

The Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo

by
William Dunbar

The Treatise of the Two Married Women and the Widow

normalized and glossed
by
Michael Murphy

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Notes for an Introduction

1. Time: Midsummer night, around St Johns Eve, what we would call the start of Summer. Probably a remnant of some old pagan rite of breakout. Bonfires were lit in the streets and near towns. Hawthorn tree or bush at the beginning is associated with the other world.
2. There is an elegant opening and closing, as if it were a *chanson d'aventure* with a knightly auditor and courtly ladies. The eavesdropping does not imply spying, peeping Tomism. It is part of the convention, a half hearted attempt to be naturalistic. For hidden listeners in such poems see Windeatt, **Dream Poetry** 3-4, 152-5.
3. The poem is also part of *Chanson de mal mariée* tradition. There was genuine grievance by women who were married off to older and perhaps sexually inadequate men, but as in Chaucer's Merchant's tale, the female response here is not pretty either.
4. Either the protagonists are courtly ladies but vulgarians underneath (like most courtly ladies?) Or they are a group of grumpy housewives aping the dress and manners of the court, and not very successfully. A satire on the vulgarity of courtiers or on the middle class? Or both? The *locus amoenus* is deliberately at odds with the vulgarity of the speeches that follow.
5. Priscilla Bawcutt notes that the characters are nameless, deliberate "types" in a tradition, one of them the dominant wife tradition best known to us from Chaucer's Wife of Bath but elsewhere as well in French and in English. She also notes that it is in part a parody of sacramental confession. Confession without repentance or desire for absolution, of course. Lines 247 ff form a parody of sermon opening. What the Widow preaches is, of course, heresy against both the ecclesiastical view and the Courtly Love view.
6. The men are versions of **senex amans** (the old man in love), or **senex patiens** (patient old husband). Senex amans is the convenient phrase to designated stories of old men who foolishly marry much younger women, and live to regret it. The couples are versions of Chichevache and Bicorné. Bicorné is the fat cow who feeds on

patient husbands, and Chichevache is the skinny animal that feeds on good wives.

7. The women part at dawn, but of course there is no *aubade*, no dawn song. They just go back to wherever vampires go. Having begun with a *demande* of one sort, the poem also ends with a *demande* of another kind. Neither is exactly a *demande d'amour* since the first asks for what it expects to be a torrent of abuse not love. The *demande* at the end is a sardonic version of the usual *demande* of the reader / listener to make a judgement : in Chaucer's "Franklin's Tale," which of the characters acted most nobly? Here, which one of these harridans would one choose as a marriage partner?

8. One does not really have to know the precise meaning of all words in the insulting passages, if indeed they do have precise meaning. The intent of this contemptuous speech of one woman about her husband is clear enough even without glosses:

And when the smy on me smirks with his smake smolet, *snivellerugly mug*

Or :

I have a wallidrag, a worm, an old wobat carl, *slob, worm, caterpillar*
 A wasted wolroun, not worth but wordès to clatter; *a used up hog*
 A bumbart, a drone bee, and bag full of phlegm, *a sluggard*
 A skabbèd skarth, a scorpion, a scutter behind.

9. The alliteration seems to help when one wants to lay things on thick, either in praise or blame. It is especially noticeable in the "flyting" or abusive section. The *Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy* is both rhymed and alliterative. In fact, each part if this *Tretis* is a kind of one sided flyting.

10. *Radix malorum est cupiditas* said the Chaucer's Pardoner in the **Canterbury Tales**. In the case of the three women, the **cupidity** of the first two has Cupid at the center of it; the Widow is more like Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath: her lust is mostly for power and material things, though the Wife would merely be a first-year apprentice to her in spite of the fact that the Wife has had five marriages to the Widow's two.

11. The texts of Eve Salisbury's edition and John Conlee's edition for Teams have been very helpful with the glosses.

12. See at the end a 20th century (and much politer) version of the Widow's Wishes.

It is important to remember that this edition of the poem is not a translation

The Treatise of the Two Married Women and the Widow
 a poem by William Dunbar
 put into modern spelling but not otherwise changed..

Lines 111-139 are given in the original spelling AND in modernized spelling.

On St John's Eve, the eve of Midsummer Day (really MidYear Day), a time of relaxed inhibitions, the poet lies down in a dry ditch, perhaps tired or inebriated from the festivities, and listens in on the uninhibited conversation of three well-dressed women in a lovely garden setting.

Upon the Midsummer even, merriest of nights,	<i>evening</i>
I movèd forth alone in mead as midnight was past,	<i>meadows</i>
Beside a goodly green garth, full of gay flowers,	<i>green garden</i>
Hedgèd to a huge height with hawthorne trees;	
Whereon a bird on a branch so burst out her notes	
That never a blithefuller bird was on the bough heard.	
What through the sugared sound of her song glad,	
And through the savour sanative of the sweet flowers,	<i>healing aroma</i>
I drew in derne to the ditch to dirkin after mirths;	<i>quietly .. to listen for</i>
10 The dew donked the dale and dinnèd the fowls.	<i>Dampened... & birds sang</i>
I heard, under a holly, heavenly green hued,	
A high speech at my hand with haughty words:	<i>near at hand</i>
With that, in haste to the hedge so hard I in thrang	<i>I thrust</i>
That I was helded with hawthorne and with hende leaves.	<i>I was covered ...lovely leaves</i>
Through pykes of the plaited thorn I presently lookèd,	<i>through spaces</i>
If any person would approach within that pleasant garden.	

