

Diverse scoles maken parfit clerkes^o
 And diverse practik in many sondry werkes
 Maketh the werkman parfyt sikerly.^o
 44f Of fyve husbondes scoleiynge am I.]^o
 45 Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shall!
 "For sith I wol not kepe me chaast in all
 Whan mine housbõnde is fro the world agon,
 Some Cristen man shall wedde me anon,
 For then th'apostle^o seith that I am free
 To wed, a Goddes half, where it liketh me.
 He seith that to be wedded is no sinne.^o
 'Bet is to be wedded than to brynne.'^o
 What rekketh me, thogh folk say vileynye
 Of shrewed Lameth and his bigamye?
 50 I woot well Abraham was an hooly man,
 And Jacob^o eek, as fer as ever as I kan,
 And ech of hem hadde wives mo than two —
 And many another holy man also.
 Wher can ye seye, in any manere age,
 60 That heighe God defended mariage
 By expres word? I pray you, telleth me.

*entirely chaste
dies*

in God's behalf / pleases

*What do I care
wicked*

so far as I know

*And so did
in any period
the high God forbade
In explicit words*

44c. Diverse scoles . . . clerkes: Attending diverse schools causes students to be "perfect."

44d–44e. And diverse . . . sikerly: And different practical experiences make the workman perfect, surely. In these lines and the next the Wife of Bath is bragging about how she has been well schooled in the ways of marriage by her five husbands. Chaucer may not have written the lines, however. See next note.

44a–44f. Of whiche . . . scoleiynge am I: I bracket these six lines because they are of questionable authenticity. They do not appear in some of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts, and may well have been late additions either by Chaucer or by an editor. Their authenticity is suspect in part because they interrupt the otherwise nice continuity between lines 44 and 45: "Thank the Lord that I have had five husbands. . . Welcome the sixth!" The line numbering of 44a–f is different from the rest of these materials because the lines are in neither the Hengwrt nor the Ellesmere manuscript, and because Walter W. Skeat, whose line numbering most subsequent editors follow, did not include the six lines in his 1894 landmark edition.

49. th'apostle: Saint Paul. The reference here is to 1 Corinthians 7:39. Most of Chaucer's knowledge of Pauline materials, and, indeed, other biblical materials in the Wife of Bath's Prologue, comes by way of Jerome. For this passage, for example, see Jerome 14. In general, however, I shall give in these notes only the biblical reference. For Chaucer, "the" apostle — that is, with the definite pronoun — always refers to Paul.

51. to be . . . sinne: See 1 Corinthians 7:28.

52. Bet is . . . brynne: It is better to marry than burn (with desire). See 1 Corinthians 7:9.

54–56. Lameth . . . Abraham . . . Jacob: In Genesis 4:19 Lameth is said to have two wives. According to Jerome 5, Abraham had three wives, Jacob four.

"Or where comanded he virginitee?
 I woot as well as ye, it is no drede,
 Th'apostel, whan he speketh of maidenhede,
 He seyde that precept thereof hadde he noon.^o
 65 Men may conseil a womman to been oon,
 But conseilning nis no comandement.
 He put it in oure owene juggement.
 For hadde God comanded maidenhede,
 70 Thanne hadde he dampned wedding with the dede.
 And, certain, if there were no seed ysowe,
 Virginitee thanne wherof sholde it growe?^o
 Poul dorste not comanden, atte leeste,
 A thing of which his maister yaf noon heeste.
 75 The dart is set up for virginitee.
 Cacche whoso may. Who renneth best lat see.^o
 "But this word^o is not take of every wight,
 But there as God list give it of his might.
 I woot well that th'apostel was a maide,
 80 But natheles, thogh that he wroot and sayde.
 He wolde that every wight were swich as he,^o
 All nis but conseil to virginitee.
 And for to been a wif he yaf me leve
 Of indulgence.^o So nis it no repreve
 85 To wedde me if that my make die,
 Withoute excepcioun of bigamye.
 Al were it good no womman for to touche,^o
 He mente as in his bed or in his couche,
 For peril is both fire and tow t'assemble.^o
 90 Ye know what this ensample may resemble!
 "This all and som: he heeld virginitee
 Moore parfit than wedding in freletee.

*know / there is no doubt
maidenhood
precise ruling
advise / one*

*at the same time
sown*

*Saint Paul
gave no law*

*let's see
every person*

God pleases to

know / Paul was a virgin

*nothing but advice (not command)
gave*

*it is no reproof
my mate*

*accusing me of
Although*

*example, metaphor
To summarize
frailty*

64–65. Th'apostel . . . noon: See 1 Corinthians 7:25.

69–72. For hadde . . . growe: From Jerome 12.

75–76. The dart . . . see: A "dart" or small spear was sometimes given as the prize to the winner of a footrace. The Wife of Bath's point is that people who want to pursue that prize may do so, but she has other "darts" in mind.

77. this word: Paul's word that people should strive for a life of abstinence.

81. He wolde . . . he: He would prefer that everyone be like him (in chastity). See 1 Corinthians 7:7.

83–84. leve Of indulgence: Special permission or dispensation to marry.

87. Al were . . . touche: See 1 Corinthians 7:1.

89. For peril . . . t'assemble: For it is dangerous to bring fire and flax close together. That the Wife of Bath has a sexual comparison in mind is clear enough from the previous and the following lines.