves to talk with her in secret.

SIMEKIN: This youngling thinks to trick me into getting a fair deal.

HILDE: Imagine that!

SIMEKIN: He wants a fair deal, from me! *(the two laugh together)* But I will blear his eyes. The more tricks he tries to play, the more I will steal from his sack. The greatest clerk is far from the wisest man.

ALLAIN: *(calling from offstage)* Come Simekin! I am anxious to see you start!

SIMEKIN: And so I come without delay.

MAUDE: *(offstage)* Mooooooooooooo.

REEVE: As the Miller went to ground the corn, his wife stole down to where Allain's horse was securely tethered.

HILDE: *(as if trying to push a horse)* Off you go now, off you go! Giddyup!

There is the sound of a horse neighing and hoofs running away. HILDE nods her head in a satisfied manner. SIMEKIN and ALLAIN enter with bags of ground flour.

SIMEKIN: There you are, everything ground fair and square.

ALLAIN: That's right. Fair and square.

SIMEKIN: Fair and square.

ALLAIN: You said it my friend. Fair. And...

SIMEKIN: Why don't we send Maudy to get your horse for you? *(calling out)* Maudy! Bring Allain his horse, will you?

MAUDE runs on.

MAUDE: The horse! The horse is lost!

ALLAIN: What!

MAUDE: It's gone!

ALLAIN: It can't be!

ALLAIN runs off.

REEVE: At that point Allain completely forgot about his fairly ground flour.

ALLAIN runs back on.

ALLAIN: The horse! The horse is lost!

HILDE: Good Sir! I see him running in the marsh!

ALLAIN: The marsh? Which way is that?

HILDE points, ALLAIN exits. SIMEKIN kneels down and takes one of the bags.

SIMEKIN: Take a half of bushel from this, mother, and bake it into bread. That will take care of his fair and square deal.

The two laugh together. ALLAIN is seen running back and forth trying to catch his horse.

ALLAIN: Hold! Stop! Halt! Halt! COME BACK!!!!

SIMEKIN: I think the poor fellow will be busy for quite some time.

SIMEKIN and HILDE laugh together.

REEVE: And so the morning passed to afternoon...

ALLAIN: *(offstage)* Stay!

REEVE: And the afternoon into night...

ALLAIN: *(running onstage)* Stay you filthy rotten beast!

REEVE: And it was pitch black before Allain was able to corral his mare. Wet and weary he made his way back to the Miller's cottage.

ALLAIN: I am a fool. My corn is stolen and I am an utter fool. I curse the day I was born and so will the warden and every fellow at school. They will all laugh at me, especially that blasted Miller.

ALLAIN joins SIMEKIN, HILDE and MAUDE who are all sitting contentedly.

SIMEKIN: Allain! Come and join us by the fire. Your horse is safely tethered once more?

ALLAIN: Aye.

HILDE: I can't imagine how he got away.

ALLAIN: Nor can I. Simekin, it is too late to ride back to the college, let me spend the night.

SIMEKIN: Of course my good man.

ALLAIN: Many thanks.

SIMEKIN: For a small fee.

ALLAIN: What?

SIMEKIN: I am merely a poor Miller, Allain, trying to make ends meet. My home is but a small one, barely enough for my family and I. Seeing as you are so learned perhaps you can make the place more spacious with your grandiose ideas.

ALLAIN: (*with a sigh*) I have the coin. Be a good host and offer me food and drink.

REEVE: And so Simekin was. He was in a fantastically jolly mood.

SIMEKIN lets out a large laugh and imitates ALLAIN chasing his horse.

SIMEKIN: Hold! Stop! Halt! Halt! COME BACK!!!!

MAUDE neighs like a horse.

SIMEKIN, HILDE and MAUDE burst into laughter.

REEVE: They all ate and drank and ate and drank and drank and ate and it was well after midnight when they fell into bed.

SIMEKIN, HILDE, and MAUDE suddenly fall to the floor and start to snore. ALLAIN stands with his hands over his ears.

REEVE: The Miller, his wife, and daughter kept each other company by the sounds of their violent snoring. This did nothing to help the poor clerk.

ALLAIN: What a racket. How am I going to sleep? (*the others give a loud snore*) I have never heard such noise. Wild beasts make less sound.

The others let out particularly loud snores. ALLAIN walks away trying to get away from the noise.

ALLAIN: Of course they are content. They have my money and my flour and I have nothing. (*speaking to the sleepers*) May wildfires land on your bodies! (*sighs again*) There is a law which states that if a man is aggrieved in one way, in another he shall be relieved. Before this night is through I will be relieved. I will not go back home looking the fool.