I saw three gay ladies sit in a green arbor,	
All grathed into garlands of fresh goodly flowers.	<i>arrayed</i>
So glittered as the gold were their glorious gilt tresses,	
20 While all the grasses did gleam of the glad hues;	<i>w. bright colors</i>
Combed was their clear hair and curiously sched	<i>elaborately arrayed</i>
Attour their shoulders down sheer shining full bright,	<i>Around</i>
With kerchiefs cassin there above of crisp clear and thin.	<i>cast up ... of gauze</i>
Their mantles green were as the grass that grew in May season,	

Fettered with their white fingers about their fair sides. *Grasped by*
 Of ferliful fine favour were their faces meek, *wonderfully fine*
 All full of flourishing fairhood as flowers in June -
 White, seemly, and soft as the sweet lilies *attractive*
 Now upspread upon spray, as new spynest rose; *newly opened*
 30 Arrayèd royally about with many rich verdure, *greenery*
 That nature full nobly enamelèd with flowers,
 Of all kinds [of] hues under heaven that any hende knew, *any one*
 Fragrant, all full of fresh odour, finest of smell.

A comely table coverèd was before those clear ladies,
 With royal cups upon rows, full of rich wines.

The wine and conversation flow freely, and one of the women, a widow, challenges the other two to tell frankly about their (arranged) marriages.

And of those fair wlonkes two wedded were with lords, *lovely ladies*
 One was a widow, i-wis, wanton of laits. *indeed loose in her ways*
 And as they talked at the table of many tales sundry,
 They wauchted at the wicht wine and wares out wordès; *drank strong w. & spoke*
 40 And syne they spoke more speedily and sparèd no matters. *And after*
 "Bewray," said the widow, "ye wedded women young, *Reveal*
 What mirth ye found in marriage since ye were men's wives.
 Reveal if ye rued that reckless condition, *regretted that rash contract*
 Or if that ever ye loved lede upon life more *loved a living man*
 45 Nor them that ye your faith has fastenèd for ever, *more than y. vowed partner*
 Or if ye think, had ye choice, that ye would choose better.
 Think ye it not a blessed band that binds so fast,
 That none undo it a deal may but the death ane?" *none but death can undo it*

The first wife responds by proposing an unorthodox & hypothetical solution to her frankly stated dissatisfaction (mostly sexual)

Than spoke a lusty blive with lusty effeiris; *lively (one) promptly in sprightly fashion*
 50 "It, that ye call the blessed band that binds so fast,
 Is bare of bliss, and balefull, and great barret works. *Free of joy & woeful & causes g. trouble*
 You speir, had I free choice, if I would choose better? *You ask*
 Chains ay are to eschew; and changes are sweet: *always to be avoided*

Such cursèd chance to eschew, had I my choice once,
 Out of the chains of a churl I 'scape should for ever.
 God, if matrimony were made to mell for a year!
 It were but merrens to be more, but if our minds pleased: ¹
 It is against the law of love, of kind, and of nature
 Together hearts to strain, that strive with other:
 60 Birds have a better law na bernes by mickle,
 That ilk year, with new joy, [en]joy a make, ²
 And fang them a fresh fere, unfulyed and constant,
 And let their fulyed feres fly where they please.
 Christ! if such a consuetude were in this kith holden!
 Then well were us women that ever we were free; ³
 We should have feres as fresh to fang when us likèd,
 And give all larbars their leave, when they lack courage. ⁴
 Myself should be full seemly in silkès arrayed,
 Gymp, jolly, and gent, right joyous and gent.
 70 I should at fairs be found new faces to see;
 At plays and at preachings and pilgrimages great,
 To show my renown, royally, where press was of folk,
 To manifest my makdom to multitude of people,
 And blow my beauty abroad, where bernes were many,
 That I might choose and be chosen, and change when me likèd.
 Than should I waill one full well, o'er all the wide realm,
 That should my womanhood wield the long winter night;
 And when I gotten had one groome ganest of other,
 Yep, and young in the yoke one year for to draw; ⁵

*God! if only to be joined
 only vexation ...unless our
 than people by far
 each y.
 get them a new mate,un-stale
 their tired mates
 such a custom .. in t. country
 fresh mates to take
 beautifully dressed
 Slim ... gracious ... ladylike
 crowds of people
 my beauty
 men are numerous
 I should choose
 satisfy
 one man the finest
 Fresh*

¹ 57-9: "It is annoying [for marriage] to be longer unless it pleases us; it is unnatural to force people who fight to stay together."

² 61: Presumably "that" refers back to birds "who each year with new joy enjoy a (new) mate."

³ 65: Bawcutt has "born" as last word of this line.

⁴ 67: We'd give all old gaffers [larbars] their walking papers when they don't have sexual vigor.

⁵ "Fresh and young in harness to pull (the plough) for a year," her metaphor for sexual service. Even when her man proved himself for a month, she would be already on the lookout for a replacement for the next year.

80 Fra I had proved his pith the first pleasant month,
 Then should I cast me to keek in kirk and in market,
 And all the country about, king's court and other,
 Where I a gallant might get against the next year,
 For to perform forth the work when failèd the other
 A forky fure, ay forthwart, and forsy in draught, ¹
 Neither feeble nor faint nor fulyeit in labour, *nor tiring*
 But as fresh of his form as flowers in May;
 For all the fruit should I fang, though he the flower burgeon.²

I have a wallidrag, a worm, an old wobat carl, *slob, worm, catterpillar*
 90 A wasted wolroun, not worth but wordès to clatter; *a used up hog*
 A bumbart, a drone bee, and bag full of phlegm, *a sluggard*
 A skabbèd skarth, a scorpion, a scutter behind; *scabby ... loose ass*
 To see him scart his own skin great scunner I think. *scratch*
 When kisses me that carybald, then kindles all my sorrow; *cannibal (?)*
 As burrs of a brim boar his beard is as stiff, *bristles of a fierce*
 But soft and supple as the silk is his sorry lume; *limp dick*
 He may well to the sin assent, but sakless is his deeds.³
 With gor his two grim eyes are gladderrèd all about, ⁴
 And gorgèd like two gutters that were with glar stoppèd; *blockedw. mud*
 100 But when that glowering ghost grips me about, *that glaring spook*
 Then think I hideous Mahoun has me in arms. ⁵
 There may no sign(ing) me save from that old Satan; *no signs of the cross*

¹ "A vigorous, forceful fellow, well able to pull."

