The Words between the Host   
and the Miller   
[THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE]

1. Now when the knight had thus his story told,
2. In all the rout there was nor young nor old
3. But said it was a noble story, well
4. Worthy to be kept in mind to tell;
5. And specially the gentle folk, each one.
6. Our host, he laughed and swore, "So may I run,
7. But this goes well; unbuckled is the mail;
8. Let's see now who can tell another tale:
9. For certainly the game is well begun.
10. Now shall you tell, sir monk, if't can be done,
11. Something with which to pay for the knight's tale."
12. The miller, who with drinking was all pale,
13. So that unsteadily on his horse he sat,
14. He would not take off either hood or hat,
15. Nor wait for any man, in courtesy,
16. But all in Pilate's voice began to cry,
17. And by the Arms and Blood and Bones he swore,
18. "I have a noble story in my store,
19. With which I will requite the good knight's tale."
20. Our host saw, then, that he was drunk with ale,
21. And said to him: "Wait, Robin, my dear brother,
22. Some better man shall tell us first another:
23. Submit and let us work on profitably."
24. "Now by God's soul," cried he, "that will not I!
25. For I will speak, or else I'll go my way."
26. Our host replied: "Tell on, then, till doomsday!
27. You are a fool, your wit is overcome."
28. "Now hear me," said the miller, "all and some!
29. But first I make a protestation round
30. That I'm quite drunk, I know it by my sound:
31. And therefore, if I slander or mis-say,
32. Blame it on ale of Southwark, so I pray;
33. For I will tell a legend and a life
34. Both of a carpenter and of his wife,
35. And how a scholar set the good wright's cap."
36. The reeve replied and said: "Oh, shut your trap,
37. Let be your ignorant drunken ribaldry!
38. It is a sin, and further, great folly
39. To asperse any man, or him defame,
40. And, too, to bring upon a man's wife shame.
41. There are enough of other things to say."
42. This drunken miller spoke on in his way,
43. And said: "Oh, but my dear brother Oswald,
44. The man who has no wife is no cuckold.
45. But I say not, thereby, that you are one:
46. Many good wives there are, as women run,
47. And ever a thousand good to one that's bad,
48. As well you know yourself, unless you're mad.
49. Why are you angry with my story's cue?
50. I have a wife, begad, as well as you,
51. Yet I'd not, for the oxen of my plow,
52. Take on my shoulders more than is enow,
53. By judging of myself that I am one;
54. I will believe full well that I am none.
55. A husband must not be inquisitive
56. Of God, nor of his wife, while she's alive.
57. So long as he may find God's plenty there,
58. For all the rest he need not greatly care."
59. What should I say, except this miller rare
60. He would forgo his talk for no man there,
61. But told his churlish tale in his own way:
62. I think I'll here re-tell it, if I may.
63. And therefore, every gentle soul, I pray
64. That for God's love you'll hold not what I say
65. Evilly meant, but that I must rehearse,
66. All of their tales, the better and the worse,
67. Or else prove false to some of my design.
68. Therefore, who likes not this, let him, in fine,
69. Turn over page and choose another tale:
70. For he shall find enough, both great and small,
71. Of stories touching on gentility,
72. And holiness, and on morality;
73. And blame not me if you do choose amiss.
74. The miller was a churl, you well know this;
75. So was the reeve, and many another more,
76. And ribaldry they told from plenteous store.
77. Be then advised, and hold me free from blame;
78. Men should not be too serious at a game.

**The Miller's Tale**

In Oxford there once lived a rich old lout

Who had some guest rooms that he rented out,

And carpentry was this old fellow's trade.

A poor young scholar boarded who had made 3190

His studies in the liberal arts, but he

Had turned his fancy to astrology

And knew the way, by certain propositions,

To answer well when asked about conditions,

Such as when men would ask in certain hours 3195

If they should be expecting drought or showers,

Or if they asked him what was to befall

Concerning such I can't recount it all.

This student's name was Nicholas the Handy.

He led a secret love life fine and dandy, 3200

In private always, ever on the sly,

Though meek as any maiden to the eye.

With Nicholas there were no other boarders,

He lived alone, and had there in his quarters

Some fragrant herbs, arranged as best to suit, 3205

And he himself was sweeter than the root

Of licorice or any herb at all.

His [*Almagest*](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Almagest) and books both great and small,

An astrolabe for plotting outer space,

And counters used in math were all in place 3210

On shelves between the headposts of his bed.

