



The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions

Mary Carruthers

PMLA, Vol. 94, No. 2 (Mar., 1979), 209-222.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0030-8129%28197903%2994%3A2%3C209%3ATWOBAT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-%23>

PMLA is currently published by Modern Language Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/mla.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions

IN HER PROLOGUE, the Wife of Bath refers to the Aesopian fable of the painting of the lion: the lion complains of a picture showing a man killing a lion and suggests that if a lion had painted it the result would have been different. Just so, says Alisoun, if women told tales of marital woe to match those of the authorities represented in Jankyn's book, they would show "of men more wikkednesse / Than al the merk of Adam may redresse."¹ The moral of the fable expresses an aspect of that general concern with the relationship of "auctoritee" to "experience" which she announces in the first sentence of her prologue. Alisoun has often been characterized as attempting to do away with authority altogether, as setting up a heterodox doctrine of marriage based on female supremacy to replace the traditional medieval view, sanctioned by the church fathers and by common law, that wives should be humble, obedient, and submissive to their husbands in all things. But the Wife's understanding of the uses of "auctoritee" is more complex than this analysis allows. Alisoun does not deny authority when authority is true; she tells us straight off that authority and experience agree on the great lesson "of wo that is in mariage." She does insist, however, that authority make itself accountable to the realities of experience. The fable of painting the lion teaches that the "truth" of any picture often has more to do with the prejudices and predilections of the painter than with the "reality" of the subject and that truthful art (and morality) must take account of this complexly mutual relationship. In her prologue, the Wife describes her own progress toward building a "trewe" marriage out of her experience and personality and uses her experience as an ironic corrective both for the pronouncements of those clerics and other authorities at whom she pokes fun in her prologue and for the idealistic romancing in which she engages in her tale.

This paper first describes Alisoun's practical

economic experience as a wealthy west-country clothier endowed with the property of her deceased spouses and then indicates how she uses this experience to counter and correct the ideal of subordinate wifedom painted by the "auctoritee" of clerical writers like Jerome and of deportment-book authors like Latour-Landry and the *ménagier de Paris*, who stressed the goal of "gentillesse" prized by the wealthy bourgeoisie. Alisoun triumphantly shows in her prologue that economic "maistrye" not only brings her the independence and freedom to love that the proscriptions of "auctoritee" deny her but enables her to create finally a mutually nourished marital bond truer than any envisioned by the traditionalists. Then, having demonstrated the undeniable virtues of experience, Alisoun treats herself in her tale to a controlled flight of comic fantasy in the idealists' mode, demonstrating through parody, the literary instrument with which she typically corrects authority, her shrewd understanding of both the delights and the limitations of lion painting.

"Experience" is the first and most significant word in the Wife's prologue. Though obviously referring to the events of her personal life—to her five husbands, her cloth making, her love of travel—the word also includes a larger context, the experience of her whole social class, the bourgeoisie engaged in trade. It is in terms of this greater experience that we must understand what Alisoun means by "maistrye"² and what her claim to marital sovereignty rooted in "maistrye" would have meant to her peers.

Because property is the basis of that claim, the nature and legal standing of Alisoun's property are crucial considerations in understanding her prologue and tale. As a cloth maker in the west of England at this time, she was engaged in the most lucrative trade possible. By the late fourteenth century, the English wool trade had become as much a trade in finished cloth as it

was in the raw wool itself,³ and the cloth-making industry had entered the export markets, in addition to supplying domestic needs. There is every reason to believe that Alisoun's cloth making, which "passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt" (GP, l. 450), was big business. Manly thought that Chaucer was belittling the Wife in likening her skills to those of the great Flemish cloth makers,⁴ but Chaucer's enthusiastic appraisal of her professional worth is no overstatement. The English cloth makers, thanks to protective legislation, were able to underprice their European competitors, to the point of contributing to a severe depression in Flanders, and thus to surpass the Flemish product in quantity as well as in quality.⁵