² "I'd get (*fang*) all the fruit after his "flower" has grown big " ?

³ He assents to the "sin" although (unfortunately) he cannot actually commit it. It was held by some clerics that sex even in marriage involved some sin, even if it was minor.

⁴ 98-9: With gum his eyes are smeared and stuck like mud in clogged gutters.

⁵ Mahomet. Mahomet and Islam were understood simply as vaguely evil, Mahoun sometimes ignorantly thought of as a kind of false god or devil.

For, though I cross me all clean, from the crown down,

He will my corse all beclip, and clap me to his breast.

all my body embrace

When shaven is that old schalk with a sharp razor,

He shoves on me his schevill mouth and sche[n]ds my lips

twisted m. & hurts

And with his hard hurcheone skin so heckles he my cheeks,

hedgehog skin so scrapes

That as a gleaming glead glow my chaps;

burning coal

I shrink for the sharp stound, but shout dare I not,

pain

110 For shore of that old shrew, shame him betide!

for fear

To give readers some idea of the difference, a page each of the old spelling text and the new spelling version follow on pp. 9-10

Lines 111 - 139 in original spelling

The page following this has the modspell version

The luf blenkis of that bogill, fra his blerde ene,
 As Belzebub had on me blent, abasit my spreit;
 And quhen the smy one me smyrkis with his smake smolet,
 He fepillis ike a farcy aver that flyrit one a gillot.
 "Quhen that the sound of his saw sinkis in my eris,
 Than ay renewis my noy, or he be neir cumand:
 Quhen I heir nemmyt his name, than mak I nyne Crocis,
 To keip me fra the cummerans of that carll mangit,
 That full of eldnyng is and anger and all evill thewis.
 I dar nought luke to my luf for that lene gib,
 He is sa full of jelusy and engyne fals;
 Ever ymagynyng in mynd materis of evill,
 Compasand and castand cacis a thousand
 How he sall tak me, with a trawe, at trist of ane othir:
 I dar nought keik to the knaip that the cop fillis,
 For eldnyng of that ald schrew that ever one evill thynkis;
 For he is waistit and worne fra Venus werkis,
 And may nought beit worth a bene in bed of my mystirs.
 He trowis that young folk I yerne yeild, for he gane is,
 Bot I may huke all this yer, or his yerd help.
 "Ay quhen that caribald carll wald clyme one my wambe,
 Than am I dangerus and daine and dour of my will;
 Yit leit I never that larbar my leggis ga betueene,
 To fyle my flesche, na fumyll me, without a fee gret;
 And thought his pen purly me payis in bed,
 His purse pays richely in recompense efter:
 For, or he clym on my corse, that carybald forlane,
 I have conditioun of a curche of kersp allther fynest,
 A gown of engranyt claith, right gaily furrit,

Lines 111-139 in modspell. Original spelling on preceding page

The love blinks of that boggle from his bleared eyes,	<i>love-looks of t. devil</i>
As Beelzebub had on me blent, abased my spirit;	<i>As if the devilstared</i>
And when the smy on me smirks with his smake smolet,	<i>snivellerugly mug</i>
He fepills like a farcy aver that fleered on a gillot.	<i>he drivels like an old nag eying a mare</i>
When that the sound of his saw sinks in my ears,	<i>his voice</i>
Then ay renews my [an]noy, ere he be near coming.	
When I hear named his name, then make I nine crosses,	
To keep me from the [en]cumbrance of that carl mangit	<i>senile lout</i>
That full of eldnyng is and anger and all evil thews.	<i>jealousy ... & evil ways</i>
120 I dare not look to my lover for that lean gib,	<i>because of that skinny alleycat</i>
He is so full of jealousy and engine false;	<i>f. tricks</i>
Ever imagining in mind matters of evil,	
Compasing and casting cases a thousand	<i>plotting</i>
How he shall take me with a trawe at tryst with another:	<i>by a trick</i>
I dare not keek to the knap that the cup fills,	<i>glance at t. boy who</i>
For eldning of that old shrew that ever on evil thinks;	<i>jealousy</i>
For he is wasted and worn from Venus's works,	
And may not beit worth a bean in bed of my mysters.	<i>not performfor my needs</i>
He trows that young folk I yearn yield, for he gane is, ¹	
130 But I may itch all this year, ere his yard help.	
Ay when that caribald carl would climb on my womb,	<i>Always ..that cannibal lout</i>
Than am I daungerous and digne and dour of my will;	<i>distant ..cold...unfriendly</i>
Yet let I never that larbar my legs go between	<i>sluggard</i>
To [de]file my flesh, nor fumble me, without a fee great;	
And though his pen[is] poorly me pays in bed,	
His purse pays richly in recompense after:	
For, ere he climb on my corse, that caribald forlane,	<i>on my body that useless ogre</i>
I have conditioun of a kerch[ief] of kersp alther finest,	<i>promise of k. of very finest gauze</i>
A gown of engrained cloth, right gaily furred,	<i>richly dyed cloth</i>

¹ 129-130: He thinks that I yearn for young men since he is impotent. I could wait all this year and *his* "yard" wouldn't work.

140 A ring with a royal stone, or other rich jewel,
 Or rest of his rusty rod, though he were rede wood. ¹
 For all the buds of John Blunt, when he above climbs, *bribes ? thrusts?*
 Me think the baid dear a-bought, so bawch are his works; *the time ...so feeble*
 And thus I sell him solace, though I it sour think:
 From such a sire, God you save, my sweet sisters dear!" *a husband*

When that the seemly had said her sentence to end, *that beauty ... her opinion*
 Than all they laughed upon loft with latis full merry, *aloud w. chuckles*
 And reached the cup round about full of rich wines.
 And rallied long, ere they would rest, with riotous speech. *And joked*

The widow invites the second wife to tell her story.