REEVE: And with that Allain tiptoed back across the room, past the snoring Miller and his snoring wife and up to the snoring daughter, who soon stopped snoring when she heard the clerk whispering in her ear.

MAUDE: I can't! My father is a very dangerous man. He'll thrash you soundly if he awakens and I am not in my bed.

ALLAIN: I am not afraid of him.

MAUDE: You should be. He's got a sword at his side, a dagger in his belt, and a knife in his hose.

ALLAIN: Right. Well... come to the garden and he will hear us not. Then he won't wake up and see that you are not in your bed.

MAUDE: The garden is too close.

ALLAIN: OK... (*thinks*) I know! Why don't you show me your cows?

MAUDE: You really want to see them?

ALLAIN: I really do.

MAUDE giggles and the two exit.

REEVE: So Allain was relieved and the two entertained themselves with much revelry and merrymaking till the rooster began to crow to mark the morn. By the dim light of dawn Allain and Maude snuck back into the cottage.

There is the sound of a rooster crowing. ALLAIN and MAUDE sneak back on. The light is very dim.

ALLAIN: Farewell Maudy. I must away, but even if I never return, I will always be your clerk.

MAUDE: Before you go I must tell you something. By the entrance to the mill you'll find a loaf of bread made from the half-bushel I helped my father steal.

ALLAIN: And for that I will give you one more kiss.

ALLAIN leans in for a kiss and SIMEKIN leaps up. ALLAIN and MAUDE give a yell and leap apart.

SIMEKIN: What, what, what?

MAUDE: Father!

SIMEKIN grabs ALLAIN by the collar.

SIMEKIN: One more kiss! What have you done scoundrel? Have you trespassed with my daughter!?

ALLAIN: With great pleasure!

ALLAIN stomps on SIMEKIN's foot and gets away. SIMEKIN takes up the chase.

SIMEKIN: You false treacherous clerk! You shall surely die for this!

ALLAIN: I will surely live!

SIMEKIN grabs ALLAIN by the waist.

MAUDE: Father! Don't hurt him! He likes cows!

SIMEKIN: Wife! Wife! Awake!

SIMEKIN and ALLAIN are locked in a wrestlers' embrace. HILDE sits up, very confused.

HILDE: Oh heavens! Heavens! The beast is on us!

SIMEKIN: Get the staff! Beat him on the head!

MAUDE: Mother no!

HILDE: Get out of the way, Maudy!

HILDE grabs the staff, but it is too dark for her to make out which is SIMEKIN as the two move around.

HILDE: I cannot see. It's too dark! I cannot see which is which!

SIMEKIN: Don't be a fool woman. Just hit!

HILDE lashes out with the staff. There is the sound of a large thump and SIMEKIN hits the ground. HILDE rushes to his side.

SIMEKIN: Oh!

MAUDE: Father!

HILDE: Simekin!

ALLAIN: You won't mind if I take my silver back, will you Simekin? I thought not! *(he grabs a bag from SIMEKIN's belt)*

HILDE: Simekin!

ALLAIN: Farewell Maudy!

MAUDE: Farewell my clerk!

ALLAIN: Take care of those cows!

HILDE: Simekin!

SIMEKIN: Ohhhhhhh.

REEVE: Allain ran fast and furious but not before picking up his flour and the bread.

ALLAIN: This is the luckiest day a poor clerk ever had! I have my flour and the bread and no money has left my hands. Lucky day indeed.

REEVE: There is a proverb that says an evil man must not expect good to come his way and the cheater will himself be cheated. Thus have I paid the Miller back with this tale.

The lights change.

HOSTESS: Well done!

REEVE: Thank you Hostess.

WIFE OF BATH: Do you feel avenged Sir Reeve?

HOSTESS: I think the two stories make them even, don't you agree?

The COOK leaps up, scattering some with her energy.

COOK: That's it! I'm ready! I have a story! I have a story!

Blackout.

ACT TWO – SCENE ONE

The lights come up on the same scene from the end of ACT ONE. The PILGRIMS are scattered about as the COOK stands centre stage, flush with the glow of finally coming up with a story to tell.

COOK: That's it! I'm ready! I have a story! I have a story!

FRANKLIN: Ah ha! The fires of creativity have been re-kindled. We are ready to hear you.

COOK: And I am ready to tell.

The COOK breathes in and opens her mouth as if to begin. Nothing comes out. There is a pause as everyone looks expectantly at the COOK.

REEVE: Well?

HOSTESS: You keep us in suspense.

COOK: Ah...

WIFE OF BATH: Say something!

COOK: Ah... ah... ah...

