

The Old Wife of Beith,  
by

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Chaucer

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Much better reformed, enlarged and corrected, than it was  
formerly in the old uncorrect copy.

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With an Addition of Many Other Things.

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Edinburgh.  
Printed and sold in Niddry's Wyn  
[Price One-Penny.]

Edited by Robert Simola

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## Introduction

Copies of The Old Wife of Beith are only found in the British Library and Oxford University Bodleian Library. It was printed in Edinburgh and sold in Niddry's-Wind. Price was one pence. The suggested publishing date is 1778. This anonymous work lists Geoffrey Chaucer as the author. The original in the British Library is listed in the ETSC system as 16mo. which means it is between six and seven inches tall. It was put on microfilm in 1966 and an electronic reproduction of the scanned images of the book was made by Thomson Gale (ECCO) in 2003.

Based on the scanned images in the ECCO facsimile, the printer used old, worn-out type. Often the difference between a long s and an f has to be implied by how a word would be spelled and which makes most sense in that particular word. The same is true for differentiating between an “o”, a “c” and an “e”. With the worn-out type used in the printing, the correct letter has to be identified by the context.

Compounding the problem of understanding is the non-standard spelling used in the book and the continuous question of whether the word in question is using what is today non-standard spelling or is a word that is no longer commonly used.

I have chosen to leave the spelling as it is in the original both to give the feeling of the original book and also because the spelling will sometimes make a difference in the pronunciation and the meter. The Old Wife of Beith is written in a rather regular iambic tetrameter with the lines ending in alternate rhymes (ababcdcd etc.) although there is some irregularity in the rhymes with either off rhymes being used, the use of couplets, or the expected rhymes simply not happening such as .

‘Your Master did you not betray?  
‘Wherfore you bid I will not stay,  
‘Go then you knave let me alone.”  
‘Whatever I be I’ll be your guide,



Illustration by W. W. Denslow

IN Beath once dwelt a worthy wife,  
Of whom brave Chaucer mention makes,  
She liv'd a licentious life.

And namely in **veneral** acts; acts of Venus; ie. sexual acts  
But death did come for all her **cracks**, loud talk or noise  
When years were spent, & days were driven  
Then suddenly she sickness takes,  
Deceast forthwith, and went to heaven.

But as she went upon the way,  
There followed her a certain guide;  
And kindly to her he did say,  
Where mean you dame for to abide?  
I know you are the wife of Beath,  
And would n ot then that you go wrong,  
For I'm your friend, and will be loath,  
That you go throw the narrow throng,  
This way is broader, go with me,  
And very pleasant is the way:  
I'll bring you there where you would be  
Go with me, friend; say me not nay.

She looked on him, then did **spier**,  
ask or question  
I pray you sir, What is your name?  
Show me the way how you came here,  
To tell to me it is not shame,  
Is that a favour about thy neck”  
And what is that upon thy side:?  
Is it a bag of silver sack;  
What are you then, where do you bide:

'I was servant unto Christ,  
'And Judas likewise is my name."  
'I knew you by your colour first,  
'Forsooth indeed you are to blame;

‘Your Master did you not betray?  
‘Wherefore you bid I will not stay,  
‘Go then you knave let me alone.’”

‘Whatever I be I’ll be your guide,  
‘Because you know not well the way,  
‘Will you but once in me confide,  
‘I’ll do all friendship that I may.’”

‘What would you me, where do you dwell?  
‘I have no will to go with thee:  
‘I fear it is some lower cell,  
‘I pray thee therefore let me be.’”

This stormy night and cold,  
I’ll bring you to a right warm inn,  
Will ye go foreward and behold,  
And mend your pace till we win in.

I’m fear’d your inn will be two warm,  
For two much hotness is not best,  
I know your way it is to hell,  
For you are none of the eleven,  
Go haste you then into our cell,  
My way is only into heaven,  
That way is then, by the gates of hell,  
If you intend there or to go,  
Good dame, I will not you compel,  
But I will go with you also,  
Then down then went a right steep hill,

Where smoke and darkness did abound,  
And pitch and sulphur burned still,  
With yells and cries hills did resound,  
The fiend himself came to the gate.