The Wife is not a weaver but a capitalist clothier,⁶ one of those persons who oversaw the whole process of cloth manufacture—buying the wool, contracting the labor of the various artisans involved in manufacture, and sending bales of finished broadcloths off to Bristol and London for export. Women wool merchants and clothiers are common enough in the records of this period. They were usually widows, carrying on after their husbands' deaths, and some of them were very wealthy indeed.⁷ The term "cloth maker" refers to that person, the clothier, who manufactures cloth.⁸ And to be a cloth manufacturer in the west of England in Chaucer's day was to be engaged in the trade in the manner I have just described, as its capitalist entrepreneur.

As early as the thirteenth century, English cloth manufacture was evolving from an urban-based, guild-monopolized trade to a rural-based "domestic" industry, in which the clothier owned the material of manufacture throughout the stages of production.⁹ In this shift from urban to rural lies the significance of Alisoun's dwelling "byside Bathe." Bath itself was an insignificant town throughout the Middle Ages, but the surrounding countryside of the Avon valley was an area of vigorous cloth production, whose clothiers took advantage of their proximity on the one hand to the wool-growing areas of the Cotswolds and Mendip Hills and on the other hand to the major port of Bristol.¹⁰ Alisoun is no modest artisan. Her extensive travels at home and abroad are appropriate to her business as well as to her pleasure, and though she is

provincial she comes from the richest of provinces.

In addition to the wealth she has garnered from wool, a good deal of property, including (most likely) the cloth business itself, has come to her from her husbands. Her legal title to this property is clear; she herself says that she gave it freely to Jankyn when she married him, and one cannot give what one does not own. Her claim is fully confirmed by the legal habits of her community. The customs of the bourgeoisie, customs that had the effect of law, gave propertied married women rights that were denied them by both the common law (which affected the rights of women whose property was held in manorial fiefs) and the canon law. Among the burgesses, married women retained the ownership and control of their property and could enter into contracts in their own names, their husbands having neither legal liability nor power of consent in such matters:

The common law was the custom of the King's Court, and an outgrowth of feudal conditions which applied particularly to the larger landowners; for the upper classes of society its rules were no doubt appropriate, but it is only in the local customs of numerous cities, towns, and villages that we can see how different the life of the ordinary people was. In these customs, for example, we find that the position of the married woman was very different from that which the common law assigned her, the complete merging of her personality being obviously out of harmony with bourgeois habits. Local customs frequently keep the woman's property free from her husband's control, accord her liberty of contract (which was denied at common law), and even allow her to trade separately upon her own account.¹¹

When custom conflicted with common law, the Court of Common Pleas tended to rule in favor of the custom.¹²

We can thus reasonably suppose that the Wife did indeed own in fee simple all the property her husbands had given to her and that she was accustomed to trade in her own name whether she was married or not. It was common for husbands to leave property to their wives without entail or other encumbrance and for the widow to be made executor.¹³ From earliest times, the widow of a landed man had the right of dower, an automatic portion of her deceased husband's

property.¹⁴ By the fourteenth century, the dower was being replaced by jointure, property settled on the wife by the husband, usually as a condition of the marriage contract but sometimes at a later point in the marriage.¹⁵ Alisoun is obviously aware of the importance of jointures and other property gifts:

I wolde no lenger in the bed abide
If that I felte his arm over my side,
Til he hadde maad his raunson unto me;
Thanne wolde I suffre him do his nicetee.¹⁶

This bald exchange may strike us as cynical, vulgar, and immoral, but we must remember that by the standards common to her class Alisoun's behavior is simply shrewd business. And since we may assume from her account that she was far too good a business woman to marry a man whose property was encumbered with children or other undesirable heirs, she has amassed a great deal of land and fee by the time we encounter her on the road to Canterbury.