MILLER: Is this part of the story?

COOK: Ah... ah...

MILLER: We heard that already! Zounds!

COOK: I... I... I can't do it!

There is a collective groan. The COOK runs from the centre. She sits with her head in her hands.

FRANKLIN: Why not child?

MILLER: Next!

WIFE OF BATH: Keep quiet hedgehog.

MILLER: I'm not the one stuttering like a teakettle.

HOSTESS: (to COOK) Go on, give it a try.

The HOSTESS tries to drag the COOK back to the centre. The COOK is quite reluctant.

COOK: I can't. What if the story's no good? What if I'm no good? What if I make a mistake? What if the story is so long that the time drags on and on and on and it never seems like the story is going to end and we're passing the same rocks and trees over and over again and you want the story to end but no one wants to interrupt and I keep going on and on until I peter out when I finally realize that the story has no end nor middle nor even a beginning and I have to leave the group and cry by the side of the road and I never get to Canterbury!

PARDONER: That's a lot to keep you up at night. Are you sure you don't have any more reasons for not going?

COOK: Well... I'm feeling rather shy.

The WIFE OF BATH comes centre, pushing the COOK out of the way.

WIFE OF BATH: Shyness has never been a problem for me.

REEVE: Not with five husbands.

WIFE OF BATH: I will not even take your words as slander, Sir Osewald, for it is quite true. I have had five husbands, which makes me an absolute expert on marriage. Of all the husbands I have had, three were good and two were bad. The first three were old and rich. They spent well and tired easily.

MILLER: What happened to them?

WIFE OF BATH: They died. After them I wanted more adventure, more excitement. I went for younger men, much to my own folly. Young men may provide adventure and excitement but they hardly tire at all! To manage a husband takes hard work, patience and a lot of nagging. I nagged my husbands constantly! The younger they are, the more nagging they require. My fourth husband was riotous and thought he could get away with a paramour. But a fist full of nagging cured him completely!

FRANKLIN: What happened to him?

WIFE OF BATH: He died. My fifth husband, let his soul never find hell, was half my age. He knew how to love a maid even though he hated women. His favourite pastime was to read to me on the wickedness of ladies fair. But even this colt was tamed so that I held the bridle reins throughout the marriage.

PARDONER: I am afraid to ask what happened to him.

WIFE OF BATH: He died. But he had a smile on his face.

FRANKLIN: Good wife, this is a long preamble.

WIFE OF BATH: I am truly sorry for that. When I talk about my husbands I tend to go on.

MILLER: And on, and on, and on.

PARDONER: I for one am grateful. I had passing thoughts about marriage. After your speech I am quite certain I will never entertain the thought again.

HOSTESS: Please, good wife, begin your tale.

WIFE OF BATH: Immediately Hostess! Now all good tales should begin with a paragon of virtue.

PRIORESS: How surprising.

WIFE OF BATH: What?

PRIORESS: I had not thought you would take the time for virtue.

WIFE OF BATH: I think a great deal of virtue. It is something I contemplate daily. Hourly even.

PARDONER: How do you get anything done?

STORY FOUR: THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

The lights change. The WIFE OF BATH moves forward.

WIFE OF BATH: As all good tales should, this story begins with a paragon of virtue. Here stands a Knight.

The KNIGHT enters and stands in a heroic pose. The WIFE OF BATH moves and stands side by side with the KNIGHT.

WIFE OF BATH: A paragon of virtue. A man of the highest calibre. Goodliness in thought, word, and deed. Almost. You see, in this story, virtue wasn't exactly on our dear Knight's mind.

PRIORESS: Ha! I knew it wouldn't last!

WIFE OF BATH: For this Knight thought himself above others.

The KNIGHT slouches a bit. The WOMEN on the side boo and hiss.

WOMEN: Boo! Hiss!

WIFE OF BATH: He thought so highly of himself he considered himself above all men.

WOMEN: Boo! Hiss!

WIFE OF BATH: He thought so highly of himself that one day he took advantage of a young maid.

The KNIGHT slouches a bit more. He tries to slink away but the WIFE OF BATH pulls him back. The WOMEN on the side boo him.

WOMEN: Boo! Hiss!

KNIGHT: I'm not sure I want to be in this story.

WIFE OF BATH: He was found out and condemned to die. And rightfully so! But his miserable, pitiful, worm-like life...

KNIGHT: I really must be going.

The KNIGHT tries to walk away but the WIFE OF BATH pulls him back.

WIFE OF BATH: His worthless life was saved by a last minute plea from the Queen.

The KING and QUEEN enter. The KNIGHT drops to his knees.