150 The widow to the other wlonk warpèd these words: *to second lady spoke*
 "Now, fair sister, falls you but feigning to tell, *it falls to you without lying*
 Since man first with matrimony you menskèd in kirk, *honored you*
 How have you fared, by your faith? confess us the truth:
 That bond to bliss or to ban, which you best thinks? *curse*
 Or how like you life to lead in loyal spousage?
 And since, myself you examine on the same wise, *And afterwards*
 And I shall say forth the sooth, dissimuling no word." *the truth*

*The second wife begins her equally frank account of her husband's
 inadequacies (mostly sexual)*

The pleasant [one] said, "I protest, the truth if I show,
 That of your tongues you be traist." The other two granted. *trustworthy, discreet*
 160 With that sprang up her spirit by a span higher.
 "To speak," quoth she, "I shall not spare; there is no spy near:

¹ 141: "or he can't use his rusty rod not matter how mad it makes him." But "Or" might mean "ere" = before, i.e. he has to promise payment before he uses

I shall a ragment reveal from root of my heart *a story*
 A roust that is so rankled till rises my stomach *a sore*
 Now shall the bile all out burst, that beild has so long; *swelled*
 For it to bear in my breast was burden o'er heavy:
 I shall the venom devoid with a vent large, *pour out in huge surge*
 And me assuage of the swalm that swellèd was great. *& relieve the pressure*

My husband was a whore-master, the hugest on earth,
 Therefore I hate him with my heart, so help me our Lord!
 170 He is a young man right yep, but not in youth flowers; *lively*
 For he is faded full far and feebled of strength:
 He was as flourishing fresh within these few years,
 But he is falyed full far and fulyed in labour; *used up & fatigued*
 He has been lecher so long till lost is his nature,
 His lume is waxed larbar and lies in a swoon: *his penis has become limp*
 Was never sojourn worse set na on that snail tired, ¹
 For after seven weeks rest it will not rap once; *not rise*
 He has been wasted upon women, ere he me wife chose, *before he chose me as wife*
 And in adultery in my time I have him ta'n oft: ²
 180 And yet he is as branking with bonnet on side, *debonair*
 And blenking to the brightest that in the burgh dwells, *And ogling the prettiest ... in the town*
 As courtly of his clothing and combing of his hairs, *like a courtier*
 As he that is more valiant in Venus's chamber;
 He seems to be something worth, that cipher in bower, *that zero in bed*
 He looks as he would lovèd be, though he be little of valour; *poor sexual drive*
 He does as dotty dog that dames on all bushes, *stupid dog that aims at*
 And lifts his leg up aloft, though he nought list piss; *can't p.*
 He has a look without lust and life without courage;

¹ "Was never time worse spent than on that tired snail."

² Does line 179 make sense in view of the rest of the account ?

He has a form without force, and fashion but virtue, ¹	<i>appearance without manliness</i>
190 And fair words but effect, all fruster of deeds;	<i>without substance, all ineffectual</i>
He is for ladies in love a right lusty shadow,	<i>vigorous appearance</i>
But in derne at the deed, he shall be droop founden;	<i>in private ... / found drooping</i>
He rallies, and makes repet with riotous words,	<i>he jokes & makes cheer</i>
Ay rusing him of his rades and rageing in chamber;	<i>boasting of his riding & passion in bed</i>
But God wot what I think when he so thra speaks,	<i>God knows ... so brazenly</i>
And how it sets him so side to say of such matters	<i>how (ill) it suits him to speak so broadly</i>
But if himself, of some even, might one see among them,	<i>some evening</i>
But he not one is, but none, of nature's possessors. ²	
She that has an old man not all is beguiled;	<i>not totally deceived</i>
200 He is at Venus's works no worse na he seems.	<i>no worse than</i>
I wend I chose a gem, and I have jet gotten;	<i>I thought ... a jet bead</i>
He had the gleaming of gold, and was but glass founden.	
Though men be fierce, well I find, from fails their courage,	<i>when their vigor fades</i>
That is but eldnyng and anger their hearts within.	<i>jealousy</i>
Ye speak of birds on bough: of bliss may they sing,	
That on Saint Valentine's day are vacant each year;	
Had I that pleasant privilege to part when me likèd,	
To change, and ay to choose again, then, chastity, adieu!	<i>and constantly to</i>
Then should I have a fresh fere to fang in mine arms:	<i>new mate to hold</i>
210 To hold a freke till he faint, may folly be called.	<i>To keep a man</i>
Upon such matters I muse, at midnight, full oft,	
And mourn so in my mind I'd murder myself;	
Then lie I waking for woe, and walter about,	<i>wallow</i>
Wariand oft my wicked kin that me away cast,	<i>Cursing my w. family</i>
To such a craudon but courage that knit my clear beauty,	<i>a craven without vigor</i>
And there so many keen knights this kingric within:	<i>kingdom</i>
Then think I on a seemlier, the sooth for to tell,	<i>more attractive (one), the truth</i>

¹ 188-9: *but* = *without*. *Virtue* probably has its the meaning of its Latin root: *virtus* = manliness, sexual potency, related to *valour* in 185 and *courage*, 187 and *passim*.

² *Not one is, but none*: possibly the repetition is for emphasis: *he is not one, definitely not one*.