His storage chest was draped with cloth of red,

And on its top there lay a [psaltery](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#psaltery)

On which at night he'd play a melody,

So sweet a sound that all the chamber rang; 3215

And [*Angelus ad virginem*](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Angelus) he sang,

And after that would follow "The King's Note."

Folks often praised him for his merry throat.

And this was how this sweet [clerk](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#clerk)'s time was spent,

While friends provided money for his rent. 3220

The carpenter had newly wed a wife,

One whom he loved more than his very life;

Her age was eighteen years. He jealously

Kept her as if inside a cage, for she

Was one both young and wild, and he had fears 3225

Of being a cuckold, so advanced in years.

Not educated, he had never read

[Cato](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Cato): one like himself a man should wed,

He ought to marry mindful of his state,

For youth and age are often at debate. 3230

But since he had been captured in the snare,

Like others folks he had his cross to bear.

And fair this young wife was! She had withal

A body like a weasel, slim and small.

She wore a belt with little stripes of silk; 3235

An apron was as white as morning milk

Upon her loins, pleated daintily.

Her white smock, too, had fine embroidery;

The collar was embellished round about

With lovely coal-black silk inside and out, 3240

And ribbons on the snowy cap she wore

Were of the same silk that her collar bore.

She wore a silken headband, broad and high.

And certainly she had a wanton eye;

Her brows were thinly plucked, and like a bow 3245

Each one was arched, and black as any sloe.

Indeed she was a blissful sight to see,

Moreso than any pear tree that could be

And softer than the wool upon a wether.

Upon her belt was hung a purse of leather, 3250

Silk-tasseled and with brassy spangles pearled.

And there's no man so wise in all this world,

Though you may go and search it every inch,

Could dream a doll so lovely, such a wench.

And brighter far did shine her lovely hue 3255

Than gold coins in the Tower when they're new.

Her song was loud and lively as the call

Of any swallow perching on the wall.

She'd skip about and play some game or other

As any kid or calf behind its mother. 3260

Her mouth was sweet as any mead whatever

Or as a hoard of apples on the heather.

Skittish she was, just like a jolly colt,

Tall as a mast, straight as an archer's bolt.

The brooch on her low collar was as large 3265

As is the boss upon a shield or targe.

Her shoes, well laced, high up her legs would reach.

She really was a primrose, quite a peach,

One fit for any lord to lay in bed

Or any worthy working man to wed. 3270

Now sir, and sir again, it came to pass

That one fine day this Handy Nicholas

With this young wife began to flirt and play,

Her husband off at Osney (anyway

These clerks are cunning when it comes to what 3275

They want), and slyly caught her by the twat;

"Surely," he said, "if I don't have my will,

For secret love, dear, I'll have quite a spill."

He held her hips as he went on to say,

"My darling, you must love me right away 3280

Or I will die, God save me!" Like a colt

Inside a shoeing frame she tried to bolt,

She turned her face away defiantly.

"Upon my faith, you'll get no kiss from me!

Why, let me go," she said, "stop, Nicholas, 3285

Or I will cry 'Out!', 'Help me!' and 'Alas!'

Unhand my body, show some courtesy!"

But then for mercy he made such a plea

And spoke so fairly, offering so fast

His all to her, that she agreed at last 3290

To grant to him her love: she made her promise

To be at his commandment, by Saint Thomas

Of Kent, when she saw opportunity.

"My husband is so full of jealousy,

If you don't wait and privy be," she said, 3295

"I know right well that I'm as good as dead.

You must be secret, keep this matter quiet."

"Nay," Handy said, "don't you be worried by it.

A clerk has for his time not much to show

If he can't fool a carpenter." And so 3300

The two were in accord and gave their word

To wait awhile as you've already heard.

When Nicholas got through with all of this

And felt her good below the waist, a kiss

He gave her sweetly, took his psaltery, 3305

And played it hard, a lively melody.

Now to the parish church it came to pass

That in her Christian works and for the mass

This good wife went upon one holy day.

Her forehead shone as bright as day, the way 3310

She'd scrubbed it so when washing after work.

Now in that church there was a parish clerk

Whose name was Absalon. His curly hair

Was shiny, bright as gold found anywhere,

And spread out like a broad fan on his head 3315

With straight and even part. A healthy red

Was his complexion, eyes gray as a gander.