QUEEN: Let me decide his fate, my King. This man believes himself above all men to take advantage of a lady.

The WOMEN on the side boo and hiss. The KNIGHT looks around nervously.

QUEEN: So let a lady decide his future and his path in life.

KING: It is done. Sir Knight, the Queen will decide your fate. You will abide by her words. Is that clear?

KNIGHT: *(with a gulp of fear)* Very much so, sire.

QUEEN: Do you realize the seriousness of what you have done?

KNIGHT: Oh yes m'lady. You can rest assured that if I am allowed to live I will never again consider myself above anyone. Never ever.

QUEEN: Your life is not yet guaranteed, Sir Knight. I hold it in my hands, like so. All it takes is for my fingers to pull apart a hairsbreadth and your life is gone; slipped through the cracks.

KNIGHT: Please take pity, your majesty!

QUEEN: All right. I will give you your life if you can answer me but one question.

KNIGHT: One question?

QUEEN: One.

KNIGHT: That's it?

QUEEN: That is all.

KNIGHT: Is there a catch?

QUEEN: No catch.

KNIGHT: What's the question?

QUEEN: The question is this: What is the one thing that women most desire? Tell me that and you will keep your neck. The axe will remain cold.

KNIGHT: What is the one thing that women most desire? That is all you wish from me?

QUEEN: I give you a year plus a day to search for the answer. At that time you will return here and tell us what you have learned.

The KING and QUEEN exit.

WIFE OF BATH: At first the Knight was light of heart.

KNIGHT: Piece of cake.

WIFE OF BATH: But the days turned into weeks and the weeks turned into months and the Knight was no further ahead than he was behind.

KNIGHT: I have searched every house, every place, every town.

WIFE OF BATH: The Knight could not find one thing that women desired. He found a million things. Some say...

TWO WOMEN enter and perform a tug of war of sorts on the KNIGHT. As the WOMEN say their lines the KNIGHT is pulled back and forth between them.

MARY: Women love riches.

WIFE OF BATH: Some say...

EVE: Women love security.

WIFE OF BATH: Some say...

MARY: Women desire to be flattered.

EVE: Women desire to be desired.

MARY: To be told that we are wise and not foolish.

EVE: To be trusted with secrets.

MARY: Women love honour.

EVE: Happiness!

MARY: Companionship!

EVE: Friendship!

MARY: Love!

EVE: Lust!

MARY: Love!

EVE: Lust!

MARY: Love, love, love!

EVE: Lust, lust, lust!

MARY: I tell you it's love!

EVE: I tell you you're off your rocker!

MARY: Who are you to tell me I'm off my rocker?!

EVE: That's exactly what I'm telling you!

The two WOMEN start to argue overtop one another, pulling the KNIGHT this way and that. The KNIGHT feels very frustrated. He brushes the two WOMEN away.

KNIGHT: All right, all right, all right!

WIFE OF BATH: I believe there is nothing more a woman desires than to be free.

The TWO WOMEN look at the WIFE OF BATH for a moment. Then they turn away.

EVE: Nooooo.

MARY: That's not it at all.

The TWO WOMEN exit.

WIFE OF BATH: Finally a year had past and it was time for the Knight to return to the castle. With every step he could hear the whetstone sharpening the axe. He believed he had no answer and his head would not be long on his neck. Close to home the Knight crossed paths with an old woman. This is my favourite part of the story. Allow me a moment as I get into the act.

The WIFE OF BATH puts on a mask and joins the action of the story as BERTHA. The KNIGHT enters looking very despondent.

BERTHA: Young man. *(the KNIGHT does not answer)* Young man!

KNIGHT: Be quiet old woman. I cannot speak with you.

BERTHA: Speak with ye? Speak with ye? I have no wish to speak with ye; I merely wish to ask a question.

KNIGHT: What is your question?

BERTHA: I merely wish to know, young man, why do ye drag your heels so? I have not seen anything like it in all my years.

KNIGHT: Old woman, it is because I am going to my death.

BERTHA: How dramatic. What death is this?

KNIGHT: A death is a death is a death.

BERTHA: And yet it troubles ye so.

KNIGHT: I did something terribly wrong which I knew was wrong at the time but thought I would never get caught but I did and then I was to die at the hands of the King but I was saved at the very last moment by the Queen when she gave me a question to answer and all I had to do was answer one teen tiny little question! Now I know I should have died at the King's command. It's so much worse to have a whole year of freedom only to know that every day brings an axe closer to my neck!

BERTHA: What is the question?

KNIGHT: It doesn't matter. There is no answer. I am to die.