It is within the context of her class and station that Alisoun makes her correction of traditional marriage teaching and teachers, including Jerome. The Wife's attitude toward her clerkly opponents should not be judged as primly as it often has been. She is not bitterly attacking them, for why should she attack a body of material so clearly removed (as the fathers themselves admit) from the lives of common wedded folk? She is not setting up a heresy, a counter-religion. To argue this is not only to disregard common pastoral doctrine and the customs of her class but to distort her own expressed intention and the tone of her debate.¹⁷ "Myn entente," she says, "nis but for to pleye" (WBP, I, 198). She does not deny the celibate ideal its due; she merely points out its lack of domestic economy. A good wife should be thrifty, and only an imprudent household would set its board exclusively with gold and silver dishes (as Jerome himself said, echoing Paul).

A master of parody, Alisoun turns Jerome's words back on themselves, to his presumed discomfiture and to our delight. Jerome is one of those figures who open themselves up to such treatment, for the most intemperate of antifeminist Christian satirists is a man best known in his private life for the circle of women disciples he collected, whose education he encouraged in

a series of notably eloquent letters. It is the Roman period of Jerome's life, the period of Paula, Marcella, Eustochium, and the unfortunate Blesilla, that the Wife remembers especially about him, as her epithet for him, "a clerk at Rome," indicates. And Alisoun is as exegetically skilled, as polemically successful, as Jerome would have wished any of his women friends to be; she has simply taken him at his word ("I do not condemn even octogamy")¹⁸ and remarried all those times. Jerome was, moreover, a man so brilliantly vituperative that he constantly embarrassed himself. The *Adversus Jovinianum* got him into a great deal of trouble at the time it was written, so much so that his friend Pammachius withdrew from circulation and destroyed as many copies of the treatise as he could lay his hands on.¹⁹ Jerome approved of this action, which he called "prudent and friendly" in the letter of defense that he wrote to Pammachius.²⁰ The record of this controversy was not lost in the Middle Ages. In taking on Jerome as she does, Alisoun is not engaging in new sport but is making a rich joke at the expense of a notoriously ill-tempered saint's most notoriously ill-tempered work. The fate of Jankyn's book is the final turn of this excellent jest. For in burning the book that contains so much of the *Adversus Jovinianum*, Alisoun is simply consigning yet another copy of the treatise to the fate that Pammachius and Jerome himself ordered for it when it first appeared.

But Alisoun's most amusing darts are not necessarily her most important, for her primary attack in both the prologue and the tale is directed at a body of marital lore held commonly by her own class and articulated most fully in the deportment books written to foster "gentillesse." These books were designed to teach young girls how to be good wives, and the books that have survived²¹ tend to stress wifely goodness more than wifely skills. They purport to be concerned with devotional instruction and morality, but as moral works they are curiously self-contradictory. Their morality tends to be "gentility," manners and deportment only, and demonstrates a single-minded concern with domestic propriety. Yet they pretend also that social reward is unrelated to economic power, especially for women. They emphasize "gentillesse," "honour," "worship," and "prow," but in senses

more appropriate to the Franklin, even to the Merchant, than to the Knight. It is this fuzzy "morality" of the deportment-book writer that especially exercises the Wife in her early experiences with husbands and in her tale.

The two best-known deportment books are both French, and both were composed in the last thirty years of the fourteenth century, *The Book of the Knight of LaTour-Landry* (Caxton's translation of the original French work) and *Le Ménagier de Paris*, which has been translated as *The Goodman of Paris*.²² The Knight of LaTour-Landry writes a beginning reading book for his young daughters, all of whom he expects will marry soon. The *ménagier* is instructing his young wife, aged fifteen:

for your honour and love, and not for my service (for to me belongs but the common service, or less) since I had pity and loving compassion on you who for so long have had neither father nor mother, nor any of your kinswomen near you to whom you might turn for counsel in your private needs.