I will not have you here, good dame,  
For you are mistress of the **slyting**;  
If once within these gates you came,

duplicity or wiles

I will be troubled with your biting,  
**Cummer, gae** back and let me be,  
Here are too many of this rout;  
For women lewd like unto thee.  
I cannot turn my foot about.

*Sir thief*, I say I shall bide out,,  
But gossip was thou ne'er to me,  
For to come in I'm not so stout,  
And of my biting thou's be free,  
But *Lucifer* what's that to thee?  
Hast thou no water in this place.  
Thou look'st so black, it to seems me,  
'Thou ne'er does wash thy ugly face.

If we had water for to drink,  
We would not care for washing then:  
Into these flames, and filthy stink,  
We burn with fire unto the doom,  
Upbraid me then good wife no more,  
For first when I heard of thy name,  
I know thou had such words in store,  
Would make the devil to think shame.

Forsooth, *Sir thief*, you are to blame,  
If I had time now to abide.  
Once you were well, but may think shame,  
That lost heaven for rebellious pride,  
Who, traitor like fell with the rest,  
Because thou would not be content;  
And now of bless are dispossesset,  
Without all grace for to repent,  
Thou mad'st poor Eve for to consent,  
To eat of the forbidden tree,  
Which we poor daughters may repent,  
And make us almost like to thee,

woman familiarly applied; go

But God be blest that past thee by,  
And did a Saviour provide,  
For ADAM's whole posterity,  
All those who do in him confide,  
Adieu false friend I may not bide,  
With thee I may no longer stay,  
My GOD in death he was my guide,  
O'er hell I'll get the victory.

Then up the hill the poor wife went,  
Opprest with stinking flames of fear,  
Weeping right sore with great relent,  
For to go else she wist not where;  
A narrow way with thorns and briers,  
And full of mires were her before.  
She sighed oft with sobs and tears,  
The poor wife's heart was wondrous sore,  
Tir'd and torn she went on still,  
Sometimes she sat, and sometimes fell;  
Ay till she came to a high hill,  
And then she looked back to hell,  
When that she had clim'd up the hill,  
Before her was a goodly plain;  
Where she did rest and weep her fill,  
Then rose and to her foot again,  
Her heart was glad the way was good,  
Up to the hill she hy'd with haste,  
The flowers were fair where that she stood,  
The fields were poleasant to her taste,  
There then she spy'd *Jerusalem*,  
On Zion's mount where that she stood,  
Shining with gold like as the sun,  
This silly soul then was right glad:  
The ports were pearls shining bright,

Glorious it was for to behold,  
With precious stones gave such a light,  
The walls were of transparent gold,  
High were the walls, the gates were shut,  
And long she thought for to be in,  
But then for fear of biding out,  
She knocked hard, and made some **din**.

noise

To knock and cry she did not spare,  
Till father ADAM did her hear,  
Who is't that raps so loudly there;  
Heaven cannot well be won by **weir**,

The wife of *Beith* since that you spier,  
Hath stood these two hours at the gate,  
Go back (*quoth he*) thou most forbear,  
Here may no sinners entrance get.  
ADAM (*said she*) I shall be in.  
In spite of all such churkls as thee;  
Thou art the original of all sin,  
For eating of the forbidden tree,  
For which thou art not **flyting** (?) fled.  
But for thy soul fences free.

ask or question

scolded, rebuked, chided

ADAM stept (?) back and let her be.  
Looking as if his nose had bled,  
Then mother EVE did at him spier,  
Who was it there that made such **din**;

ask or question

noise

He said a women would be here,  
For me I durst not let her in.