Na is our sire, by such seven; with that I sigh oft: *Than my husband by 7 times*
 Then he full tenderly does turn to me his tume person, *useless*
 220 And with a yolden yard does yolk me in arms, *limp penis*
 And says: 'My sovereign sweet thing, why sleep you no better?
 Me think there holds you a heat, as you some harm alyt.' *a fever, you've caught some ailment*
 Quoth I, 'My honey, hold aback, and handle me not sore;
 An ache is happenèd hastily at my heart root.'
 With that I seem for to swoon, though I no swarf take; *tho' I'm not a fainter*
 And thus beswik I that swain with my sweet words: *deceive that peasant*
 I cast on him a crabbèd eye, when clear day is comen, *a crabby look*
 And let it is a love blink when he about gleams — *And pretend ...when he turns around*
 I turn in[to] a tender look what I in teen warit, *in anger had meant*
 230 And him behold homely with heartly smiling.
 I would a tender peronall, that might no put thole,¹ *a girl that can't endure thrusts*
 That hated men with hard gear for hurting of flesh,
 Had my good man to her guest; for I dare God swear,
 She should not start for his stroke a straw's breadth of earth.
 And syne I would that ilk bond that ye so blessed call *And then I wish that same bond*
 Had bound him so to that bright, till his back worked, *to that beauty*
 And I were in a bed brought with bern that me liked, *a man*
 I trow that bird of my bliss should a bourd want." ²

Anon, when this amiable had ended her speech,
 240 Loud laughing, the laif allowed her mickle: *the others praised her highly*
 These gay wives made game among the green leaves,
 They drank and did away dule under derne boughs; *they drank away care u. hidden*
 They swapit of the sweet wine, those swan-white of hues, *They quaffed*
 But all the pertlier, in plane, they put out their voices. *More impudently, bluntly*

¹ 231-234: "I wish that some girl who doesn't care for hard thrusts and does not like men with hard equipment because it hurts, I wish she would have him as bed partner; she wouldn't have to move an inch out of the way from any of **his** stabs."

² 238 "I guess that girl couldn't imagine my bliss." (?)

The widow begins an account of her two marriages where she ruled the roost.

Then said the Widow: "I-wis there is no way other; *Indeed*
 Now tides me for to talk; my tale it is next: *It's time for me*
 God my spirit now inspire and my speech quicken,
 And send me sentence to say, substantious and noble; *help me to teach serious doctrine ..*
 So that my preaching may pierce your perverse hearts,
 250 And make you meeker to men in manners and conditions.¹
 I show you, sisters in shrift, I was a shrew ever, *in confession*
 But I was sheen in my shroud, and showed me innocent; *ladylike in dress & looked i.*
 And though I dour was and dane, despitous and bold, *and haughty*
 I was dissembled subtly in a saint's likeness:
 I seemèd sober and sweet and simple without fraud,
 But I could sixty deceive that subtler were holden. *were considered*
 Unto my lesson ye lyth, and lere at me wit, *listen and from me learn wisdom*
 If you not list be forlet with losingers untrue: *don't want to be deceived by flatters*
 Be constant in your governance, and counterfeit good manners.
 260 Though ye be keen, inconstant and cruel of mind;
 Though you as tigers be tern, be tretable in love, *fierce, be tractable*
 And be as turtles in your talk, though ye have tails brukill;²
 Be dragons both and doves, ay in double form,
 And when it needs you, anon, note both their strengths; *When necessary use both*
 Be amiable with humble face, as angels appearing,
 And with a terrible tail be stinging as adders;
 Be of your look like innocents, though ye have evil minds;
 Be courtly ay in clothing, and costly arrayed,

¹ These next few lines parody the opening of a sermon in church. First the widow inappropriately asks for God's blessing on what she is about to say, much of which is directly contrary to her text: "to make you meeker to men," and inverts church teaching into rank heresy:

Be amiable with humble face, as angels appearing,
 And with a terrible tail be stinging as adders. "

² Be like (innocent) turtledoves in your conversation even if you have hot tails.

That hurts you nought worth a hen; your husband pays for all.

How she managed her first husband.

270	Two husbands I have had, they held me both dear,	
	Though I despised them again, they spyèd it nothing:	<i>again = in return, they noticed</i>
	One was a hoary hogcart, that hosted out phlegm;	<i>haggard old man who hacked up</i>
	I hated him like a hound, though I it hid privy:	<i>quietly</i>
	With kissing and with clapping I gert the carl fone;	<i>I made the man a fool</i>
	Well could I claw his crook back, and comb his cowed noddle, ¹	<i>scratch ...balding head</i>
	And with a bukky in my cheek bo on him behind,	<i>tongue in c. make a face</i>
	And with a beck gang about and blear his old eye,	<i>with a curtsy go</i>
	And with a kind countenance kiss his crynd cheeks;	<i>wrinkled</i>
	In my mind making mocks at that mad father,	
280	Trowing me with true love to treat him so fair.	<i>Thinking</i>
	This could I do without dule, and no dis-ease take,	<i>without trouble / unease</i>
	But ay be merry in my mind and mirthfull of cheer.	
	I had a lovesomer leid my lust for to slake,	<i>I had a lovelier lad to satisfy my lust</i>
	That could be secret and sure and ay save my honour,	
	And sue but at certain times and in siker places;	<i>And meet ...& safe places</i>
	Ay when the old did me anger with awkward words	<i>when the old (man) angered me</i>
	Upon the gallant for to goif it gladded me again.	<i>On my lover to gaze</i>
	I had such wit that for woe weepèd I little,	<i>such wisdom</i>
	But let the sweet ay the sour to good season bring. ²	
290	When that the chuf would me chide, with girnand chaftes,	<i>brute ... with snarling mug</i>
	I would him chuck, cheek and chin, and cherish him so mickle,	<i>so much</i>
	That his chief chymys he had chevist to my son, ³	
	Suppose the churl was gone chaste ere the child was gotten:	

¹ Kinsley has has “keyth” for Bawcutt’s “claw”.

² But I always let the sweet (part) bring the sour to the right flavor

³ 292-3: (So) that he deeded his chief mansions to my son, who was not HIS son because the lout had gone impotent before my son was conceived.

As wise woman ay I wrought and not as wood fool,
For more with wiles I won na wichtness of hands.