(*Goodman*, p. 43)

Even though one of these writers is a gentleman and the other a burgess, their instructions are remarkably similar. And their books, like all such books for children, reflect more what the writers think marriage ought to be than what it is. In these works the husband is a father-god, all-knowing, all-powerful, generally benevolent, despotic; the child-wife's only task is to keep his honor and estate by practicing absolute obedience. They exemplify biased lion painting at its worst. Yet sometimes they have their practical side. The *ménagier* has useful chapters on such matters as falconry, equine diseases, gardening, cooking, overseeing servants, and getting rid of household pests like fleas and flies. The knight's treatise lacks these lessons simply because he is writing for unmarried daughters rather than for a young bride who must cope immediately with the affairs of a large and unwieldy household, for the letters of the Paston women make clear that their daily responsibilities were just as burdensome as those of merchants' wives.

A wife acted as her husband's business partner and had to assume full responsibility for the conduct of his affairs when he was away, as medieval husbands with means often were. The *ménagier* and the knight are both particularly

concerned that young girls understand a wife's obligation to care for her husband's honor and estate: to this end she must be patient, obedient, and dutiful, especially in company, and she must not gossip or reprimand him publicly. The appearance of matrimonial unity was as important as the appearance of corporate unity is today, and for the same reasons. To teach this, the *ménagier* tells a tale that is revealing of the moral assumptions of his book. A merchant's wife ran off with a young man who promptly deserted her, and she was then forced by poverty into prostitution. Rumors of her fall reached the community where her husband lived. To dispel them, he dispatched her two brothers to fetch her home, decorated his house, and received her with great public display. He thus saved his wife's honor, says the *ménagier*, because it "touched the honor of himself and his children" (pp. 184–86). The merchant was wise because in keeping his wife he kept his own estate.

A good wife is a wife who can keep her husband's good. She was frequently required to act for him in a legal capacity. Thus we hear of Margaret Paston holding a manor court while her husband was in London tending his legal affairs (Davis, Vol. 1, Nos. 188, 189 [July–Aug. 1465]). That formidable royal aristocrat, Lady Isabel Berkeley, while in London trying to keep herself out of the Tower, wrote to her husband:

Sur your matter speedeth and doth right well, save my daughter costeth great good; At the reverence of God send money or els I must lay my horse to pledge and come hom on my feet: keep well all about you till I come home, and trete not without mee, And then all thinge shall bee well.²³

With such discretionary power located in the wife, it was evidently essential that she be taught to respect her husband's social and economic estate as her own. And without such power, I would add, such injunctions would not be so important.

If the deportment books were content to teach that social behavior was simply a practical area of domestic economy, wifely "gentillesse" would get little quarrel from Alisoun. But they are not, of course, because their authors confuse manners and morals in a way that takes their writing

into the realm of genteel fantasy. One of their morals is that among women virtue alone will be rewarded with success, a lesson that could not be further from the fact of most medieval marriages. LaTour-Landry begins his treatise with a tale of the king of England come to seek a wife among the three daughters of the king of Denmark. The eldest was lovely but coquettish, the middle one bold of speech, and the youngest meek, well-mannered, and ugly. The king took the youngest because she was "ferme in her estate, behaving, and of good maners" (*LaTour-Landry*, p. 17). His choice was against the advice of his friends, who warned him, significantly, that he would "lose worship" if he did not choose the oldest, the heiress. It is a pretty tale, but it must be contrasted with the words of Stephen Scrope, writing around 1440: "For very need I was fain to sell a little daughter I have for much less than I should have done by possibility."²⁴ This is the same Scrope who, at fifty and "disfigured in my person [by illness] . . . whilst I live" (Gairdner, I, 154), was considered a fine match for twenty-year-old Elizabeth Paston.²⁵ The sale by parents of the rights to marry their children was a common practice among both gentry and bourgeoisie in the later Middle Ages.²⁶

In view of such discrepancies between medieval theory and medieval practice, one must be careful about accepting the deportment books as authorities on what was actually anticipated in a medieval marriage. These books have much the same quality as modern books on dating etiquette for teenagers, which offer advice we truly know to be honored more in the breach than in the observance. Occasionally, the writers themselves will admit the impracticality of what they appear to be counseling. At the end of his retelling of the Griselda story, the *ménagier* comments:

And I, that have set the tale here merely to lesson you, have not set it here to apply to you, nor because I would have such obedience from you, for I am not worthy thereof, and also I am no marquis nor have I taken in you a shepherdess, and I am not so foolish, so overweening nor of so small sense that I know not well that 'tis not for me to assault nor to assay you thus, nor in like manner. . . . And excuse me if the story telleth of cruelty too great (to my mind) and above reason. (p. 137)

There can be no doubt that the Wife's behavior, especially in her first marriages, is almost everything the deportment-book writers say it should not be. But not quite, for they would have had to approve, though perhaps grudgingly, her mastery of the practical aspects of domestic economy and public "honour." She has chaperones and witnesses (however compromised), and though she chides her husbands "spitously," there is no evidence that she does so in public. I rather hope that those ten-pound kerchiefs of hers are out of date,²⁷ for it is more in keeping with the Wife's evident economy to save and mend good stuff than to be constantly buying the latest fashions. Her "gites" are of scarlet, the choicest material.²⁸ And, as she says, there are no moths or mites in her wardrobes.²⁹

The practical bourgeois wife clearly contradicted the idealized image of the subservient wife held up as a model by "gentility" and by the church. Yet the wit Alisoun directs at traditional marriage lore, coming as it does from the rich experience of her class, should not horrify her audience (though they may take exception to some of it) because they would recognize the common truth of what she is saying. Take for instance her ridicule of clerical teaching concerning the remarriage of widows. In fact, a rich widow was considered to be a match equal to, or more desirable than, a match with a virgin of property. A wealthy widow was considered a real find, even for a family as landed as the Pastons. Edmund Paston writes: "Here is lately fallyn a wydow in Woorstede whyche was wyff to on Boolt, a worstede marchaunt, and worth a m li [thousand pounds]" (Davis, Vol. I, No. 398 [probably after 1480]). The sole considerations are money and the inheritance rights of issue from previous marriages. Thus Agnes Paston insisted that Scrope reveal in full before any betrothal was arranged "if he were married [to Elizabeth Paston] and fortun'd to have children, if tho children schuld enheryte his lond or his dowter þe wheche is married" (Davis, Vol. I, No. 446). And Edmund Paston reassures his family concerning the widow with the thousand pounds that she "has but ij chylderen whyche shalbe at þe dedys charge."³⁰ Nobody mentions the slightest reservation about the morality of marrying widows. Nor do we find such a lack of concern only among the practical Pastons. The

Knight of LaTour-Landry praises the piety of widows who do not remarry, but it is clear that his expectations for his own daughters are quite different:

But, my faire doughters, take hereby a good ensauple, that yef be fortune ye fall into a good marriage, and afterwarde God take youre husbandes from you, wedde you not ayen vnausely for vain plesaunce, but werkithe bi the counsaile of youre true frendes. (pp. 156–57)

And the *ménagier*, who is a very moral man indeed, clearly expects his young wife to marry again upon his death (pp. 42, 109).

As Alisoun knows from experience, the true fruits of marriage are described neither in Jerome nor in the deportment books but are set in the marriage bed. Its important spoils for her are neither children nor sensual gratification but independence.³¹ Marriage is the key to survival, and that is what Alisoun seeks and finds. Her parents married her off when she was twelve, an early enough age to suggest either notable greed or straitened financial circumstances on their part.³² The extent to which parents who were set on a marriage would go in order to break the will of a reluctant daughter is chillingly attested by the experience of Elizabeth Paston when her mother had bound her to the dreadful Scrope:

sche hath son Esterne [this letter was written 29 June] þe most part be betyn onys in þe weke or twyes, and som tyme tywes on o day, and hir hed broken in to or thre places. (Davis, Vol. II, No. 446)