I'll go (*quoth she*) and ask her will,  
Her company I would have fain

But ay she cry'd and knocked still,  
And in no ways she would refrain,

Daughter, said EVE, you will do well,  
And come again another time;

Heaven is not won by sword or steel,  
Nor none that's guilty of a crime,

Mother, said she the fault is thine,  
That knocking here so long I stand,  
Thy guilt is more by far than mine,  
If thou would rightly understand,  
Thou wast the cause of all our sins,  
Wherein we're born and conceiv'd,  
Our miseries thou did'st begin,  
By thee thy husband was deceiv'd.

EVE then went back where Noah was,  
And told him all how she was blam'd  
Of her great sin, and first trespass,  
Where of she was so much asham'd.

Then NOAH said I will go down,  
And will forbid her that she knock,  
Go back (*she said*) ye drunken **lown**  
You're none of the ceiestial flock.

NOAH (*she said*) hold thou thy peace,  
Where I drank ale, thou did'st drink wine  
Discovered was to thy disgrace,  
When thou wast full like to a swine;  
If I drank I learn'd at thee  
for thour't the father and the first,  
That others taught and likewise me,  
To drink as we had no thirst,

Then NOAH in haste turned back with speed  
Ad told the patriarch ABRAHAM then,  
How that the **carling** made him dread  
And all his deeds how she did ken.

ABRAHAM she said will ye but spier,  
I hope you are not **flyting** free;  
You of yourself had such a care,

variant of loon; i.e. fool, idiot

old woman

ask or question  
scolding, rebuked, chided

Deny'd yourself and made a lie,  
Oh then I pray you let me be,  
For I repent of all my sin,  
Do thou but open the gates to me,  
And let me quietly come in,

ABRAHAM went back to JACOB then,  
And told his nephew how he **spied**,  
How that of her nothing he **wan**,  
Then down came JACOB thro' the close?  
And said go backward down to hell;

JACOB (*quoth she*) I know thy voice,  
That gate pertaineth to thyself;  
Of thy old trumperies I can tell,  
With two sisters thou leadst thy life.  
And the third part of the tribes twelve,  
Thou got with maids beside thy wife;  
And stole thy fathers venison,  
Only by fraud thy brother free,  
Gave thou him not for venison,  
A kid instead of **baken rae**.

JACOB himself was tickled so,  
He went to LOT where he was lying,  
And to the gate pray'd him to go,  
To **stunch** the **carling** of her crying

LOT says fair dame make less ado,  
And come again another day,  
Old harlot **carse**, and drunken too,  
Thou with thine own two daughters lay.  
Of thine untimely seed I say  
Proceeding never good for ill.

Poor LOT for shame he stole away,  
And let the wife still **crack** her fill.  
Meek MOSES then went down at last.

discovered, found out

baked or cooked deer

staunch; Old woman

churl, boor

loud talk or noise

To pacify the **carling** then;  
Now dame said he knock not so fast,  
Your knocking will not let you **ben**.  
Good sir, she said, I am a **ghast**,  
When that I look you in the face,  
If that your law till now had last,  
Then surely I had ne'er got grace;  
But MOSES sir, now by your leave,  
Altho' in heaven you be possest,  
For all you saw did not believe  
But you in Horeb there transgrest:

Then AARON said I will not swear,  
But conjure her as I can,  
And I will make her now forbear,  
So that she shall not rap again.  
Then ARON said, thou whorish wife.  
Go get you gone and rap no more;  
With idols you have led our life,  
Or then you shall repent it sore.

Good ARON priest I know you well,  
The Golden calf you may remember,  
Who made the people plagues to feel,  
'Tis of you recorded never;  
Your priesthood now is nothing worth,  
CHRIST is my only priest and he,  
My LORD, who will not keep me forth,  
So I'll be in spite of thee.

Then up starts SAMSON at the length;  
Unto the gate apace came he,  
To drive away the wife with strength.  
But all invain it would not be.

SAMSON (*quoth she*) the world may see,  
Thou was a judge that prev'd unjust;

old woman, (disparaging)

in  
scared, frightened

Those gracious gifts that GOD gave thee.  
Thou lost them thy licentious lust,  
From DELILAH thy wicked wife,  
Thy secrets could not thou refrain,  
She daily sought to take thy life,  
Thou lost thy fight when then was sta'n  
Thought thou was strong it was invain,  
Hunting with harlots here and there.