*I managed, not like a mad fool
than w. strength of hand*

Her second husband

Syne married I a merchant, mighty of goods:
He was a man of mid eld and mean stature;
But we no fellows were in friendship or blood,
In freedom nor forth bearing nor fairness of person,
300 Which ay the fool did forget, for feebleness of knowledge,
But I so oft thought him on, till angered his heart,
And whilom I put forth my voice and ‘peddlar’ him called;
I would right touchingly talk by I was twice married,
For ended was my innocence with my old husband.
I was appearing to be pert within perfect eld;¹
So says the curate of our kirk, that knew me full young:
He is o’er famous to be false, that fair worthy prelate;²
I shall be loth to let him lie, while I may look forth.
I gert the buthman obey, there was no but else;
310 He made me right high reverence, from he my right knew;
For, though I say it myself, the severance was mickle
Betwixt his bastard blood and my birth noble.
That page was never of such price for to presume once
Unto my person to be peer, had pity not granted.³
But mercy in womanhood is a mickle virtue,
For never but in a gentle heart is generate any ruth.

*Afterwards
middle age & medium height
or class
liberality, conduct, beauty
I often reminded him
And once
talk about how
my virginity
priest ... church
I made the “pedlar” obey me
deep respect
the distance was great
That servant
great v.
pity*

¹ 305: I was known to be haughtly even before I was grown up.

² 307: Either “he is too reputable to be lying,” or its opposite: “He is quite famous for lying ...”

³ 313-316: He would never have presumed to be my equal (*peer*) had my mercy not allowed it, but then pity is a great virtue in women, for “pity runneth soon in gentle hearts.” She is congratulating herself on her imaginary nobility (“*gentleness*) of blood and of heart in allowing this “peddlar” to marry her.

I held ay green into his mind that I of grace took him,¹ *freshly in ...as a favor*
 And for he couth ken himself I courteously him lered:
 He durst not sit once my summons, for ere the second charge, *dared not ...2nd order*
 320 He was ay ready for to run, so rad he was for blame. *So scared*
 But ay my will was the worse of womanly nature;
 The more he louted for my love, the less of him I recked; *The more he fawned*
 And eke, this is a ferly thing: ere I him faith gave, *strange thing: before marriage*
 I had such favour to that freke, and feid syne forever.² *To that man ...later enmity*

When I the care had all clean and him overcomen wholly, *I had complete charge*
 I crew above that crawdon, as cock that were victor; *that coward*
 When I him saw subject and set at my bidding,
 Then I him lightlied as a loon and loathed his manners. *valued him lightly, as a fool*
 Then waxed I so unmerciable to martyr him I thought,
 330 For as a beast I prodded him to all boys' labour: *servant's l.*
 I would have ridden him to Rome with rope on his head,
 Were not ruffle of my renown and rumour of people. *harm to my reputation*
 And yet hatred I hid within my heart all;
 But whiles it heaped so huge, whiles it behoved out: *sometimes ... it had to come out*
 Yet took I never the wosp clean out of my wide throat, *the stopper*
 While I aught wanted of my will or what I would desire. *While I anything needed*
 But when I severed had that sire of substance in earth, *separated the man from his property*
 And gotten his biggings to my bearn, and high borough lands, *buildings.. son ..tall apartments*
 Than with a stew start out the stopper of my hals, *w. a gush... from my throat*
 340 That he all stonished through the stound, as of a steel weapon. *blow*
 Then would I, after long first so fain have been wroken, *long truce ...gladly be avenged*
 That I to flyte was as fierce as a fell dragon. *to abuse ...a fierce d.*
 I had for flattering of the fool feignèd so long,

¹ 317-18: "I kept reminding him that I had married him as a favor, and so that he should know his position I gently taught it to him. "

² "Before I married him, I had a favorable opinion of that man, but since then, endless contempt."

My evidentis of heritage ere they were all sealed, ¹
 My breast, that was great beild, bowden was so huge,
 That near my baret out burst ere the bond maken.
 But when my bills and my bauchles was all broad sealed, *bills & b. = legal documents*
 I would no longer bear a bridle, but braid up my head; *but threw*
 There might no molet make me moy, nor hold my mouth in: *no bit make me tame*
 350 I gert the reins rak and rif into sunder; *I made the reins break & tear*
 I made that wife-carl to work all women's works,² *that nancy*
 And laid all manly matters and mensk on this earth. *And put aside ... and dignity*
 Then said I to my cumaris in council about, *my confidants (co-meres), godsibs*
 "See how I cabled yon colt with a keen bridle!
 The cappill that the creels cast in the chaff midden, ³ *the horse ... baskets ... garbage*
 So courteously the cart draws, and kens no plunging, *does no rearing*
 He is not skeich, nor yet scars, nor skips not one side': *restive nor jumpy*
 And thus the scorn and the scaith 'scaped he neither. *hurt*
 He was no gladsome guest for a gay lady, *companion*
 360 Therefore I got him a game that ganed him bettir; *that suited*
 He was a great golded man and of goods rich;
 I let him be my lombard to loose me all misteris, *my banker to relieve me of all business*
 And he was fain for to fang from me that fair office, *glad to get*
 And thought my favors to find through his fele gifts. *his many gifts*
 He grathed me in a gay silk and goodly arrays, *dressed me*
 In gowns of engrained cloth and great golden chains, *rich cloth*
 In rings royally set with rich ruby stones,
 While highly rose my renown among the rude people.
 But I full craftily did keep those courtly weeds, *clothes*

¹ 243-6: "To flatter that fool I had to pretend for so long (until the documents handing over his property were sealed) that my breast was swollen with rage, and it all nearly burst out before the legal documents were sealed."

² DOST defines *wif carll* as a "weak or womanish man."

³ 355: "The horse that threw off the pannier baskets in the garbage heap."

