Early English Poetry
EARLY ENGLISH POETRY

RECITED BY CHARLES W. DUNN

This record provides readings of some of the finest poetry produced in the English language prior to Shakespeare. Like any other language, English has been constantly changing, in sounds, forms, arrangements, syllabic stress, intonation, and vocabulary. We cannot be absolutely certain what it sounded like in the middle ages, but scholars have reconstructed reasonable approximations of the various periods, which have been followed here.

For the most part, it has also been possible to determine the precise meaning of Early English writings. All of the works read here have been printed in their original form. To illustrate word order and sentence structure, three of the Old English passages have been translated quite literally. Two longer passages, one in Old English and one in Middle English, have been accompanied with poetic translations to suggest something of the literary quality of the originals. The excerpt from Chaucer is sufficiently close to Modern English to require no further interpretation than the glosses provided.

The English language was brought to Britain about A.D. 450 by wandering Germanic tribes, who also brought with them a tradition of alliterative poetry and a repertoire of heroic legends. Though the English were Christianized at the end of the sixth century, the poetry surviving from the Old English period of the language (450-1100) is predominantly heroic in tone and Germanic in theme. With the coming of the French after the Conquest of 1066, a new kind of poetry emerged in the Middle English period (1100-1450), which was courtly rather than heroic. Each period achieved a grandeur of its own, as a comparison between Beowulf and Gawain will show. The other great achievement of the Middle English period lies in the comedy and humor of Chaucer's poetry.

SIDE I -- OLD ENGLISH POETRY

Side I contains Old English poetry composed in alliterative verse. Each line contains four beats. The initial sounds of the first and third beats usually alliterate; the second may or may not alliterate; and the fourth generally provides contrast by not alliterating. (Any vowel may alliterate with either of the clusters sc, sp, and st alliterate only with the same cluster.)

SIDE I, Band 1: CAEDMON'S HYMN

Bede in his Ecclesiastical History attributes this hymn to Caedmon, who was a monk in the monastery of Whitby. The original was probably composed between A.D. 660 and 680 and is thus one of the oldest extant poems reflecting the Christianity which Augustine had first introduced in 597 among the English.


Nū wē sceal hērice heofonlice Weard,  
Meotodes meahate  and hī mōdgejance,  
weorða ᵇ Wulfsendere,  swā hē wundra gehwæs,  
ēce Dryhten.  &œ” ostwæle.  
Hē ærest scēop  eorðan bearnum  
heofon to hōfe,  hālig Scyppend;  
þā midhāneyr  muneynnes Weard,  
ēce Dryhten,  after ēole  
frum foldan,  Frēa wīlmītīg.

Now we should praise heaven-Kingdom's guardian, the maker's might, and his mind's embrace, work of the father of glory, as he of each marvel, the eternal lord, the foundation has laid. First he shaped for earth's children heaven as a roof, the holy shaper; then middle-earth, mankind's guardian, the eternal lord, afterwards fashioned as land for men, the ruler almighty.
Then Edward the tall still stood in the front, eager and pressing. In vaunting words he said that he would not flee one foot's length of land, would not draw back since one better than he lay dead. He burst through the shield-wall and fought against the warriors till he had worthily avenged his treasure-giver upon the sea-raiders, before he lay dead in the slaughter.

So did Æthelric, a noble companion, ready and eager for action; earnestly he fought, Sibyrtiht's brother; and many, many another cleft the round shields. Boldly they battled. The shield-edge burst, and the battlecoat sang a song of horror.

Then in strife Offa struck the viking so that he fell to earth, and there Gadd's kinsman sought a resting-place. Soon in the conflict Offa was cut down. But he had performed what he promised his lord when earlier he avowed to his ring-giver that they should both ride back to their stronghold, home uninjured, or should fall in the ranks, should die of wounds in the field of slaughter. Faithful he fell beside his leader.

Then there was shattering of shields. The Vikings advanced, enraged for action. Spear often pierced the life's core of the doomed. Forward then went Wistan, son of Thurstan; he fought against the foemen. He was in the throng a slayer of three of them before he lay dead in the slaughter, the offspring of Wigelin. Stubborn was the strife there. The fighters stood firm in the struggle; warriors fell, worn down with wounds; the slain fell to earth.

All this while Oswald and Ealdwold, the two brothers, encouraged the men, charged their fellow-kinsmen with words that they should endure there at need, should wield their weapons unwavering.

Ealdwold spoke, raised his shield—"he was a seasoned companion—, flourished the ash-wood. Full boldly he advised the warriors:

"Spirit shall be firmer, heart the braver, resolve shall be the greater, as our force becomes smaller. Here lies our lord, hewed all to death, the good man in the dust. Forever may he repent who thinks now to retreat from this play of conflict.