Then SAMSON turning back again,  
And with the wife would **meel no mair.** would no longer speak with  
Then said the king DAVID knock no more,  
We all are troubled with your crying;  
DAVID (*quoth she*) why cam'st thou here,  
Thou might'st bide out as well as I,  
Thy deeds no way thou can'st deny,  
Is not thy sins far worse than mine/  
Who with URIAH'S wife did ly  
And caus'd him to be murdered **syne.** immediately afterward

Then JUDITH said, who's there that knocks  
And to your neighbours gives these notes,

Madam, she said, let be your mocks,  
I come not here for cutting throats;  
I am a sinner full of bloats,  
Yet thro' CHRIST's blood I shall be clean,  
If I and you were judg'd by votes,  
The things thou did'st was worse done,

Then said the sapient SOLOMON,  
Therefore our SAVIOUS I suppose,  
The heavenly entrance will deny.

Remember (*quoth she*) the latter day,  
What idol gods thou did up set,  
And so lewd *Venus* play,  
Thou did'st thy MAKER quite forget.

Then JONAH (*quoth she*) how stands the case  
How came you here to be with CHRIST?  
How dare you look him in the face?  
Considering how ou broke your tryst,  
To GOD's errand thou withstood him,  
And held his **nounsel** in distain. counsel

The raven messenger thou plead'st him,  
And brought no message back again,  
With mercy thou wast not content,  
When that the LORD he did them spare,  
Although the city did repent,  
It grieved thee, thy heart was **sait**, set

Let me alone and speak no more,  
Go back again into the whale,  
For now my heart is also **sere**, barred, held fast  
But yet I hope I shall prevail,  
Good JONAH said **crack** on your fill. loud talk or noise

For here I may no longer tarry,  
Yea knock as long as e'er ye will,  
And go into the **firie farie**. fire fair; ie. go to hell

JONAH she said ye do miscarry,  
As I have done in former time,  
You're not St. PETER nor St. MARY?  
Thy bloat's as black as ever mine,  
So JONAH then he was asham'd,  
Because he was not **flyting** free. scolded, rebuked, chided

Of all his faults she had him blam'd,  
He left her then and let her be.

Saint THOMAS I council thee,  
Go speak unto this wicked wife,  
She shames us all, and for me  
Her like I never heard in life.

THOMAS then said you make much strife

When you are out there's **mickle din**, a great noise or racket  
If you were here, I'll lay my life,  
No peace the saints would get within,  
It is your trade for to be **flyting**, scolded, rebuked, chided  
Sill in a fever as one raves,  
No marvel tho' you wifes be biting  
Your tongues were made of aspen leaves.

THOMAS (*auoth she*) let be your **tants**, taunts  
You play the pick thank I perceive,  
Tho' thou be brothered among the saints,  
An unbelieving heart thou have.  
You brought our LORD unto the grave,  
But wou'dst no more with him remain.  
And was the last of all the **lave**; law  
That did believe he rose again.  
There might no doctrine do thee good,  
No miracles made thee confide,  
Till thou beheld CHRIST's wounds & blood  
And put'st thine hand into his side,  
Did'st thou not daily with him dine,  
And saw'st the miracles which he wrought,  
But blest are they who do confide,  
And do believe, yet saw him nought.

THOMAS she says will ye but spier, ask or question  
If that my sister MAGDALEN,  
Will come to me if she be here:  
For comfort sure she'd give me more.

He was so blyth, and turned back,  
And thanked GOD THAT HE WAS GONE;  
He had no will to hear her **crack**. loud talk or noise  
But told it MARY MAGDALEN,  
When that she heard her sister's mocks,  
She went unto the gate with speed,

And asked her who's there that knocks,  
She said, good mistress you must stand.  
Till you be tired by tribulation,  
Sister, says she, give me your hand,  
Are we not both of one vocation?  
It is not through your occupation.  
That you are place so divine;  
My faith is fix'd on CHRIST's passion,  
My soul shall be as safe as thine.  
Then MARY went away in haste,  
The **carling** made her so ashamed'  
She had no will of such a guest,  
To lose her pains, and be so blam'd.