370 Till after death of that drupe that docht naught in chamber. ¹
 Though he of all my clothes made cost and expense, *bore the cost*
 Another shall the worship have, that wiolds me after; *who enjoys me*
 And though I liked him but little, yet for love of others,
 I would me preen pleasantly in precious weeds, *in expensive clothes*
 That lovers might upon me look and young lusty gallants,
 That I held more in dainty and dearer by full mickle
 Na him that dressed me so dink: full dotis was his head. *Than he ...so nicely ...stupid*
 When he was harried out of hand to high up my honors, *to elevate*
 And painted me as peacock, proudest of feathers,
 380 I him miskenned, by Christ, and cuckold him made; *I ignored him*
 I him forlet as a lad and loathed him mickle: *I treated himmuch*
 I thought my self a popinjay and him a plucked herle; *heron*
 All thus enforcèd he his foe and fortified in strength, *re-inforced & fortified his foe (me)*
 And made a stalwart staff to strike himself down.
 But of one bourd in bed I shall you breif yit: *one joketell you*
 When he one whole year was hanyt and him behoved (?) rage, ²
 And I was loth to be loppin with such a lob avoir, *mounted by an old nag*
 As lang as he was aloft, I looked on him never,
 Nor let never enter in my thought that he my thing pierced,
 390 But ay in mind another man imagined that I had;
 Or else had I never merry been at that mirthless ride. *I'd have had no pleasure*

When I that grome gelded had of goods and of nature, *robbed him of goods & manhood*
 Me thought him graceless on to goif, so me God help: *to look at*
 When he had wared all on me his wealth and his substance, *had spent*
 Me thought his wit was all went away with the laif; *his mindthe rest*
 And so I did him despise, I spitted when I saw
 That super spent evil spirit, despoiled of all vertu. *all manhood*

¹ 370: "Till after the death of that weakling that was useless in bed."

² 386 ff: "When he'd been a year without sex and needed relief, I was reluctant to be mounted by that old nag, and as long as he was up, I did not look at him nor would I admit to myself that he had penetrated me, but kept imagining that I had another man."

For, well ye wait, wives, that he that wants riches *you know*
 And valiantness in Venus's play, is full vile holden: *held in contempt*
 400 Full fruster is his fresh array and fairness of person, *Useless ... and good looks*
 All is but fruitless his effer and fails at the up with. *his looks ... at the crucial moment*

I busked up my barnes like baron's sons, *dressed my children*
 And made but fools of the fry of his first wife. *children*
 I banished from my bounds his brothers ilkane; *each one*
 His friends as my foes I held at feid ever; *enmity*
 By this, ye believe may, I loved not himself,
 For never I liked a lede that 'longed to his blood: *a person of his family*
 And yet these wisemen, they wait that all wives evil *they think*
 Are kend with their conditionis and known with the same. *are seen & known by their disposition*

*Having outlasted both husbands she is now even more free to do as she wishes,
 under cover of her "mourning" for the dead..*

410 Dead is now that dyvour and dollin in earth: *bankrupt and buried*
 With him died all my dole and my dreary thoughts; *my pain*
 Now done is my duly night, my day is upsprungun, *dreary*
 Adieu dolour, adieu! My dainty now begins: *my pleasure*
 Now am I a widow, i-wis, and well am at ease;
 I weep as I were woe-ful, but well is me forever;
 I busk as I were baleful, but blithe is my heart; *I dress as if mourning*
 My mouth it makes mourning, and my mind laughs;
 My cloaks they are care-full in colour of sable, *carefull= sad*
 But courtly and right curious my corse is there under:¹
 420 I droop with a dead look in my dule habit *my mourning dress*
 As with man's dail I had done for days of my life. *dealing, intercourse*
 When that I go to the kirk, clad in care weed, *mourning clothes*
 As fox in a lamb's fleece feign I my cheer;
 Than lay I forth my bright book abroad on my knee,

¹ "Underneath my cloak my body is dressed in courtly and elaborate fashion."(?)

With many lusty letters illumined with gold;	
And draw my cloak for-thwart oe'r my face white,	<i>across</i>
That I may spy, unespied, a space me beside	<i>my surrounding for a while</i>
Full oft I blink by my book, and blynis of devotion,	<i>Look past ...& pay not attention to</i>
To see what bern is best brand or broadest in shoulders,	<i>what man is brawniest</i>
430 Or forged is most forcely to furnish a banquet	<i>and built strongest</i>
In Venus's chamber, valiantly, withouten vain ruse:	<i>vain boasting</i>
And, as the new moon all pale, oppressèd with change,	
Kythes whiles her clear face through clouds of sable,	<i>shows sometimes</i>
So keek I through my cloaks, and cast kind looks	<i>peek</i>
To knights and to clerics and courtly persons.	
When friends of my husbands behold me afar,	
I have a water sponge for woe within my wide cloaks,	
Then wring I it full wilily and wet my cheeks,	
With that water mine eyes and welter down tears.	
440 Than say they all, that sit about, "See ye not, alas!	
Yon lustless lede so loyally she loved her husband:	<i>joyless creature</i>
Yon is a piety to imprint in a prince's heart,	
That such a pearl of pleasance should yon pain dre!"	<i>this pain endure</i>
I sign me as I were a saint, and seem an angel;	<i>make the sign of the cross</i>
At language of lechery I let as I were crabbèd.	<i>I pretend to be offended</i>
I sigh without sore heart or sickness in body.	
According to my sable weed I must have sad manners	<i>To go w. my dark clothes</i>
Or they will see all the sooth; for certes, we women	<i>the truth</i>
We set us all for the sight to syle men of truth.	<i>to divert m. from</i>
450 We dule for no evil deed, so it be dern holden.	<i>We regret nokept secret</i>
Wise women have ways and wonderful guidings	
With great engine to bejape their jealous husbands;	<i>ingenuity to trick</i>
And quietly, with such craft, convoy our matters	<i>w. skill conduct our affairs</i>
That, under Christ, no creature kens of our doings.	<i>So that ...no c. knows</i>
But folk a cury may mis-cook, that knowledge want,	<i>a dish ...who lack knowledge</i>
And has no colours for to cover their own kindly faults;	<i>no devices ...natural failings</i>
As do these damsel, for derne doted love,	<i>silly from secret love</i>

That dogons hold in dainty, and deal with them so long,
Till all the country knows their kindness and faith:

that fall in love w. clods

460 Faith has a fair name, but falsehood fares better:

Fidelity

Fie on her that cannot feign her fame for to save !

who can't lie to protect her name

Yet am I wise in such work, and was all my time;

Though I want wit in worldliness, I wiles have in love,

As any happy woman has that is of high blood:

of high birth? or highly sexed?