BERTHA: What doom and gloom ye bring! Ye allowed me to ask a question. 'tis only fair that I allow ye to ask a question.

KNIGHT: The question is... *(with a huge sigh)* What is the one thing that women desire?

BERTHA begins to laugh.

KNIGHT: I don't find this very funny. I'm quite fond of my head.

BERTHA: Sir Knight, what would ye say if I said I had the answer?

KNIGHT: Of course you have an answer. Every woman has an answer.
There are as many answers as there are stars in the night sky and
flowers in the field.

BERTHA: Not AN answer. THE answer.

KNIGHT: THE answer?

BERTHA: THE.

KNIGHT: The only one?

BERTHA: That is what I hold.

KNIGHT: Old woman if you truly know, I would do anything for you.
I would pay you most handsomely. I would slay any enemy you
desire. One word and I would...

BERTHA: All I require is this — pledge me your troth that the next
thing I ask of ye, ye will do with all your might. If ye do this, then I
will give the answer.

The KNIGHT kneels down in front of BERTHA.

KNIGHT: I pledge on my word and my life.

BERTHA: Then your life is safe and so is your head. When ye call out in
the great hall I will be there to dare any woman to challenge your
answer or say it not true.

KNIGHT: What is it! Tell me quick! Time is short!

BERTHA: Come closer Sir Knight. I do not wish the whole world to
hear.

*She whispers something into his ear. He stands back
amazed.*

KNIGHT: Wow.

BERTHA: Come with me now, and have no fear.

KNIGHT: To the castle!

The KING and QUEEN enter with a flourish. The KNIGHT kneels in front of them. BERTHA is off to the side, watching the scene.

KING: Welcome back Sir Knight.

QUEEN: What have you to say?

KING: Do you have an answer?

KNIGHT: I do m'lord.

QUEEN: And so, what is it that women most desire?

KNIGHT: My lady, I have heard many things. I have heard that women wish love, and honour, and friendship, and flattery, and happiness, and much more. I have heard so many different answers I knew not which way to turn nor who to believe. A year and a day is a long time to gather thoughts as one gathers wheat. However, I believe I know the one thing that all women want. The one answer.

KING: Then tell us so.

KNIGHT: The one thing that all women want is *(he takes a big breath)* to have sovereignty over her husband. They want love, honour, friendship, and flattery, and happiness but also mastery over him above, to make their own choices. That is what I believe and that is my answer to what women most desire. Kill me if you believe otherwise.

There is a small pause. The KNIGHT bows his head and waits. The KING turns to the QUEEN and shrugs his shoulders. The QUEEN thinks for a moment and then nods her head.

QUEEN: Congratulations Sir Knight. You have won your life.

KING: Congratulations!

QUEEN: We have a celebration feast prepared in your honour. Join us.

KNIGHT: But what if I had come back with the wrong answer?

BERTHA comes forward.

BERTHA: Hold! Hold I say! I must be heard!

KING: Who is this?

BERTHA kneels before them.

BERTHA: Mercy my Queen! I may be old and foul and poor but I am the one who taught the answer to this Knight; he did pledge me his word and life that for my answer he would do the next thing I ask of him.

QUEEN: Then he must do it.

KNIGHT: I will do so with the most humblest of gratitude. This woman's kindness did save my neck and I owe her a world of debt.

BERTHA: And so it must be paid. Before this court, then, I ask ye to take me as your wife.

KNIGHT: What?

BERTHA: I ask ye to marry me, Sir Knight.

KNIGHT: You have got to be joking.

BERTHA: No jokes. Ye pledged your word and your life.

KNIGHT: So take my life. Take my money. Take anything. But do not ask me to marry you.

BERTHA: That is all I ask.

KNIGHT: But I can't marry you! I'm a Knight. You're old. And ugly. And poor! (*turning to the KING*) Your majesty? My lady, surely...

QUEEN: You gave your word.

KNIGHT: But...

KING: Your word must be your bond. You will marry this woman and you will do so this very day. A man's word must be kept for a man to keep his honour.

The WIFE OF BATH removes the mask to address the audience.

WIFE OF BATH: And so the Knight and the old woman were married. The two went off to entertain themselves with much revelry and...

KNIGHT: (*interrupting the WIFE*) Stop! Stop right there! There was no revelry and no merrymaking! There was none and there never will be! Absolutely not! No way, no how! Never, ever, ever, ever! Ever!

WIFE OF BATH: In truth it was quite a dour occasion. There was no great ceremony or reception. There was no fancy food nor beautiful dress nor dancing nor flowers. The Knight was in a foul mood from beginning to end and when the deed was done, he hid away.