"I am old in age. Desert I will not, but for my part I think to lie beside my lord in death, beside so dear a man."
The groves will bear blossoms, dwelling-places will flourish, plains become beautiful, the world will grow forth. All these things then urge on the spirit of the eager-hearted who is so minded to journey (read gewitan) afar over the water-laden—

The cuckoo also urges with his sad call, summer's har-binger sings, foretells sorrow, bitter in breast. The man does not know, the person favored by fortune, what some undergo then, those who follow farthest the paths of exile. But yet, now my spirit soars beyond my soul's confinement, my mind's mood with the sea-tides over the whale's home widely soars, over the earth's bounds, comes back again to me whetted and greedy; the lone flyer screams, she summons my soul out onto the whale's way beyond resistance, over the width of waters.
Beowulf is the only epic which has survived complete from the Old English period. It was probably composed about the middle of the eighth century and was originally intended to be recited orally or sung to the accompaniment of a harp. The poet, who was presumably attached to some Anglo-Saxon court, had a profound knowledge of the pre-Christian Germanic tribal traditions but was concerned with their Christian and philosophic implications.

The setting, which is partially historical, is laid in sixth-century Scandinavia. The hero, Beowulf of Geatland (South Sweden), is legendary, as are the principal events. In the first part of the poem, Beowulf as a young prince frees the Danish princess, who had once sheltered his father in exile, from the ravages of supernatural sea-monsters. In the second part, the conclusion of which is here presented, Beowulf as an aged king rides his own Geatland of a destructive dragon.

The treatment of this folkloristic plot is both subtle and refined. Beowulf exemplifies the ideal tribal chieftain; the unearthly monsters reflect human error and sin; the collapse of kingdoms results from the failure of their leaders and retainers; and the death of the hero reveals the transitoriness of human achievement.

Translation: C. W. Kennedy, Beowulf (Oxford Univ. Press, 1940).
...
Beowulf spoke, though his heart was sore.

The wounds of battle grievous and grim.

Full well he weened that his life was ended,
And all the joy of his years on earth;
That his days were done, and Death most near:
'My armor and sword! I would leave to my son
Had fate but granted, born of my body,
An heir to follow me after I'm gone.
For fifty winters I've ruled this realm,
And never a lord of a neighboring land
Dared strike with terror or seek with sword.
In my life I abode by the lot assigned,
Kept well what was mine, counted no quarrels,
Sware no false oaths. And now for all this
Though my heart be grievous, my heart be glad.
When life leaves body, the Lord of mankind
Cannot lay to my charge the killing of kinmen!
Go quickly, dear Wiglaf, to gaze on the gold
Beneath the hoar stone. The dragon lies still
In the slumber of death, despooled of his hoard.
Make haste that my eyes may behold the treasure,
The gleaming jewels, the goodly store,
And, glad of the gold, more peacefully leave
The life and the realm I have ruled so long.'

Then Weohstan's son, as they tell the tale,
Clad in his corslet and trappings of war,
Heartaken at once to his wounded lord.
Under roof of the barrow he broke his way,
Proud in triumph he stood by the seat,
Saw glittering jewels and gold on the ground,
The den of the dragon, the old dawn-flier,
And all the wonders along the walls.
Great bowls and flagons of bygone men
Lay all unburnished and barren of gems,
Many a helment ancient and rusted.
Many an arm-ring cunningly wrought.
Treasure and gold, though hid in the ground,
Override man's wishes, hide them who will!
High o'er the hoard he beheld a banner,
Greatest of wonders, woven with skill,
All wrought of gold; its radiance lighted
The very ground and the glittering gems.
But no sign of the worm! The sword-edge had slain him.
As I've heard the tale, the hero unaided
Rifled those riches of giants of old.
The hoard in the barrow, and heaped in his arms
Beakers and platters, picked what he would
And took the banner, the brightest of signs.
The ancient sword with its edge of iron
Had slain the worm that watched o'er the wealth,
In the midnight flaming, with menace of fire
Protecting the treasure for many a year