Huted be the halok lass a hundred year of eld!¹

Her "secret" and not so secret life

I have a secret servant, right sober of his tongue,

sober or souir: sure

That me supports of such needs when I a sign make:

Though he be simple to the sight; he has a tongue siker;

sure, dependable

Full many a seemlier sege worse service does make:

handsomer man

470 Though I have care under cloak the clear day till night,

Yet I have solace under serk till the sun rise.

pleasure under the shirt

Yet am I halden a holy wife o'er all the whole shire,

I'm considered

I am so piteous to the poor, when there are persons many.

When there's an audience

In passing on pilgrimages I pride me full mickle,

very much

More for the praise of the people na any pardon winning.

than any

But yet me think the best bourd, when barons and knights,

best joke

And other bachelors, blithe blooming in youth,

And all my lovers loyal my lodging pursue,

flock to my house

And fill me wine wantonly with welfare and joy:

480 Some rowns; and some rallies; and some reads ballads;²

Whispers .. Flirts

Some raiffis forth rudely with riotous speech:

burst

Some 'plaines, and some prays; some praises my beauty,

Some kisses me; some clapp me; some kindness me proffers;

hug

¹ "Hooted be the 100 year old woman who is still a silly girl." I.e. Some people never learn.

² *Sum* in the original possibly means "one" rather than "some."

Some carves to me courteously; some me the cup gives;
 Some stalwartly steps bin, with a stout courage *steps within*
 And a stiff standing thing stuffs in my neff; *my hand*
 And many blenks bin o'er that but full far sits, ¹ *glance down inside*
 That may, for the thick throng, not thrid as they would. *not succeed*
 But, with my fair calling, I comfort them all:
 490 For he that sits me next, I nip on his finger;
 I serve him on the other side in the same fashion;
 And he that behind me sits, I hard on him lean;
 And him before, with my foot fast on his I tramp; *the one in front*
 And to the berns far but sweet blinks I cast. *men afar ...sweet looks*
 To every man in special I speak some words,
 So wisely and so womanly, till warm their hearts.
 There is no living lede so low of degree *no man alive*
 That shall me love unloved, I am so loik hearted; *soft hearted*
 And if his lust be so lent into my lyre white *so set on my w.body*
 500 That he be lost or with me lie, his life shall not danger. ²
 I am so mercifull in mind and meny all wights, *and pity all men*
 My sely soul shall be safe, when Sabaoth all judges. *My poor soul ... when God*

Ladies, learn these lessons and be not lassies found: *little girls*
 This is the legend of my life, though Latin it be none."³

When ended had her ornate speech, this eloquent widow,
 Loud they laughed all the laif, and loffèd her mickle; *the others and praised her much*

¹ *Ben our* = within over = “over to the inner room” acc to Harvey-Wood. The whole phrase seems to mean something like “and many can only get glimpse within (to the inner room) who sit too far away to get what they want because of the crowd.”

² 500: “If his desire is so strong that he will die unless he sleeps with me, his life will be in no danger,” i.e. I will oblige him. Bawcutt maintains that “lie” really reads “lak” = “sport amorously.” The difference is small. In view of what the Widow tells us here, it seems unnecessary for her to have a secret and discreet lover, as she relates above (466 ff)

³ A legend was normally a life of a saint written in Latin. The irony is obvious.

And said they should example take of her sovereign teaching,
 And work after her words, that woman was so prudent. *after = according to*
 Then cooled they their mouth with comfortable drinks;
 510 And carpéd full cummerlike with cup going round. *& chatted intimately*
 Thus drove they o'er that dear night with dances full noble
 Till that the day did up dawn, and dew donkèd flowers; *moistened*
 The morrow mild was and meek, the mavis did sing, *thrush*
 And all removed the mist, and the mead smelled; *meadow*
 Silver showers down shook as the sheen crystal, *bright c.*
 And birds shouted in shaw with their shrill notes; *in the wood*
 The golden glittering gleam so gladded their hearts,
 They made a glorious glee among the green boughs. *music*
 The soft sowch of the swyr and sound of the streams, *soft murmuring of the valley*
 520 The sweet savour of the sward and singing of fowls, *grass*
 Might comfort any creature of the kin of Adam,
 And kindle again his courage, though it were cold slokynt. *extinguished*
 Then rose these royal roses, in their rich weeds, *rich clothes*
 And rakit home to their rest through the rise blooms. *Strolled ...flowering bushes*

And I all privily passed to a pleasant arbor, *quietly*
 And with my pen did report their pastime most merry.
 Ye auditors most honorable, that ears has given
 Unto this uncouth adventure, which early me happened,
 Of these three wanton wives that I have written here,
 530 Which would you wail to your wife, if you should wed one? *choose as*

End of Twa Mariit Wemen & the Wedo

Appendix on next page.

Appendix

A gentler, cleaner 20th century version of the material wishes of the widow.

Peel Me A Grape

music and lyrics by Dave Frishberg

Here's how to be an agreeable chap:

Love me and leave me in luxury's lap._

Peel me a grape; crush me some ice

Skin me a peach, save the fuzz for my pillow._

Poach me a prawn, talk to me nice;

You gotta wine me and dine me...

Don't try to fool me; bejewel me.

Either amuse me or lose me.

I'm getting hungry; peel me a grape..._

Pop me a cork, French me a fry._

Crack me a nut, bring a bowl fulla bon-bons._

Chill me some wine, keep standing by._

Just entertain me, champagne me._

Show me you love me, kid glove me._

Best way to cheer me, cashmere me.

Hop when I holler, skip when I snap._

When I say do it, jump to it...

Send out for a scotch; call me a cab.

Cut me a rose; make my tea with the petals._

Just hang around, pick up the tab.

Never out-think me, just mink me.

Don't hug me. Polar bear rug me;

New Thunderbird me, you heard me._

I'm getting hungry, peel me a grape...