

- 685 To reden on this book of wikked wives.<sup>o</sup>  
 "He knew of hem mo legendes and lives  
 Than been of goode wives in the Bible.  
 For trusteth well, it is an impossible  
 That any clerk wol speke good of wives,  
 690 But if it be of hooly seintes lives,  
 Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.<sup>o</sup>  
 "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?<sup>o</sup>  
 By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,  
 As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,  
 695 They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse  
 Than all the mark of Adam<sup>o</sup> may redresse.  
 "The children of Mercurie and Venus<sup>o</sup>  
 Been in hir wirking ful contrarius.  
 Mercurie loveth wisdam and science,  
 700 And Venus loveth riot and dispence,  
 And for hir diverse disposicioun  
 Ech falleth in othes exaltacioun.<sup>o</sup>  
 And thus, God woot, Mercurie is desolat  
 In Pisces wher Venus is exaltat,

*tales and life stories*  
*Than there are about*  
*an inconceivable event*

*cells, places of prayer*

*contentious*

*revelry and extravagance*  
*opposed dispositions*

**685. book of wikked wives:** This anthology of antifeminist and antimatrimonial anecdotes and tales was apparently designed in part to convince young men to consider the celibate priesthood rather than a secular calling. Alisoun, of course, is infuriated by having to listen to Jankyn read to her from this book, which would have denigrated women, wives, and marriage.

**688-91. For trusteth . . . mo:** Alisoun exaggerates, but medieval clerics were known for their antifeminist views, and books like Jankyn's exist to this day. For clerics, Eve was the archetypal human woman whose gluttony and pride caused man to be driven out of heaven. Eve is counterbalanced by Mary, of course, whom clerics would have thought of as utterly sinless, and certainly not human in the same sense that Eve was.

**692. Who peyntede . . . who:** The reference here is to an old fable, originally by Aesop, about the man who painted a picture of a man defeating a lion. A lion remarks that if lions did the painting, they would naturally paint scenes depicting a lion defeating a man. Alisoun's point is that if women told about men, the wickedness of men would be apparent.

**696. all the mark of Adam:** All who are in the image of Adam — that is, all men. The idea here is that women could tell such stories about the wickedness of men that all the men in the world could not "redress" or make amends for them or set them right.

**697. Mercurie and Venus:** Learned men, or clerks, were associated with Mercury, god of learning and literature, while most women in the secular world were associated with Venus, goddess of love. The following lines suggest in a complicated manner that clerks and women are by nature "contrarius." The conflict between Mars and Venus (see lines 610-18) leads to divisiveness within the Wife of Bath. This conflict between Mercury and Venus leads to dissension between the Wife of Bath and others, especially the clerk Jankyn, who was her fifth husband.

**702. Ech falleth . . . exaltacioun:** A complicated astrological reference that means that when one of the planets is "exalted" or increases its influence, the other "falls" or loses its influence.

- 705 And Venus falleth there Mercurie is reysed.<sup>o</sup> *where*  
 Therefore no womman of no clerk is preysed.  
 The clerk, whan he is oold and may noight do  
 Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho, *love-works / worth an old shoe*  
 Thanne sit he doun and writ in his dotage *writes in his old age*  
 710 That wommen kan not kepe her mariage. *remain faithful*  
 "But now to purpos, why I tolde thee  
 That I was beten for a book, pardee.  
 Upon a night Jankyn, that was oure sire,  
 Redde on his book, as he sat by the fire,  
 715 Of Eva first, that for her wikkednesse  
 Was all mankinde broght to wrecchednesse.  
 [For which that Jhesu Crist himself was slayn  
 That boghte us with his herte blood agayn.  
 Lo, heere expres of womman may ye finde *redeemed us*  
 720 That womman was the los of all mankinde.]<sup>o</sup> *explicitly / find (it said)*  
 Tho redde he me how Sampson<sup>o</sup> loste his heres,  
 Slepinge. His lemman kitte it with her sheres,  
 Thurgh which treson loste he bothe his eyen.  
 Tho redde he me, if that I shall not lyen,  
 725 Of Hercules<sup>o</sup> and of his Dianire  
 That caused him to sette himself a-fire.  
 "Nothing forgat he the sorwe and wo  
 That Socrates<sup>o</sup> hadde with his wives two,  
 How Xantippa caste pisse upon his heed.  
 730 This sely man sat stille as he were deed.  
 He wiped his heed. Namooore dorste he sayn  
 But, 'Er that thonder stinte, comth a reyn!' *No more dares*  
 "Of Phasipha,<sup>o</sup> that was the queene of Crete, *Before thunder stops*

**717-20. For which . . . mankinde:** See note to lines 575-84. There is some question about whether these antifeminist lines are Chaucer's own.

**721. Sampson:** In this story, Sampson makes the mistake of telling Delilah the secret that his strength lies in his hair. She cuts his hair and reports his weakened condition to his enemies, who blind him. See Judges 16. Chaucer tells the story at more length in the Monk's Tale in Fragment VII (Group B<sup>2</sup> 3205-84). Chaucer apparently took this story and several of the following from Jerome.

**725. Hercules:** Deianira, Hercules' second wife, without realizing that it will kill him, gives him a shirt dipped in poisoned blood. Rather than let the poison kill him, however, he buries himself in hot coals and dies. Chaucer tells the story at more length in the Monk's Tale, Fragment VII (Group B<sup>2</sup> 3285-3332).

**728. Socrates:** Socrates' difficulties with his wife, Xantippe, and his patience in the face of those difficulties, are legendary, but Chaucer derived this incident in which Xantippe dumps a chamber pot on his head from Jerome 48. In Jerome, however, what she dumps is said to be merely "dirty water," not urine.

**733. Phasipha:** Even bold Alisoun is reluctant to talk openly about Pasiphae, who has a love affair with a bull and later gives birth to the Minotaur.