The tracery of Saint Paul's was no grander

Than his shoes' openwork, with fine red hose.

The lad was trimly dressed from head to toes; 3320

He wore a sky-blue tunic that in places

Was tricked out with the loveliest of laces,

And over it his surplice was as bright

As any blossom seen, a purest white.

A merry child he was, as God may save. 3325

He well could let your blood, and clip and shave,

And draw you up a deed and quittance too.

Some twenty different ways the fellow knew

To demonstrate the latest Oxford dance;

He'd kick his heels about and blithely prance 3330

And play some merry tunes upon the fiddle.

Loud treble he was known to sing a little

And he could play as well on the guitar.

In Oxford there was not a single bar

That he did not go visit with his act 3335

If there was any barmaid to attract.

To tell the truth, a fart would make him squeamish,

And he was always proper in his English.

This Absalon so jolly, fond of play,

Went with a censer on that holy day 3340

To cense the parish wives. And as he passed,

Many a longing look on them he cast--

Especially on this carpenter's wife.

Just looking at her made a merry life.

She was so neat and sweet, this wanton spouse, 3345

That if he'd been a cat and she a mouse

At once he would have caught her. Absalon,

This parish clerk so jolly, full of fun,

Could not, for the love longing in his heart,

Take offerings from wives, he'd take no part, 3350

For courtesy, he said, and never might.

The moon, when night had come, was full and bright

As Absalon took guitar under arm,

His thoughts upon whom he might wake and charm;

Thus amorous and jolly, off he strode 3355

Until he reached the carpenter's abode

Soon after cockcrow. He then took his station

Beside a casement window, its location

Right in the old man's bedroom wall. And there

He daintily began to sing his air: 3360

"Now, dearest lady, if your will it be,

It is my prayer that you will pity me."

He sang and played the guitar right in tune.

The carpenter awoke and heard him croon

And said then to his wife, "Why, Alison, 3365

What's going on? Is that not Absalon

Who's chanting there below our bedroom wall?"

And she replied, "Yes, John, no doubt at all,

As God knows, I can hear him tone for tone."

Now shouldn't one leave well enough alone? 3370

From day to day this jolly parish clerk

Wooed her till he was woebegone. He'd work

Upon it night and day and never rest;

He'd comb his spreading locks, he smartly dressed;

By go-betweens and proxies he would woo 3375

And swore he'd be her servant ever true;

He warbled to her like a nightingale;

He sent her honeyed wine, some mead, spiced ale,

And cakes still piping hot. And since she knew

Of city ways, he offered money too; 3380

For some folks can be won by such largess,

And some by blows, and some by kindliness.

To show her his abilities so varied,

He even went on stage, portraying Herod.

But what would this avail him with the lass? 3385

For she so loved this Handy Nicholas

That Absalon could elsewhere toot his horn;

He had for all his labor only scorn.

And so she made poor Absalon an ape,

Made all his earnest efforts but a jape. 3390

The proverb tells the truth, it's not a lie,

Here's how it goes: "The one nearby and sly

Will always make the distant dear one hated."

Though Absalon go mad, wrath unabated

Because he was so far out of her sight, 3395

Nigh Nicholas was standing in his light.

Well may you fare, O Handy Nicholas,

For Absalon must wail and sing "Alas"!

And so it was that on one Saturday

The carpenter to Osney made his way, 3400

And Handy Nicholas and Alison

Were in accord on what was to be done,

That Nicholas should now devise a wile,

This simple jealous husband to beguile;

And if their little game turned out all right, 3405

She then could sleep in Handy's arms all night,

As this was his desire and hers as well.

So right away--no further words to tell,

For Nicholas no longer meant to tarry--

He slyly to his room began to carry 3410

Both food and drink to last a day or two.

He told her what to lead her husband through

If he should ask for Nicholas: she'd say

She didn't know his whereabouts, all day

Upon the lad she had not laid an eye; 3415

She thought some malady he had was why,

For though her maid cried out, the lad to call,

He wouldn't answer any way at all.

So this went on for all that Saturday;

This Nicholas up in his chamber lay, 3420

And ate and slept, or did what he thought best,

Till Sunday when the sun went to its rest.

This simple carpenter began to wonder

About him, if some ailment had him under.

"By dear Saint Thomas, I'm now full of dread 3425

That things aren't right with Nicholas," he said.

"O God forbid that suddenly he's died!