Now good St. PAUL said MAGDALEN,  
For that you are a learned man,  
Go and convince this women than,  
For I have done all that I can.  
Then went the good apostle PAUL,  
To put the wife in better tune,  
Wash of the filth that **files** thy soul  
Then shall heaven's gates be opened soon.

Remember PAUL what thou had done,  
For all th' epistles thou did'st compile;  
Though now thou sittest up above,  
Thou persecuted CHRIST a while.  
Saint PAUL, she said is it not so,  
I did not know so well as ye:  
But I will to my SAVIOUS go,  
Who will his favour shew to me;  
You think you are of **flyting** free,  
Because you war rapt up above,  
But yet it was CHRIST's grace to thee,  
And matchlessness of his dear love.

Then PAUL she says, let PETER come,  
If he be lying let him rise?  
To whom I will confess my sin,  
And let him quickly bring the key's.  
Too long I stand he'll let me in,  
For why, I cannot longer tarry;  
Then shall you all be out of **din**,  
For I must speak with good saint MARY.

noise

The good apostle discontented,  
Right suddenly he turned back,  
For he did very much repent,  
To here the **carling** proudly **crack**,  
PAUL says, good brother now arise,  
And make an end of all this din,  
And if so be you have the keys,  
Open and let the **carling** in

old woman; loud talk or noise

The apostle PETER rose at last,  
And to the gate with speed he **hies**;  
**Carling** quoth he, knock not so fast,  
You cumber MARY with the cries.

goes

old woman

PETER she said, let CHRIST arise,  
And grant me mercy in my need,  
For why I never deny'd him thrice,  
As thou thyself hath done indeed.  
Thou **carling** bold what's that to thee,  
I got a remission for my sin,  
It cost many sad tears to me,  
Before I entered here within,  
Thou must be purified of sin,  
And of all sins must be made free.

old woman

Saint PETER then no thanks to ou,  
That so you were rid of your fears,  
It was CHRIST's gracious look I trow,

That made you weep these bitter tears,  
The door of mercy is not clos'd,  
I may get mercy as well as ye,  
It is not so as ye suppose,  
But it will be inspite of thee.

    But wicked wife it is two late,  
Thou shouldest have mourned on the earth  
Repentance now is out of date.  
It should have been before thy death,  
Thou mightiest then have turned **wrath**,  
To mercy thee, and mercy got  
But now the LORD is very loath,  
Ah PETER then what shall I do  
Hell will not have me as I hear:  
Shall I despair of mercy too,  
No, no I grust on mercy dear,  
And if I parish here I'll stay,  
And never go from heaven bright,  
I'll never hope and always pray,  
Until I get my SAVIOUR's light.

    I think indeed, you are not right,  
If you had faith you could win in,  
Importune then with all your might,  
Faith is the feet wherewith you came.

    But good saint PETER let me be,  
Had you such faith, did it abound:  
When you did walk upon the sea,  
Was you not like for to be drown'd?  
Had not our SAVIOUR helped thee:  
Who came and took thee by the hand,  
So can my LORD do unto me,  
And bring me to the proms'd land,  
Is my faith weak, yet he is strong,

The same an ever shall remain,  
His mercy lasts, and his good will,  
To bring me to his flock again,  
He will me help, and me relieve.  
And will increase my faith also,  
If weakly I can but believe.  
For from this place I'll never go.

But PETER said how can that be:  
How darest thou look him in the face,  
Such horrid sinners like to thee,  
Can have no courage to get grace,  
Here none come in but they that's stout,  
And suffered have for the good cause,  
Like unto thee are keeped out,  
For thou hast broke all MOSES laws.

PETER she said, I do appeal,  
From MOSES and from thee also;  
With him and you I'll not prevail,  
But to my SAVIOUS I will go;  
Indeed of old you was right stout,  
When you did cut off *Malchus* ear:  
But after that you went about,  
And a poor maid then did you fear,

Wherefore saint PETER do forbear,  
A comforter indeed you're not,  
Let me alone I do not fear.