Till he died the death. Then Wiglaf departed
In haste returning enriched with spoil.
He feared, and wondered if still he would find
The lord of the Weders alive on the plain,
Broken and worn with wounds.
With his freight of treasure he found the prince,
His dear lord, bloody and nigh unto death.
With water he bathed him till words broke forth
From the hoard of his heart and, aged and sad,
Beowulf spoke, as he gazed on the gold:
'For this goodly treasure whereon I gazed
I give my thanks to the Lord of all,
To the Prince of glory, Eternal God,
Who granted me grace to gain for my people
Such dower of riches before my death.
I gave my life for this golden hoard.
Heed well the wants, the need of my people;
My hour is come, and my end is near.
Bid warriors build, when they burn my body,
A stately barrow on the headland's height.
It shall be for remembrance among my people
As it towers high on the Cape of the Whale,
And sailors shall know it as Beowulf's Barrow,
Sea-faring mariners driving their ships
Through fogs of ocean from far countries.'
Then the great-hearted king unclipped from his throat
A collar of gold, and gave to his thane;
Gave the young hero his gold-decked helmet,
His ring and his byrny, and wished him well.
'You are the last of the Wergilding line.
All my kinmen, ears in their glory,
Fate has sent to their final doom,
And I must follow.' These words were the last
The old king spoke ere the pyre received him,
The leaping flames of the funeral blaze,
And his breath went forth from his bosom, his soul
Went forth from the flesh, to the joys of the just.
Then biter it was for Beowulf's thane
To behold his loved one lying on earth
Suffering sore at the end of life.
The monster that slew him, the dreadful dragon,
Likewise lay broken and brought to his death.
The worm no longer could rule the hoard.
But the head and work of the hammer,
Had laid him low; and the winged dragon
Lay stretched near the barrow, broken and still.
No more in the midnight he soared in air,
Dkocking his presence, and proud of his gold;
For his task to earth by the sword of the king.
But few of mankind, if the tales be true,
Has it prospered much, though mighty in war
And daring in deed, to encounter the breath

Of the venomous worm or plunder his wealth
When the ward of the barrow held watch o'er the mound.
Beowulf bartered his life for the treasure;
Both foes had finished this fleeting life.
Not long was it then till the laggards in battle
Came forth from the forest, ten thousand strong,
In cruel vengeances. The headman who had dared not face the attack of the foe
In their lord's great need. The shirkers in shame
Came wearing their bucklers and trappings of war
Where the old man lay. They looked upon Wiglaf.
Weary he sat by the side of his leader
Attempting with water to waken his lord.
It availed him little; the wish was vain!
He could not stay his soul upon earth,
Nor one whit alter the will of God.
The Lord ruled over the lives of men
As He rules them still. With a stern rebuke
He reproached the cowards whose courage had failed.
Wiglaf addressed them, Weohstan's son:
Gazed sad of heart on the hateful men:
'Lo! he may say who would speak the truth:
That the lord who gave you these goodly rings,
This warlike armor wherein you stand—
When o'er on the ale-bench he dealt to his hall-men
Helmet and byrny, endowing his chieftains
With the fairest he found from near or from far—
That he grievously wasted these trappings of war
When battle befell him. The king of the folk
Had no need to boast of his friends in the fight.
But the God of victory granted him strength
To avenge himself with the edge of the sword
When he needed valor. Of little avail
The help I brought in the bitter battle!
Yet still I strove, though beyond my strength,
To aid my kinsman. And ever the weaker
The savage for whom I struck with my sword;
Ever the weaker the wailing flame.
Too few defenders surrounded our ruler
When the hour of evil and terror befell.
Now granting of thanks and giving of swords,
Inherited land-right and joy of the home,
Shall cease from your kindred. And each of your clan
Shall fall of his birthright when men from afar
Tell of your flight and your destitute deed.
Death is better for every soul
Than life besmirched with the brand of shame!'
The return, or the death, of their dear-loved lord.

Not long did he hide, who rode up the headland,
The news of their sorrow, but soon before all:
Our leader lies low, the lord of the Weders,
The king of the Geats, on the couch of death.

He slept his last sleep by the deeds of the worm.
The dreadful dragon is stretched beside him
Slain with dagger-wounds. Not by the sword
Could he spill the monster or lay him low.

And Wiglaf is sitting, Weohstan’s son,
Best over Beowulf, living by death.

Death watch he keeps in sorrow of spirit
Over the bodies of friend and foe.

Now comes peril of war when this news is rumored abroad,
The fall of our king known afar among Frisians and Franks!
For a fierce feast rose with the Franks when Hylgel’s wondrous host
Invaded the Frisian fields, and the Hetraves vanquished the Geats,
Overcame with the weight of their hordes, and Hylgel fell in the fray.

It was not his lot to live on dispersing the spoils of war.
And never since then of the Franks had we favor or friend.

And I harbor no hope of peace or faith from the Swedish folk,
For well is it known of men that Ongentheow slew of the sword
Hæðcyn, the son of Hæthel, near Ravenwood, in the fight
When the Swedish people in pride swept down on the Geats.

This is the fighting and this the dread,
The bitter hatred, that breeds the dread
Lest the Swedish people should swear against us
Learning our lord lies lifeless and still.

His was the hand that defended the hoard,
Heroes, and realm against ravaging foe,
By noble counsel and dauntless deed.
Let us go quickly to look on the king
Who brought us treasure, and bear his corpse
To the funeral pyre. The precious hoard
Shall burn with the hero. There lies the heap
Of untold treasure so grimly gained,
Jewels and gems he bought with his blood
At the end of life. All these at the last
The flames shall veil and the brands devour.

No man for remembrance shall take from the treasure,
Nor beauteous maiden adorn her breast
With gleaming jewel; bereft of gold
And tragic-hearted many shall tread
A foreign soil, now their lord has ceased
From laughter and revel and rapture of joy.