For sure a ticklish world's where we abide;

Today I saw 'em tote a corpse to kirk

Though Monday last I saw the man at work. 3430

"Go up," he told his knave at once. "Go on,

Call at his door, knock on it with a stone,

See how it is, and tell me truthfully."

The knave went up the stairway sturdily

And cried out at the chamber door; he stood 3435

There pounding like a madman on the wood.

"What are you at, O Master Nicholay?

How can you sleep for all the livelong day?"

All was for naught, for he heard not a sound.

But then a hole low in the door he found 3440

(The one through which the cat was wont to creep),

And through this hole he took a thorough peep

Until at last he had the lad in sight.

This clerk sat gaping upward as he might

If he were staring off at the new moon. 3445

He went back down the stairs, and none too soon,

To tell his master how he'd seen the man.

To cross himself the carpenter began,

And said, "Help us, I pray, Saint Frideswide!

A man knows little of what shall betide. 3450

This man has fallen with his astromy

Into some madness or some malady.

I always figured it would end just so!

God's privacy's a thing men shouldn't know.

Yea, blessed always is the simple man 3455

Who knows his creed and that is all he can!

So fared another clerk with astromy:

He walked out through the fields to try to see

The future in the stars, and got for it

A fall into a fertilizer pit, 3460

One he had not foreseen. Yet by Saint Thomas,

I pity Handy Nicholas. I promise,

He shall be scolded for such studying,

If that I may, by Jesus, heaven's King!

Get me a staff, and neath the door I'll pry 3465

While you heave on it, Robin. By and by

He'll come out of his studying, I'll bet."

Then at the chamber door he got all set.

His knave was very strong in any case

And by the hasp he heaved it from its place, 3470

The door went falling in right to the floor.

Nicholas sat as stonily as before,

Continuing to gape into the air.

The carpenter assumed it was despair;

He took him by the shoulders mightily 3475

And shook him hard, and cried reproachingly,

"What is it, Nicholay? Look down! Awake,

Think on Christ's passion! Here the sign I make

Now of the cross, from elf and evil sprite

To keep you." He began then to recite 3480

At once a night spell on the walls about

As well as on the threshold leading out:

"O Jesus and Saint Benedict, we pray

You'll bless this house from every demon's sway.

Night falls--[White Paternoster](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#Paternoster), help defeat her! 3485

Where have you gone, O sister of Saint Peter?"

And then at last this Handy Nicholas

Began to sorely sigh, and said, "Alas!

Shall all the world so soon be swept away?"

The carpenter replied, "What's that you say? 3490

On God, like we hard workers do, now think."

And Nicholas then said, "I need a drink,

And afterwards we'll speak in privacy

Of certain things concerning you and me.

I'll surely tell no other what I've learned." 3495

The carpenter went down, then soon returned,

With a full quart of strong ale, up the stairs;

And when they both had finished up their shares,

Nick tightly shut the door. As to confide,

This carpenter he set down by his side. 3500

He said, "Now, John, my host both kind and dear,

Your word of honor you must give me here

That to no man this secret you'll disclose;

For it is Christ's own secret that I pose,

And if you tell it, sad will be your fate. 3505

There's such a vengeance if you should relate

What I'm to say, you'll reap insanity."

"By Christ's own holy blood, it shall not be,"

Old John replied, "for I am not a blabber,

No, I must say, I'm not an idle gabber. 3510

Say what you will, which I will never tell

To child nor wife, by him who harrowed hell!"

"Now, John," said Nicholas, "believe you me,

I found this out through my astrology

As I looked on the moon when it was bright. 3515

This Monday at a quarter of the night

There shall come down so furious a rain

Not half its force did Noah's flood contain.

This world," he said, "in less than one small hour

Shall all be drowned, so hideous the shower. 3520

Mankind shall thus be drowned and lose all life."

The carpenter replied, "Alas, my wife!

My Alison, alas! She too will drown?"

And in his sorrow nearly falling down,

He said, "No remedy will make it pass?" 3525

"Why, yes, by God," said Handy Nicholas,

"If you'll work by sound learning and advice.

Don't work from your own head, that won't suffice.

As Solomon once said (and it is true),

'Work all by counsel and you'll never rue.' 3530

If you'll work by good counsel, I've no doubt

That mast and sail we then can do without,

For I will save your wife and you and me.

Have you not heard how Noah came to be

Saved by our Lord, who warned him beforehand 3535

That water was to devastate the land?"