After such treatment poor Elizabeth gave in and agreed to “rewle hire to hym as sche awte to do” even though “his persone is symple,” though for other reasons the marriage finally fell through. It is difficult to imagine Alisoun’s experience with husbands one through three as any better than the melancholy misalliances contemplated in the pages of the Paston letters. The lesson that Alisoun has learned is obvious: marriage is contracted for money, and the acquisition of money is equivalent to the attainment of honor, respect, and independence. She alternately chides and flatters her old husbands into allowing her to walk about the town in her good clothes, but her freedom is hard earned:

And therfore every man this tale I telle:
Winne whoso may, for al is for to selle;
With empty hand men may no hawkes lure.
For winning wolde I al his lust endure,
And make me a feined appetit—
And yit in bacon hadde I nevere delit.

(WBP, ll. 419–24)

The root of marital “maistrye” is economic control. The husband deserves control of the wife because he controls the estate; this is a fundamental lesson in the deportment books. As the *ménagier* says, a wife should behave according to her husband’s desires for he “ought to be and is sovereign and can increase and diminish all” (p. 112). The logic is clear: sovereignty is the power of the purse. This is not a spiritual doctrine but a property doctrine, based on the facts of a mercantile economy. Similarly, Alisoun realizes that sovereignty is synonymous with economic control:

They hadde me given hir land and hir tresor;
Me needed nat do lenger diligence
To winne hir love or doon hem reverence.

(WBP, ll. 210–12)

Her logic is neither unique nor shocking. For why did the king of England reward the youngest of Denmark’s daughters with his rich person? For the reverence she did him, of course. Alisoun carries the lesson to its conclusion; once reverence is rewarded, the need for it is past.

Why Alisoun married her fourth husband is unclear from her prologue, but we may assume it had something to do with “ricchesse,” since Jankyn is the only exception she makes to this rule. Number four occupies her primarily as an occasion for remembering number five and her prime—the dances, carols, and entertainments that her money and her husband’s absence on business allowed her to enjoy:

Therfore I made my visitaciouns
To vigilies and to processions,
To preching eek, and to thise pilgrimages,
To playes of miracles and to mariages.

(WBP, ll. 561–64)

A major part of her motive for desiring to hear sundry tales, to see and to be seen at these public occasions, was surely business, her own thriving cloth trade and her husband’s as well. Yet it is clear that, by this point in her career, pleasure

—even love—is a motive she is also free to entertain.

Alisoun is no simple acquisitive machine. Chaucer's brilliant stroke is to give her a streak of romance that blossoms in direct proportion to her accumulated wealth. Husband number four calls forth her fine lyricism "Upon my youthe and on my jolitee" (WBP, l. 476). Her happiness at this stage in her life, however, can have little to do with the quality of that fourth marriage, which was as battle-ridden and woeful as any of the first three. What has changed for her is the degree of her financial independence. She waxes lyrical at this point in her life because she can now afford to; she has bought the freedom to "daunce to an harpe smale, / And singe, ywis, as any nightingale, / Whan I hadde dronke a draughte of sweete win" (WBP, ll. 463–65). The moral of this experience is not hard to draw: independence of spirit blooms with economic independence, the freedom to give freely.

The full flower of Alisoun's awakened heart is her gift to Jankyn of the "maistrye" of her property. She gives freely, consciously, as a token of perfect love, a sign of pure faith, a pledge of true "gentilesse." It is the extravagant gift of an extravagant sentiment, of "love and no riches," and it promptly gets her into the worst trouble of her woeful life. For her gesture does not inspire a corresponding generosity in him. Instead he proceeds to rob her of her independence and her will. Her one romantic excursion ends in a deafness symbolic of her failure to heed her own lesson: "With empty hand men may no hawkes lure." It is a lesson she will not forget again.