Many a spear in the cold of morning
Shall be borne in hand uplifted on high.
No sound of hark shall waken the warrior,
But the dusky raven decoy to the dead
Shall clamor and cry and call to the eagle
What fare he found at the carrion-feast
The while with the wolf he worried the corpse.’

So the stalwart hero had told his tidings,
His fateful message; nor spoke amiss
As to truth or telling. The host arose;
On their woful way to the Eagles’ Ness
They went with tears to behold the wond’r.
They found the friend, who had dealt them treasure
In former days, on the bed of death,
Stretched out lifeless upon the sand.

The last of the good king’s days was gone;
Wondrous the death of the Weder prince!
They had sighted first, where it lay outstretched,
The monstrous wonder, the lost home worm,
The horrible fire-drake, hideous-hued,
Scorched with the flame. The spread of its length
Was fifty foot-measures! Oft in the night
It sported in air, then sinking to earth
Returned to its den. Now moveless in death
It had seen the last of its earthly lair.

Beside the dragon were bows and beakers,
Platters lying, and precious swords
Eaten with rust, where the hoard had rested
A thousand winters in the womb of earth.

That boundless treasure of bygone men,
The golden dower, was gilt with a spell
So that never a man might ravage the ring-hall
Save as God himself, the Giver of victory—
He is the Slather and Shield of men—
Might allow such man as seem’d to Him meet,
Might grant whom He would, to gather the treasure.

Then spake Wiglaf, Weohstan’s son:
‘Often for one man many must sorrow
As has now befallen the folk of the Geats.
We could not persuade the king by our counsel,
Our well-loved leader, to shun assault
On the dreadful dragon guarding the gold;
To let him lie where he long had lurked
In his secret lair till the world shall end.
But Beowulf, dauntless, pressed to his doom.
The hoard was uncovered; heavy the cost;
Too strong the fate that constrained the king!
I entered the barrow, beholding the hoard
And all the treasure throughout the hall;
In fearful fashion the way was opened,
An entrance under the wall of earth.
Of the hoarded treasure I heaped in my arms
A weighty burden, and bore to my king.
He yet was living; his wits were clear.
Much the old man said in his sorrow;
Sent you greeting, and bade you build
In the place of burning a lofty barrow,
Proud and peerless, to mark his deeds;
For he was of all men the worthiest warrior
In all the earth, while he still might rule
And wield the wealth of his lordly hand.
Let us haste once more to behold the treasure,
The gleaming wonders beneath the wall.
I will show the way that you all may see
And closely scan the rings and the gold.
Let the bier be ready, the pyre prepared,
When we come again to carry our lord,
Our leader beloved, where long he shall lie
In the kindly care of the Lord of all.’

[Beowulf’s Funeral]

Then the son of Weohstan, stalwart in war,
Bade send command to the heads of homes
To bring from afar the wood for the burning
Where the good king lay: ‘Now glede shall devour,
As dark flame waxes, the warrior prince
Who has often withstood the woe of steel
When the storm of arrows, sped from the string,
Broke over shield, and shaft did service,
With feather-fittings guiding the barb.’

Then the wise son of Weohstan chose from the host
Seven shames of the king, the best of the band;
Eight heroes together they tied to the barrow
In under the roof of the fearful foe;
One of the warriors leading the way
Bore in his hand a burning brand.
They cast not lots who should loot the treasure
When they saw unguarded the gold in the hall
SIDE II -- MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

SIDE II, Band I: SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Sir Gawain is a romance composed about 1375 in the West Midland dialect of Middle English. The poet uses a form of alliterative verse derived from the Old English period, but the work is divided into stanzas (101 in all), each, unlike Old English poetry, concluding with a five-line rimeing "bob and wheel.

One New Year in Arthur's court, Gawain behaeds a superhuman Green Knight and promises to submit to an exchange beheading game at the Green Chapel a year later. On the way to the encounter the following Christmas he stays at a strange castle. There his resolution is challenged by a seductive hostess from whom he accepts a magic girdle of invulnerability. In the present selection, which suggests something of the unparalleled atmosphere of this courtly romance, he leaves the castle to keep his tryst at the Green Chapel.


Jay bovyn bi bonkej pes boyes ez hore,
Jay clobemen bi clryfie pes claym2 pes coldes; 2090
Pes hese was wyg yd hal, but wyg yd vernder.
Mat maged on je mor, galt on je mousey;
Ych hule hal a hale, a wysyl hale hale;
Broken bydyl & breys bi bonkley aboute. 2080
Schyrse schaterands on scores, per jay dous schowned.

We alswyt elwas pes we pes pow jay bi wod schollen,
Til hit wyt nyce ssey sous pes eyme tydes pes
tydes;
Jay were on a hulse ful hyms,
Jay quyote maw lay bydyle;
Pe burns pes rok hyms by
Bedes his myarter abide.