"Yes," said the carpenter, "quite long ago."

"Have you not heard," said Nicholas, "also

Of Noah's troubles with his fellowship

Until he finally got his wife to ship? 3540

There is no doubt, I daresay, as to whether

He would have given up his last black wether

That she might have a vessel to herself.

Do you know, then, what's best to do yourself?

Haste is required, and for a hasty thing 3545

No time for preaching nor for tarrying.

"Be off at once and fetch into this inn

Three kneading troughs or tubs--we'll have one then

For each of us; but see that each is large,

So each of us may float as on a barge. 3550

And have therein some victuals too, at best

Enough to last a day--fie on the rest!

The waters will subside and go away

At nine or so on the following day.

But Robin must not know of this, your knave, 3555

And Jill your maid I also cannot save;

Don't ask me why, for though you ask of me

I will not tell a soul God's privity.

Suffice it, John, lest you go raving mad,

To have the same good grace that Noah had; 3560

Your wife I'll surely save without a doubt.

Be on your way, get busy hereabout.

"But when you have, for her and you and me,

Secured these kneading tubs, then hang the three

Up in the roof--and hang them very high, 3565

That our provision no man may espy.

And when you have accomplished what I've said,

And stored enough good fare to keep us fed,

An ax besides to whack the cord in two

When comes the rain, so we can ride it through; 3570

And when you've knocked a hole up in the gable,

Toward the garden and above the stable,

That we may freely pass upon our way

Until the mighty shower's gone away,

Then merrily we'll float, I undertake, 3575

Just as the white duck floats behind the drake.

'How, Alison! How, John!' I'll call to you.

'Be merry, for the flood will soon be through!'

And you will say, 'Hail, Master Nicholay!

Good morning, I can see you, it is day!' 3580

And then we shall be lords, throughout this life,

Of all the world, like Noah and his wife.

"But of one thing you must be warned about:

Be well advised, on that night never doubt

That when each one of us has gone on board, 3585

We must not speak a word. We can't afford

One call or cry but only silent prayer,

For it's God's own dear will that I declare.

"Your wife and you, therefore, hang far apart;

That twixt you two no sinful play may start 3590

(And I refer to sight as well as deed)

This ordinance is said. God give you speed!

Tomorrow night when everyone's asleep,

Into our kneading tubs we then shall creep

And there we'll sit awaiting God's good grace. 3595

Be on your way, I have no longer space

To sermonize on this, and so I'll cease.

It's said, 'But send the wise and hold your peace.'

Well, you are wise, so you I needn't teach.

Get going now and save us, I beseech." 3600

This simple carpenter went on his way

With many an "Alas" and "Wellaway,"

And to his wife he told his privity.

Now she was well aware, much more than he,

Of what this cunning plan was to imply. 3605

She acted, though, as if about to die;

"Alas! go now immediately," she said,

"Help us escape or all of us are dead!

I am the truest of devoted wives,

So go, dear spouse, and help to save our lives." 3610

See what a great thing is emotion! Why,

Of what one may imagine one can die,

So deep is the impression it can make.

This silly carpenter began to shake;

He feared he was to witness verily 3615

Old Noah's flood come rolling like the sea

To drown young Alison, his honey dear.

He weeps and wails, he looks so sad and drear

As many a sigh he heaves, a mournful sough.

He goes and gets a kneading trough somehow, 3620

One tub and then another, which he then

Has privately transported to the inn;

In privacy he hangs them as instructed.

Three ladders with his own hands he constructed

By which they would go climbing rung by rung 3625

Up to the rafters where the tubs were hung.

He put in each of them some cheese and bread

And good ale in a jug, to keep them fed

Sufficiently for what would be a day.

Before beginning, though, all this array 3630

He had his knave and maid as well to go

Upon an errand to London. And so

Upon that Monday, as it drew to night,

He shut the door, lit not one candlelight,

Arranged all things to look as they should be, 3635

And up into their tubs then climbed the three.

They sat the time a furlong takes to walk.

Said Nick, "Now Paternoster, then no talk!"

And "Mum," said John, and "Mum," said Alison.

The carpenter's devotions were begun, 3640

He stilly sat, prayed to the Holy Spirit,

And waited for the rain, intent to hear it.

But dead asleep from all his weariness

The carpenter soon fell--it was, I guess,

Around the curfew time. Yet even then 3645

He sorely groaned, such pain his soul was in.