Jankyn provides the Wife her most painful encounter with traditional authority, and the terms of her ultimate success in her marriage to him express the full complexity of the truth of her experience. Jankyn believes in "auctoritee," being too young to know that "maistrye" derives not from an arbitrary schema, however ancient, but from that skill and knowledge which are acquired through experience and are respectful of the real intricacies of local custom and personality. He is not an eccentric; he is merely a very young man who has suddenly been given control of the entire estate of a formidable older wife and who feels understandably inadequate to the task.

Alisoun tells us that Jankyn "somtime was a

clerk of Oxenforde, / And hadde laft scole and wente at hoom to boorde / With my gossib, dwelling in oure town" (WBP, ll. 533–35). All that these lines indicate is that Jankyn is a local youth who had gone to university for a time (thus acquiring the title of clerk) and had left school to come home and get along in the world by means of his best assets, his legs. Fortunately, his landlady's best friend was a wealthy woman with an excellent record of outlasting husbands. It is unlikely that Jankyn, who had left Oxford before he was twenty, had completed any sort of degree, nor should we assume that he had any intention of doing so. The title "clerk" implies nothing about the seriousness of his clerical vocation, student tonsure being a rite performed more often by the barber than by the bishop.³³ The names of married clerks and married masters occur regularly in Oxford records of the late fourteenth century, and their presence suggests strongly that secular influences were commonplace in certain faculties of the university, particularly in the arts, but also in medicine and, to some extent, in civil law.³⁴ The university was often the route of advancement for young men of Jankyn's class, who spent a few years in the arts curriculum preparing for careers without orders. The early registry books of Merton, Exeter, and New colleges reveal the names of many students who came to Oxford during the late fourteenth century, stayed for three or four years without taking a degree, and then left their studies for worldly pursuits.³⁵ Jankyn's closest analogue is not the scholarly Clerk, but Nicholas; they are equally, and in the same ways, "hende."³⁶

Jankyn, through his wife's indulgence, has been elevated to the status of a wealthy burgess. Such a responsibility presumably weighs heavy on the shoulders of so young a man, so recently discovered following the bier (probably for money) of a town notable.³⁷ And with all the cowardice and callousness of his years, Jankyn takes refuge in old authorities to proscribe the behavior of his wife by reading to her every night from his "book of wikked wives." He is behaving not like a medieval cleric but like an inexperienced medieval husband, for the book is Jankyn's version of a deportment book, with the conventional age relationships of husband and wife hilariously, outrageously, reversed.³⁸

Jankyn is all "auctoritee" and no "experience," and such a combination is dangerous, as Alisoun discovers from his behavior. She learns more than this simple lesson, however. For in sentimentally relinquishing her estate to Jankyn, she gave away the basis on which she was able to make the gift in the first place, and her consciousness of the real importance of property to love is the complex truth that this final experience with Jankyn brings to her. She realizes fully the foolishness of her momentary indulgence. That was a "quainte fantasye," most untypical of her class. And I think that it is within the context of her misgiven gift that we should read her efforts to explain her aberrant heart:

I folwed ay my inclinacioun
By vertu of my constellacioun;
That made me I coude nought withdrawe
My chambre of Venus from a good felawe.

I loved nevere by no discrecioun,
But evere folwede myn appetit,
Al were he short or long or blak or whit;
I took no keep, so that he liked me,
How poore he was, ne eek of what degree.

(WBP, ll. 621–24, 628–32)

The last line quoted, plus her earlier word "discrecioun," provides the social context in which we should understand her excuses. The Wife is indeed grabbing at motives in these lines, but not out of an attack of ecclesiastical scruples. Her action in marrying the penniless Jankyn would have seemed the height of stupidity to all members of her class, and it is her sense of her extreme folly in the eyes of her neighbors, and in her own eyes as she looks back on the experience, that produces her self-apology. "Allas, allas, that evere love was sinne!"³⁹ not only in the view of Jerome but in the light of all the practical wisdom of her class.