[V.]
For I had woman eyn hider, wyse, at pise tymes,
2092 & now pes pes not for fer fre pes notte place
Pat je hael spied, & spuryed to spesially after;
Bot I schal say yw wyse ywis, ywis I yw knowes,
& pes a e ye wpon lyes pes I wel louy,
2096 Wales pe serech bi my wyte, [wyn] woryed pe better.
Pe place pat pe proce to ful percloue is halden;
Per wone3 a wyse is pe wust, Ie wost wpon ery.
For he is stiffe & sturne, & to strike loueis,
& more he pes say mon wpon myylende,
& his body bigger pes pes best forwe,
Pat ar is Artyur's hoon, Hester ojer ojer.
He chasez pes since a pes chapel greme,
2100 Per passen non bi pes place so proude in his armes
Pes a dyrlyk5 hym to dape wylk dynt of his honde;
For he is a mon medis, & mercy mon vass,
For he hit chorie oper chaplayn pat bi pes chapel
rydes,

2108 Monk oper mass-prest oper any mon elie,
Hym pyrck as queme hym to quelle as quyck go
seluen.
For-joy I say [wyn] as nype pe is in sadel sitte,
Com pe jere, pe be kyyled, pe pes kyntz rede,
2112 Trawe pe pes pes twely, pes pes hes twentys tydes to
spend;
He bate wayed hore ful yore,
On bont meh braet hende,
2116 Ayay a dyne3 pes 3e may not yeow endere.

[VI.]
For-joy, godez nee Gawayn, let pe gome one,
& galz a-way sum oper gate, wpon Goddes halhe;
2120 Cawy3 bi sum oper kyth, pe Kryst mot yw spode;

2124 & seyse no quyynge of resette bydyle nowhere,
Bot hyye bonkej & bren vpon bope halus,
& roych knoleled knaere wth knorned stoney;
Pes akez of pes swotes skynned hym ypoyt.
2128 Penhe he broun & wyth-hylde his hore at pat tyde,
& ofye chaunged his che pe chapel to seche;
He ses non suche in no syde, & sely hym ypoyt,
Saw a yttled on a luxnde, a lowe as hit wrajes,
2132 A baly burry bi a bonke pes byssyme by-syde,
Bi a forse of a fodle pes ferked yse;
Pe hore bluerd pen-isme as hit boyeld hade.
Pe kyntz kachez his cappe & com to pe lawe,
2136 Listyse dyves hylye & at a lynde tachez
Pe renye, & bi[le] richel[3] wth a tope knyve,
Penhe he boyes to pe bery, aboute hit he walke3,
Debatez with hym-selt quaquit hit be myyt.
2140 Hit bake a hole on pe ende & on nyper syde,
& ouer-grown wth greme in godes ay-where,
& al war3 hyle in-wyl, nobot an olde cauz,
Or a crenezis of an olde craze;
He coube hit nym deme

with spele,
'We, lords,' quoy pe genlye kyrtz,
2152 'Wheter pes bi pe greme chapel pes pe feste
Ha[re] myyt aboue myd-yynyt.
2156 Pe dele his matynass tales.'

[IX.]
'Now i-wyse, quoy Wewayn, 'wyste is here;'
Pes oiteres is eugly, wth eray ouer-grown;
Wel biesem pe wyse wreadded in greme;
2192 Dale he his deonseus on pe demed wyse;
Now I fale hit is pe fende, in my wyse wytes,
Pat hes stoken me pes sesten, to styre me here;
Pes is a chapel of menceaunce, pat chakhe hit
by-hyde!
2196 He hit is a comendat kyrtz pat juer I com ise.'
With heye helme on his hode, his launce in his hende.
He roncez yte to pes fell of pe roych wony;
Pese herdes he of pat kytes hit, in a hardes roche.
2200 Bynode pe broke, in a bonke, a wonder breze
noyse.
Quast I hit clatred in pe clyff as hit clese schuilde,
As one vpon a grynydende hode grones an eype,
What I hit wharrizd & whette as water at a mule.
2204 What I hit rouded & ronge, rawye to here.
Penhe 'bi Godde,' quoy Gawayn, 'pat gare a[a]l I trone,'
Is ryched at pe resresse me, rank, to mete
bi rote;