KNIGHT: I don't want to see anyone, I don't want to hear anyone, I don't want to talk to anyone. My life is a deep pit of despair and I am going to go drown myself. I don't want to do anything ever again.

The WIFE OF BATH re-dons the mask and approaches the KNIGHT as BERTHA.

BERTHA: I am your love and I saved your life. I never did ye wrong. Why do ye treat me so? What am I guilty of? Tell me that I may amend it.

KNIGHT: It can never be amended. You are ugly and old. There is no way to change either of those facts. I do not wish to be married to you.

BERTHA: Is this the cause of your unrest?

KNIGHT: Of course it is, are you blind?

BERTHA: Sir Knight, I will give ye a choice. I can be one of two things. I can be old and ugly till I die. But a truer more humbler wife ye will never see. I will never displease ye. I will never hurt ye, cause discomfort or unrest. Or... I can be young and beautiful.

KNIGHT: I pick young and beautiful! Young and beautiful!

BERTHA: But there is a catch.

KNIGHT: I don't want there to be a catch.

BERTHA: I will be young and beautiful at your peril. I will go to every house in every town. A more faithless and untrue wife ye'll never see and everyone will know it. Which do ye choose?

The KNIGHT rises and paces back and forth a moment before he answers.

KNIGHT: Lady... I cannot choose. I place the choice in your hands. Do whatever you wish.

BERTHA: Then I may choose as I see fit?

KNIGHT: It is in your hands.

BERTHA: I have my choice and ye will abide by my choice?

KNIGHT: Aye.

BERTHA: Kiss me Sir Knight.

KNIGHT: Do I have to?

BERTHA: Kiss me and I will be both for ye. Young and fair. Faithful and good.

The WIFE OF BATH removes the mask.

KNIGHT: You're beautiful! You're young and beautiful! I did it! I did something right!

He runs off with a buoyant skip.

WIFE OF BATH: A thousand kisses did the Knight give his wife. And so the two lived in total joy and complete happiness for the rest of their days. I say to you that life be long for the man who does not lord over his wife. I wish a curse and pestilence on those who do otherwise!

SCENE TWO

The lights change and the PILGRIMS are back in their walking formation. The PRIORESS is dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.

PRIORESS: I love happy endings.

WIFE OF BATH: So do I.

REEVE: That surprises me.

WIFE OF BATH: I must admit to having a streak of romance. I'm trying to stamp it out.

PARDONER: If the death of five husbands won't do it, nothing will.

MILLER: Hostess! More ale!

HOSTESS: I don't have any, loggerhead. Lest you forget we are on the road.

MILLER: Zounds I did forget. But just for a moment. Hostess!!!

HOSTESS: Now what?

MILLER: I want to know who leads our story quest. You see, I didn't forget that. Ha!

HOSTESS: We will each cast a vote when the time comes.

COOK: There's going to be a vote? I feel faint.

PARDONER: Don't worry. We'll cheat so there's no chance of you winning.

FRANKLIN: Good pilgrims! I am ready to bring my coal from the creativity fire.

WIFE OF BATH: Isn't that analogy getting a bit old?

The lights change. The FRANKLIN moves forward.

STORY FIVE: THE FRANKLIN'S TALE

This tale is a dance. The characters move in a Renaissance-style courtly dance as they weave in and out of the story.

FRANKLIN: This story is one of patience. Patience is a high virtue. It outlasts all forces. Remember the man who is patient with love. I have a story of another type of Knight. One who held honour above all else and one who truly loved his lady fair.

ARVIRAGUS and DORIGEN enter and dance with each other as the FRANKLIN talks.

FRANKLIN: He did vow to serve her. She did vow to love him. And so they became husband and wife.

ARVIRAGUS: You are much fairer than the brightest sun.

DORIGEN: Sir Knight it is my heart that you have won.

ARVIRAGUS: There is nothing more than you I adore.

DORIGEN: Your gentleness does shame me through my lord.

ARVIRAGUS: Never will I show nor feel jealousy.
Follow you I will, you shall have sovereignty.

DORIGEN: Pray that there between us lies no strife.
And I will ever be your humble wife.
That is surely true till my heart breaks.

ARVIRAGUS: You have my vow, never will I forsake.

FRANKLIN: And so their life was harmonious wedded bliss. Until one day, when Arviragus had to sail to England and leave his Dorigen behind.

*ARVIRAGUS kisses DORIGEN's hand and leaves.
DORIGEN throws herself to the ground.*

FRANKLIN: In his absence Dorigen wept and sighed and lived in a rage of grief.