(He also snored, the way his noggin lay.)

Then down his ladder crept young Nicholay,

And Alison down hers as softly sped;

Without a single word they went to bed 3650

Right where the carpenter was wont to be.

And there the revel and the melody!

For there lay Alison and Nicholas--

What mirth and pleasant business came to pass!--

Until the bell of Lauds began to ring 3655

And friars in the chancel were to sing.

Now Absalon, the amorous parish clerk

(Still woebegone from being so lovestruck),

Upon that Monday was down Osney way

To join companions for some sport and play. 3660

While there he chanced to ask a cloisterer

In private about John the carpenter.

They went outside the church, and to this clerk

The monk said, "I've not seen him here at work

Since Saturday. I'd say, as best I have it, 3665

He's been sent out for timber by the abbot.

For timber he will very often go

And stay out at the grange a day or so.

If not, he's surely at his house today.

Which place he's at I can't for certain say." 3670

This Absalon was thrilled, his heart was light.

"It's time," he thought, "to stay awake all night,

For I saw not one stirring of the man

About his door, not once since day began.

"As I may thrive, at crowing of the cock 3675

Privately at his window I will knock,

The one so low there in his bedroom wall.

To Alison I'll speak and tell her all

About my longing. This time I won't miss

But at the least will get from her a kiss. 3680

That will be, by my faith, some consolation;

My mouth has itched all day, a situation

That is a sign of kissing at the least.

And, too, last night I dreamt about a feast.

Therefore I'll go and sleep an hour or two, 3685

Then I will stay up all the night and woo."

At first cockcrow, at once from his repose

This jolly lover Absalon arose

And donned attire as smart as any viewed.

Some cardamon and licorice he chewed, 3690

To scent his breath, before he combed his hair.

A true-love herb as well he chose to bear

Beneath his tongue, thereby to be exquisite.

Then to the old man's house he made his visit.

There quietly he stood beneath the casement 3695

(It reached down to his breast, so low its placement);

He cleared his throat and spoke in softest voice:

"What are you doing, honeycomb, my choice

And fairest bird, my sweetest cinnamon?

Awake and speak to me, sweet Alison. 3700

How little do you think upon my woe;

I sweat for your love everywhere I go.

No wonder that I sweat and slave for it:

I'm longing as the lamb longs for the tit.

Yes, darling, I have for you such a love 3705

You've got me mourning like a turtledove,

My appetite's that of a maid," he cried.

"Get from the window, jackass," she replied.

"So help me God, there'll be no 'come and kiss me.'

I love another and, by Jesus, he 3710

Is better far than you or I'm to blame.

Unless you want a stoning, in the name

Of twenty devils, let me sleep. Away!"

"Alas," said Absalon, "and welladay,

That my true love is ever so beset! 3715

At least then kiss me, if that's all I get,

For Jesus' love and for the love of me."

"Will you then go," she said, "and let me be?"

"Yes, darling, surely," he was quick to say.

"Get ready, then," she said, "I'm on my way." 3720

To Nicholas she whispered, "Shh, be still;

Of laughter you're about to get your fill."

Now Absalon got down upon his knees

And said, "I am a lord by all degrees,

For after this I hope there's more to follow. 3725

Come, grace me, darling, my sweet little swallow!"

She opened up the window then with haste.

"Come on," she said, "be quick, no time to waste,

We don't want neighbors seeing you've come by."

Absalon wiped his mouth till it was dry. 3730

The night was dark as pitch, as black as coal,

And from the window she stuck out her hole;

And Absalon, not knowing north from south,

Then kissed her naked ass with eager mouth

Before he was aware of all of this. 3735

Then back he started, something seemed amiss:

A woman has no beard, he knew as much,

Yet this was rough and hairy to the touch.

"O fie!" he said. "Alas! what did I do?"

"Tee hee," said she, and clapt the window to. 3740

Poor Absalon had reached a sorry pass.

"A beard, a beard!" laughed Handy Nicholas.

"God's body, this is really going swell."

Poor Absalon heard all this very well,

In anger had to give his lip a bite, 3745

And to himself he said, "I'll set you right."

Who's rubbing now, who's scrubbing now his lips

With dust, with sand, with straw, with cloth, with chips,

But Absalon, who's crying out "Alas!

May Satan take my soul if I'd not pass 3750

Up owning this whole town that I might be

Avenged for this despite they've done to me.