2208 Let God wonche; we loe,
His help[ey] me not a mete
My lif [jas] I for-goe,
Dreed doty me no lote.'
To swear by the Lord and all his good saints
(So help me the oaths on God's hallowed sworn)
That I'll guard well your secret, and give out no
story.
You hastened to see any hero I've heard of."
"Thank you," said Gawain, and grudgingly added,
"Good fortune go with you for wishing me well.
And truly I think you'd not tell; yet though never
So surely you hid it, if hence I should hasten,
Fearful, to fly in the fashion you tell of.
A coward I'd prove, and could not be pardoned.
The chapel I'll find whatsoever befalls,
And talk with that wight the way that I want to,
Let weal or woe follow as fate may wish.
Hard to subdue and fell,
Should stand there with a stave,
Yet still the Lord knows well
His servants how to save."
Quoth the man, "By Mary, you've said now
this much:
That you wish to bring down your own doom on
your head.
Since you'd lose your life, I will stay you no
longer.
Put your helm on your head, take your spear in
your hand,
And ride down this road by the side of that rock
Till it brings you down to the tale's rugged bot-
tom;
Then look at the glade on the left hand a little:
You'll see in the valley that self-same chapel,
And near it the great-limbed knight who is guard-
ing it.
Gawain the noble, farewell now, in God's name!
I would not go with thee for all the world's
wealth.
Nor in fellowship ride one more foot through
the forest."
The man in the trees there then turns his bridle,
As hard as he can hit his horse with his
heels,
And across the fields gallops, there leaving Sir
Gawain
Alone.
"By God," the knight said, "now
I'll neither weep nor groan.
Unto God's will I bow,
And make myself his own."
He strikes spurs into Gringolet, starts on the
path;
By a bank at the side of a small wood he pushes
in,
Rides down the rugged slope right to the dale.
Then about him he looks, and the land seems
wild,
And nowhere he sees any sign of a shelter,
But slopes on each side of him, high and steep,
And rocks, gnarled and rough, and stones right
rugged.
The clouds there seemed to him scraped by the
crags.
Then he halted and held back his horse at that
time,
And spied on all sides in search of the chapel;
Such nowhere he saw, but soon, what seemed
strange.
In the midst of a glade a mound, as it might be,
A smooth, swelling knoll by the side of the water,
The falls of a rivulet running close by;
In its banks the brook bubbled as though it were
boiling.
The knight urged on Gringolet, came to the glade,
There leaped down lightly and tied to the limb
Of a tree, right rugged, the reins of his noble
steed,
Went to the mound, and walked all about it,
Debating what manner of thing it might be:
On the end and on each side an opening; every-
where
Over it grass was growing in patches,
All hollow inside, it seemed an old cave
Or a crag's old clefts: which, he could not decide.
Said the knight,
"Is this the chapel here?"
Alas, dear Lord! here might
The fiend, when midnight's near,
His matin prayers recite.

"Of a truth," said Gawain, "the glade here is
gloomy;
The Green Chapel's ugly, with herbs over-
grown.
It greatly becomes here that hero, green-clad,
To perform in the devil's own fashion his wor-
sip.
I feel in my five senses this is the fiend
Who has made me come to this meeting to kill
me.
Destruction fall on this church of ill-fortune!
The cursedest chapel that ever I came to!"
With helm on his head and lance in his hand
He went right to the rock of that rugged abode.
From that high hill he heard, from a hard rock
over
The stream, on the hillside, a sound wondrous
loud.
Lo! it clattered on cliffs fit to cleave them, as
though
A scythe on a grindstone some one were grinding.
It whirred, lo! and whirred like a water-mill's
wheel.
Lo! it ground and it grated, grievous to hear.
"By God, this thing, as I think," then said Gawain,
"Is done now for me, since my due turn to meet it
is near.
God's will be done! 'A right well!'" No whit doth did me here.
Though I my life forego
No sound shall make me fear."
Chaucer, who died in 1400, began his Canterbury Tales about 1387, by which time he had acquired an unequaled mastery of comic narrative poetry. (He wrote in the London dialect of Middle English, which is more readily understandable to the modern reader than the Midland dialect of Sir Gawain.) In the General Prologue to the Tales he described, among other characters, the Wife of Bath, five times a widow, and an expert in love. On the road to Canterbury she unfolds, in an expansive prologue not included here, to the company of pilgrims her method of handling husbands and then narrates in her own subjective manner the tale which is recited here complete.