DORIGEN: All around me say do not mourn or wail,
That all my tears are shed to no avail.
I will weep and fast and pine for my love,
Till he's here I see no light from above.

DORIGEN brings out a letter. She tears it open. As she does so, ARVIRAGUS enters, but does not come forward.

ARVIRAGUS: My lady Dorigen, do not despair.
Soon home again will I with speed and care.

ARVIRAGUS exits.

DORIGEN: A letter from my lord, now I can rest.
May his journey home be ever blessed.

FRANKLIN: But soon Dorigen's newfound calm began to fade. She would walk upon the bank where her castle stood and gaze outwards to the sea, waiting for her love to come. Ship after ship sailed by but none brought Arviragus home.

DORIGEN: Ah me!

FRANKLIN: The more she watched, the more she noticed the black grisly rocks that stood at the base of the cliff.

DORIGEN: Ah me!

FRANKLIN: Rocks that could damage a ship.

DORIGEN: Ah me!

FRANKLIN: Rocks that could drown a man.

DORIGEN: Oh foul stones! Oh foul confusion there.
Why has God created such a snare?
A hundred thousand bodies have been thrown.
These rocks they slay my heart right to the bone.

She flings herself to the ground. TWO WOMEN enter and try to pick DORIGEN up.

EVELINE: Dorigen you do give us quite the fright.

AVALINE: Come with us, we go to revels tonight.

EVELINE: It's best to pull your mind away from shore.

AVALINE: Come dance with us and think on this no more.

EVELINE and AVALINE dance. DORIGEN dances too, but she is not energetic at all. AURELIUS watches.

EVELINE: Dorigen does this not so please your soul?

DORIGEN: My love is far from here, I am not whole.

The dance finishes and DORIGEN sits. AURELIUS hovers near her.

FRANKLIN: There was a young man at the dance, a squire who went by the name of Aurelius. He was young, strong, virtuous, wise, rich, and held in high-esteem. He could sing and dance better than any man. He was well-respected and he was terribly in love with Dorigen.

AURELIUS: I drink my fate with no need of a cup,
That she is here is stroke of purest luck.

DORIGEN's friends, who have been sitting with her, leave. She is alone. AURELIUS screws up his courage and dives down to kneel in front of DORIGEN.

AURELIUS: Madam, I wish to make your heart full glad.
My heart does break and oh, my soul is mad.
With just one word you may slay me or save,
For at your feet do I make my very grave.
Madam have mercy sweet, have mercy true,
There is no place in the world without you.

DORIGEN: Aurelius, never did I know your heart's intent.
Your words are clear and so they are well-meant.
But you must know that with my soul and life,
Never could I be an unfaithful wife.

AURELIUS: Thank you for being straight and plain with me.
Excuse me lady I will take my leave.

He bows and starts to slink off totally dejected.

FRANKLIN: The pain she had caused with those words was so plain on his face that Dorigen called him back again.

DORIGEN: Aurelius!

AURELIUS returns.

DORIGEN: There is one way for you my love to gain.
 Look to the cliffside by my castle main.
 There lies jagged stones that harm passing ships.
 Remove those grisly tombs from the sea's grip.
 And at the end if the cliff's face is clean,
 So that none of the black rocks may be seen,
 Then I will love you the best of any man.
 You have my word in all that I can.

AURELIUS: Is there no other task that you can give?

DORIGEN: No other Aurelius, not while I live.
 What pleasure should a man have in his life,
 For to go and love another man's wife.

*The ladies enter and dance DORIGEN away.
 AURELIUS is left alone onstage.*

AURELIUS: This task has forever turned my heart cold.
 My coming death has been here so foretold.

*AURELIUS drops to the ground. His sister, JOANNE
 enters.*

JOANNE: What has happened to you, dear Aurelius?
 Why do you lie in torment furious?

FRANKLIN: Aurelius told his sister of his suffering. She took him home
 where he did not die, but wallowed in sorrow for over two years.
 In the meantime Arviragus returned home to his glowing bride.

*ARVIRAGUS enters. He and DORIGEN dance together
 in a loving embrace.*

FRANKLIN: Nothing was ever said of Dorigen's impossible promise to
 the poor squire. In fact Dorigen did quite forget the words that
 she had said. However the poor squire did not forget.

AURELIUS: How can I live when my love stands so near?
 What can I do to make the shore disappear?

JOANNE runs in panting.

JOANNE: Brother dear awake, awake with speed.
 I think I may have found someone to do the deed!
 A man of natural magic have I found.
 He can make the rocks vanish from the ground.