Take home the **whissel of your groat**;  
Was it your own or PAUL's good sword,  
When that your courage was so keen,  
You was right stout upon my word,  
Then would you fain at fishing been;  
For at the crowing of the cock,  
You did deny your MASTER thrice,

your counterfeit coin



For all your stoutness turn'd a block,  
Now **flyte** no more if you be wise.

scold, dispute, chide

Yet at the last the LORD arose,  
**Invironed** with angels bright,  
And to the wife in haste he goes,  
Desir'd her soon pass out of sight,  
O LORD said she, now do me right,  
But now according to my sin  
Have ye not promis'd day and night.  
When sinners knock to let them in.  
He said thou wrests the scripture wrong,  
The night is come thou spends the day,  
In whoredom thou hast lived long,  
And to repent didest delay,  
Still y commandments thou abusedst,  
And vice committedst busily,  
Since you my mercy refusedst,  
Go down to hell eternally?  
O LORD my soul doth testify,  
That I have spent my time invain,  
Oh! make a wandering sheep of me,  
And bring me to the flock again.

surrounded, encircled

Think'st thou there is no court to crave,  
Of all these gifts in thee was planted,  
I gave thee beauty above the **lave**,  
A pregnant wit thou never wanted.  
Conform unto the Jewish laws,  
was brought to thee to be put down,  
But nevertheless thou let'st her go,  
And make the Pharasees afraid,

law

Indeed says CHRIST it was right so,  
And that my bidding was obey'd;  
Woman said he I must not cast,

The childrens bread to dogs like thee,  
Altho my mercy still do last,  
Yet is there mercy none for thee.

But loving LORD may I presume,  
Poor worm that I may speak again,  
The dogs for hunger was undone  
And of the crumbs they were right fain;  
Grant me one crumb then that does fall,  
From thy best childrens table, LORD,  
That I may be refresh'd withal,  
It will me help enough afford.

The gates of mercy are now clos'd,  
And thou can'st hardly enter in,  
It is not so as thou suppos'd,  
For thou art daily sick to sin.

It's true indeed my LORD most meek,  
My sore and sickness I do feel,  
Yet I will never go away,  
For although in youth I had a sway,  
To whom should I go in old age,  
Or who should I with sin engage,  
Although I be the wife of *Beith*.  
In *Beith* I liv'd this fifty years,  
And after death I did come here.  
Now from this place I'll never go,  
For still I say it shall be so.  
Yet thou the lame did'st truly lead.  
Who lay long at *Bethfaida*'s pool,  
Of many that never sought,  
Like to the poor *Samaritan*,  
When thou into the fold him brought,  
Even as thou did the widow of Nain,  
Most gracious GOD did thou not bid,

All that are weary come to thee,  
Behold I come even overlaid  
With sin, have mercy upon me.

The issues of thy soul are great,  
Thou art both leprous and unclean;  
To be with me you are unfit,  
Go from me then let me alone.

MASTER said she, it must be granted,  
My sins are great, give me contrition,  
The forelorn son when he repented,  
Obtain'd his father's full remission.

I spaird my judgments many times,  
And spiritual pastors did thee lend,  
But thou renewed thy former crime,  
Ay more and more me to offend.  
My LORD said she, I do amend,  
Lamenting for my former vice,  
The poor thief at the latter end,  
For one word went to Paradise,

The thief heard never of my teaching,  
My heavenly precepts and my laws,  
But thou was daily at my preachings,  
Both heard and saw and yet **misca's.**

did not know or understand

MASTER said she, the scripture shows,  
The Jewish woman which broke thy laws,  
Sweet LORD my GOD say me not nay,  
For if I parish here I'll die,  
Poor silly wretch, now speak no more,  
Thy faith poor soul hath saved thee;  
Enter, go in unto thy glory,  
And rest through all eternity.

FINIS.