Text with explanatory glosses: Charles W. Dunn, A Chaucer Reader (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1952), Wife’s Tale, lines 1-408.
"Flyst" me thy troubte, here in myn hand," quod she, "The nexte thyng that I require thee, Thou shalt do, if it be in thy myght, And I wol teile it yow er' it be myght." "Have here my troubte," quod the knygght, "I grante thee." "Thanne," quod she, "I dar me wel avaunte," Thy lyf is saut," for I wol stonde ther-bye. Upon my lyf, the queene wol sey as I. Let see which is the proudest of hem alle That wreteth on a coverchiff or a calle That dar seye "Nay!" of that! I shal the trete. Las us for goth without leagen speche." Tho rondred she a pistel in his ere And had hym to be glad and have no fre. When they be comen to the court, this knygght Seyde he hadde holde' his day as he had hight, And redy was his answer, as he sryde. Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde, And many a wivre," for that they ben wije, The queene hirself stynge as justice, Assembled been," his answer for to here, And afterward this knygght was bode' appare. To every wyte comanded was silence, And that the knygght sholde telle in audience What thyng that worldly women loven best. This knygght ne stod nat stille as dooth a best But to his question anon" anwerde With many vroys that al the court it herde. "My lige lady, generally," quod he, "Women desire to have sovereignty As wel over hir housebonde as hir love And for to be in maisterie" amoy. This is youre mooste" desir, thogh ye me kille. Dooth as yow list. I am here at youre wille." In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde. Ne wydene that contraried that" he sayde But sayden he was worthy han" his lyf. And with that word up stirte" that olde wyf 190 Which that the knygght" sayte sitting on the grene. "Mercy," quod she, "my sovereyn lady queene, Er that" youre court departe, do me right. I taught this answer unto the knygght, For which he plighte me his trothe" there, The firste thyng I wolde hym requere, He wolde do, if it laye in his myght. Before the court thanne preye I the, sire knygght," Quod she, "that thow make use unto" thy wyf. For wel thou wootst that I have kyned thy lyf. 200 If I sey fals, saye, "Nay," upon thy fre." This knygght anwerde, "Alas and wellylawe," I woot right wel that swich was my bistehe. For Goddes love, as cheyn a newe requeste! Taak al my good," and lat my body go." "Nay, thanne," quod she, "I shrewse us bothe two. For, though that I be foul, old, and poore, I nolde, "for al the metal ne for." That under erthe is grave or" lih above, But if thy wyf I were and ekh" thy love." "My love!" quod he. "Nay, my damnaunce!" Allas that any of my naciuon" Sholde ere so soule" disparaged be! But al for nighte! Th'end" is this that he Constryned was, he neded moste hir wedde, And taked his olde wyf, and gote to bedde. Now wolden som men seye, par aventur." That for my negligence I do no cure That tellen yow the joye and al the array That at the caste was that like day; To whiche thynge shortely anwere I shal. I seye, ther nas' no joye ne" caste at al. Ther nas but hynne's" and muche sorow, For pryveyly he wedded hire on morwe, And, al day after hidde hyme" as an owle, So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foulde. Greet was the wo the knygght hadde in his thought Whan he was with his wyf" beside" y-brught. He walweht, and he turneth to and fro. His olde wyf lay smyling evere mo' And seye, "O dese housebonde, amokite! Farelly" every knygght thus with his wyf as ye? Is this the lawe of kyng Arthure hous? Is every knygght of his thus daungerous? I am youre owene love and youre wyf. I am se which that" saved hath youre lyf. And certes" yet ne dide I yow never unright. Why fare ye thus with me this feste nighte? Ye faren" lyk a man hadde" lost his wi. What is my glif! For Goddes love, tel it, And it shal ben amended, if i may. "Amended!" quod this knygght. "Allas, nay, nay. It wol nat ben amended nevere mo." Thow art so loothly, and so olda also, And thereto comen of" so lowe a kynde Thow vlied wonder in" thogh I walwe and wynde. So wolde God, myn herte werde brount!" "Is this, quod she, "the cause of youre unreste?" "Ye, certeinly," quod he. "No wonder is." "Now sire," quod she, "I kneue amende al this, If that me liste, er' it were dayes thare, So wel ye myghte bere yow unto me. "But, for" ye speken of swich gentileesse As is descended from olde richesse, That therefore sholdeyn ge be gentil men, Swich arroisnaunce if nat worth an hem. Looke who that is moost vertuous alway, Pyyve and apart, and moost entendeth ay To do the gentil deedes that he kan; Taak hym for the grettest gentil man. Crist wol, we clayyme of hym oure gentileesse, Nat of oure eldres for" his" olde richesse, For, thogh they yeve" us al hir heritage For which we clayyme to been of heigh parage, Ye may" they nat bigarte, for no thynge. To noon of us hir" vertuous lyvyn That made hem gentil men y-called be And had" us folwen" hem in swich degree. "Wele kan the wise poete of Florence That highe Dani" spokere in this sentence, Lo, in swich maner" ryem is Dantez tale. Ful selo" eriht by his branchez smale Provunsee of man, for God of his provunsee Wel that of hym we claymey oure gentileisse, For of oure eldres may we nothynge claymey But temporel thynge that man may hurt and maynne. "Eek" every wyght wootst this as wel as I, If gentileesse was planted natuern, Unto a cerryne lysage doun the kynde, Pyyve and apart, thanne wolde they nevere fyne To doon of gentileesse the faire office They myghte" do no velyzynye or vice. "Taak fyr, and bere" it in the darkest e hous Bitwick this and the mount Kaukauzon. And lat men shet" the dores and go therne, Yet wol the fyr as faire hyme and brenne" As twenty thousand men myghte it bihole. His office" nature ay" wol it holde, Up" peril of my lyf, till that it dy. "Here may ye se wel how that genterey Is nass announced to possessus. Sith" folk ne doon hir operacion of Alwee as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kynde. For, God it woot," men may wel often gende A lodes some do shame and velyzynye. And he that wol han pryt of" his gentrye, For he was born of a gentile hous And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous, And ryf" hymevelen do no gentil dede" No folwen" his gentil auuenture the deed" is, He nys" nat gentil, be he duc or erl, For velyzyn syllful deedes make a chelir. For gentileesse nys but renomee Of thyn auventures for hir hyme" bountye, Which is a straungre" thynge for thy persone. Thy gentileesse commeth fro God Alone. Thanne comth oure verry gentileesse of grace; It was no thyng bigarte" us with oure place. "Thynketh how noble, as seith Valentin," Was thilke" Tullius Hostilius That out of povertie roos to heigh noblese. Redeth Serke, and redek ech Bocce. Sher shul ye seen" express that no dedre is That he is gentil that douth gentil dede. And thener" leve" housebonde, he thus conclude, Al were it that myne auventures were rude, Yet may the hyme God, and so hope I. Grante me grace to lyven vertuously. Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigynne To lyven vertuously and wyver yeere. And tær-se" ye of povertie mannger. The hyme God, on whom that we blicne, In willful" povertie cresse to lyve his lyf. And certes" every man, mayden, or wyf May undersonde that Jesus, brenve" Kyng, Ne wolde nat cheze" a viciouz lyvyng. Glad" povertie is an honeste thynge, certes; This wol Senek and other clerkes" seyn. Who so that hath hym payd of" his povertie, I holde hym riche, al" hadde he nat a shote. Where (Looke oke that) in parenes in public stive never alwaye
He that coveith is a poure wight,
For he wold han that is nat in his myght;
But he that myght hath no coveith to have
Is riche, althogh ye holde hym but a knave.