AURELIUS: If the rocks do vanish; the cliff be smooth.
 Then to Dorigen her truth must prove.
 She gave her word and I will take it so.
 Great haste, great haste, hurry we must go!

The ASTRONOMER enters. He walks and speaks in a highly mysterious manner.

ASTRONOMER: It is true that I know the CAUSE of your coming. It is true that I can make the STONES disappear. It is true that EVERY MAN will think the sea of Brittany is clean and clear. It is true that I will waste no time with this ILLUSION.

AURELIUS: Oh will this really happen as you say?

JOANNE: You'll make the rocks there vanish, go away?

ASTRONOMER: It is true.

FRANKLIN: And so on this cold and frosty December night, to the cliffs the trio went. The sun was nearly set and shone as burned gold on the rocks.

The ASTRONOMER does a strange dance while AURELIUS and JOANNE watch. At the end he raises his hands and brings them down suddenly. AURELIUS and JOANNE look with faces of wonderment. They both give a cheer. They jump up and down and hug each other.

AURELIUS & JOANNE: I can't believe my eyes, nor what I see!
 The rocks are gone for all eternity!

ASTRONOMER: It is true.

The ASTRONOMER and JOANNE exit. DORIGEN enters.

FRANKLIN: With that Aurelius ran as fast as he could to Dorigen. It just so happened that Arviragus was away and she was alone.

AURELIUS: Lady! Look fair and tell me what you see!

DORIGEN: Aurelius you shake so, what troubles thee?

AURELIUS: Go to! Please open full your eyes and stare.
 Look out and see what is no longer there.

DORIGEN looks out. She can't believe what she sees.

DORIGEN: No. No. This is not right. This is not true!

AURELIUS: And thus I say your own words back to you.
You must love me the best of any man.

DORIGEN: (*repeating her own words with horror*)
You have my word in all that I can.

AURELIUS: You must keep the promise that you have made.

DORIGEN: My heart is cold and I am so afraid.

AURELIUS: I have done as you have commanded me.
I leave you to your words and honour free.
Come to the garden yond, to meet me so.
Now I am worthy your love to bestow.

AURELIUS exits. DORIGEN brings her hands to her face.

DORIGEN: Alas that this should ever come to pass.
I never dreamed it would happen as,
It is against the laws of nature oh!
Oh wretched fortune that has wrapped me so.
I am trapped in your chains with no escape.
Here as I stand does my heart surely break.
There are two choices: dishonour or death.
There is only one choice that can take breath.
I must lose my life than body shame.
I would rather die than discredit my name.
Surely many a maid who's been trespassed,
Did kill herself. Oh woe! Alas! Alas!

She throws herself to the ground. ARVIRAGUS enters.

ARVIRAGUS: Oh worthy wife why is it that you mourn?

DORIGEN: Dear Sir, I wish my life had naught been born.

FRANKLIN: And she told him the whole story from beginning to end,
all the way back to the dance and the off-the-cuff remark Dorigen
made but never thought would come to pass.

ARVIRAGUS: Dear wife, do not cry over what's been done.

DORIGEN: You are not angry? No fury begun?

ARVIRAGUS: There is no fury for you are my life.

DORIGEN: Then you know of a way to cure my strife?

ARVIRAGUS: No. Above all else do I hold honour true.
You must keep your word; I expect it of you.

FRANKLIN: And Dorigen knew this to be the case. Arviragus was a Knight through and through; honour above all else. With her head held low Dorigen made her way to the garden.

AURELIUS enters to see DORIGEN coming towards him.

AURELIUS: Dorigen, my lady? Where do you go?

DORIGEN: To keep my word as my husband bade so.

AURELIUS: Your husband? He knows the story full?

DORIGEN: He does and so I push and pull,
My body to the designated spot.
I must keep my word though I like it not.

DORIGEN keeps moving. AURELIUS stays still.

DORIGEN: My lord? We must away from the street.

AURELIUS: M'lady my heart does stay my legs and feet.
I will not keep you to your word and bond.

DORIGEN: But you have won; the rocks sent to beyond.

AURELIUS: Arviragus is a man noble and strong.
He would rather have shame his whole life long,
Than for you to go against your creed.
Finally my eyes are open and I see.
I see your distress that is dark as night.
I would rather suffer forever than break the lady and the Knight.

DORIGEN: Aurelius...

AURELIUS: Please remember the words that you heed
When giving a squire an impossible deed.

AURELIUS exits.

FRANKLIN: Thus honour wins out over all.

DORIGEN and ARVIRAGUS sweep into each other's arms and then exit.

FRANKLIN: And I think that the power of love bears repeating again.
All you ladies remember and take heed, when giving a squire an impossible deed.



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