Alas," he cried, "I didn't turn aside!"

His hot love then was cold, indeed had died;

For from the time he kissed her naked ass 3755

He didn't give one cress for any lass,

For he'd been cured of all his malady;

All lovers he denounced repeatedly

And wept just like a child who has been whipped.

Across the street a little ways he slipped 3760

To see a blacksmith, Master Gervase, who

Was known for plow parts, shares and coulters too,

And at his forge was busy making more.

This Absalon knocked softly at his door

And said, "Quick, Gervase, get this door undone." 3765

"Who's there?" he asked. "It's me, it's Absalon."

"Why, Absalon! By Christ's sweet tree, I say,

Why up so early? [*Benedicite*](http://english.fsu.edu/canterbury/glossary.html#benedicite)*!*

What's ailing you? God knows, some merry girl

Is what brings you out prowling in a whirl, 3770

And by Saint Neot you follow what I mean."

But Absalon was caring not a bean

For all his play, he didn't speak or laugh,

For he had much more tow on his distaff

Than Gervase knew. He said, "My friend so dear, 3775

This red-hot coulter in the chimney here--

Lend it to me. There's something I must do

And then right soon I'll bring it back to you."

"Why, surely," Gervase said, "if it were gold

Or a poke of nobles in a sum untold, 3780

As I'm a smith, 'twould be yours every bit.

But what the devil will you do with it?"

"Let that," said Absalon, "be as it may.

I'll tell you all about it when it's day."

He grabbed it by the handle, which was cool, 3785

And quietly went out, and with the tool

He went again to the carpenter's wall.

He cleared his throat to give a little call

And knocked upon the window as before.

"Who's there?" he heard young Alison once more. 3790

"Who's knocking there? It is a thief, I'll bet."

"Why, no," he said, "God knows, my little pet,

It's Absalon. My darling little thing,

I've brought for you," said he, "a golden ring.

So help me God, my mother gave it to me. 3795

It's well engraved, it is a fine thing truly.

I'll let you have it for another kiss."

Now Nicholas was up to take a piss,

And thought he would improve upon the jape

And have him kiss his ass ere he escape. 3800

He hastened to the window, turned around,

And stuck his bottom out without a sound,

Both buttocks and beyond, right to the thighs.

Then Absalon, who had to strain his eyes,

Said, "Speak, sweet bird, I know not where thou art." 3805

And Nicholas at this let fly a fart

So great it sounded like a thunderclap--

It nearly blinded Absalon, poor chap.

But he was set with his hot iron to move,

And Nicholas was smote right in the groove. 3810

Off came the skin a handbreadth wide and some,

The hot iron had so burnt him in his bum,

And from the smart he thought that he would die.

Just like a madman he began to cry,

"Help! Water, water! Help me, for God's sake!" 3815

The carpenter by then had stirred awake;

He heard mad cries of "Water!" loud and clear,

And thought, "Alas, the Flood of Noel's here!"

He sat right up without the least ado

And grabbed his ax and whacked the cord in two, 3820

Then down went everything--no time for sale

Of any of his bread or any ale:

He hit the floor, and there unconscious lay.

Then Alison and Handy right away

Cried out "Help!" and "Disaster!" in the street. 3825

The neighbors, high and low, ran there to meet,

They stood and stared at poor unconscious John

Who lay there on the floor so pale and wan,

For from the fall he had a broken arm.

But he himself was blamed for all his harm; 3830

For when he spoke, each word was then denied

By Nicholas and Alison his bride.

They made the claim to all that he was mad:

Some ghastly fear of "Noel's flood" he had,

A fantasy that had him so deranged 3835

Three kneading tubs the old man had arranged

To buy and hang there in the roof above;

And then he had implored them, for God's love,

To sit up there and keep him company.

The people laughed at such a fantasy; 3840

Up at the roof they all began to gape,

And turned the old man's harm into a jape.

No matter what the carpenter insisted,

It was for naught, his reasons were resisted.

With such great oaths the fellow was put down, 3845

He was considered mad throughout the town;

Each learned man agreed with every other,

Saying, "The man is mad, beloved brother,"

And everyone just laughed at all his strife.

So she was screwed, the carpenter's young wife, 3850

Despite all jealous safeguards he could try;

And Absalon has kissed her nether eye,

And Nicholas is scalded in the rear.

This tale is done, God save all who are here!