"Verry" povertie, it syntheth properly.
Juvenal smite of povertie myghty.
"The poure man, whom he gooth by the weye,
Biforn the theives he may synge and playe."

Povertie is hateful good and, as I gesse,
A ful great brynghere out of bisynesse.
A grete amendere ek of savience.
To hym that taketh it in pacience.
Povertie is this, althogh it synne alage,
Possesion that no wight wol chalenge.
Povertie ful oft, when a man is lowe,
Maketh his God and eek hymselfe to knowe.
Povertie a spectacle is, as thinketh me,
Thurgh which he myght his verray frendes se.

And therfore, sire, syn that I ought yow greve,
Of my povertie namoure ye repreve.

"Now, sire, of olde ye repreve me;
And certes, sire, thogh noon auctoritee." Were in no boke, ye gentills of honour Seyen that men solde an old wight doon favour
And clepe hym fader, for youre gentileose;
And auctour shal I fynden," as I gesse.
"Now, ther," ye seye that I am foule and olde,
Thanne dere ye yow ought to been a cokewold," For filthe and elde, also moote I thee,
Beene grete wardyens upon chastitee.

But, nathelease, syn I knowe youre delit,
I shal fullfille youre worldly appetit.
"Chere now," quod she, "oon of thine thynges
tewe:" To han me foule and olde till that I dreye,
And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf;
And rever yow displese in al my lyf;
Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair
And tak yowre aventurer of the repair:" That shal be to yowre hous by cause of me,
Or in som oother place, may wel be.

Now cheere yowselfe whethere that ye liketh," quod she.
This knyght avyseth hym" and soore sketh," But atte laste he seyde in this manere:
"My lady, and my love and wyf so dere,
I putte me in yeure wise governaunce.
Cheeth youself which may be most plesaunce"
And moost honour to yow and me also.
I do no fors the whethere of the two,
For as ye liketh, it suffiseth me." "Thanne have I gete" of yow maistrey, quod she.

"Syn I may chese and governe as me lust?" quod she.
"Ye, certes, wyf," quod he. "I holde it best."
"Kys me," quod she. "We be no longer woote,
Foe, by my truehath, I wol be to yow bothe —
This is to seyn, ye, bothe faire and good.
I pray to God that I moote sterven wood!
But I to yow be also good and trewe
As ever was wyf syn that the world was newe.
And but I be to-morn as faire to sene"
As any lady, emperice, or quene.

That is bitwix the est and eek the west,
Do with my lyf and deth right as ye lust.
Cast up the curryn. Looke how that it is.

And when the knyght syn ye verray al thi,
That she so faire was and so yong ther-to,
For joye he hente hire in his armes twon.
His herte bethed in a bath of blisse,
A thousand tymes a rwe he gan hir kisse,
And she obeyday hym in ebery thing.
That myghte do hym plesaunce" or lisyng.
And thus they lyve unto hir" lyes ende
In purit joye, and Jesu Crist us sende.
Houblondes meke, yonge, and freche a-bedde,
And grace toverbyde hem" that we wedde.
And rek I praye Jesu shroue hir" lyes
That night wol be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygartes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray plesaunce."