And then to compound the folly by giving her money away! Here no excuse will serve, and she attempts none:

What sholde I saye but at the monthes ende
This joly clerk Janekin that was so hende
Hath wedded me with greet solempnitee,
And to him yaf I al the land and fee
That evere was me yiven therbifore—
But afterward repented me ful sore:
He nolde suffre no thing of my list.

(WBP, ll. 633–39)

Her last line is not the petulant comment of a spoiled child but the moment of truth for a generous master whose free gift has been abused by an ignorant apprentice. Love and economics have a proper relationship for women as well as for men; they are not unrelated concepts, whatever the writers of romances (and deportment books) may pretend. Ignorance of that lesson invites a destructive sentimentality that breeds marital tyranny. Alisoun realizes simply that, without the sovereignty over herself that "richesse" has brought her, she loses her freedom to love. "Sovereinetee," "maistrye," "fredom," "richesse," and "love" are brought together as aspects of one whole truth at the end of her prologue.

And so the master resumes her "maistrye." As she takes back her property, she assumes the household sovereignty that her property right gives her:

And whan that I hadde geten unto me
By maistrye al the sovereigntee,
And that he saide, "My owene trewe wif,
Do as thee lust the terme of al thy lif,
Keep thyn honour, and keep eek myn estat,"
After that day we hadde nevere debat.
God help me so, I was to him as kinde
As any wif from Denmark unto Inde,
And also trewe, and so was he to me.

(WBP, ll. 823–31)

She is true to Jankyn, keeping her honor and his estate, because good business decrees that she be so—and because she has learned to join business with her heart.

The Wife's tale should be understood in the context of her prologue rather than as a wishful alternative to it, for the story's utopian simplicity of thought is severely qualified by the teller. Critics are apt to take its sentimental idealism at face value, but I think that this is an error, for though the Wife has been capable of sentimentality, she knows too much now to indulge herself in it seriously again, even in a tale. Instead, she reveals her own fine comic understanding both of the delights of lion painting and of its essential untruthfulness. Her tale gives full rein to the ideals of sentiment but never lets us forget that they exist exclusively "In th'olde dayes of the King Arthour" (WBT, l. 1). It is her contribution to the exemplary stories of the deport-

ment books, for it is surely their ethos that the Wife has especially in mind.

The tale teaches “proper” marriage relationships. Only, of course, it is an exemplum that turns the ideas of the male deportment-book writers upsidedown—and, viewed from that angle, they seem comic indeed. The *ménagier*, articulating the sentiments of men of his class, states that the husband ought to be, and is, sovereign because he can increase and diminish all. On the contrary, Alisoun demonstrates, the wife ought to be sovereign because it is she who can increase and diminish all, through her magical powers. Her tale is strongly akin to the deportment-book stories in both method and substance; it is askew only in gender. It shares with them the voice of the all-wise older counselor, the aristocratic milieu, the concern with virtue (that of the younger person being counseled especially), the emphasis on gentility, the showpiece exemplum against gossip,⁴⁰ and the digressive, informal manner of storytelling. The chief difference between them, besides the obvious one of sex roles, lies in intention. The deportment-book writers do not often seem aware of the problems of truth that are inherent in the exemplary genre, the painting of lions and hunters, but Alisoun clearly is. The result is a significant difference in tone. The one is solemn and hortatory, the other not so. The Wife of Bath’s tale is funny. That is a crucial point to remember.

The double sense of what constitutes gentility that we see in the instructions of the deportment-book writers is the Wife’s starting point and the fulcrum of her jest.⁴¹ The old hag and the rapist-knight understand “gentilesse” in different ways. She sees it only as an inner, moral quality, and he defines it solely in terms of birth and class. The hag expresses the deportment books’ idealized view of “gentilesse” and the knight a practical, class-based version. The knight believes that gentlemen can do whatever they want to anybody—except marry penniless old hags—without losing their “gentilesse.” His class consciousness is much in evidence. “Allas,” he cries, “that any of my nacioun / Sholde evere so foule disparaged be” (WBT, ll. 212–13), and he objects that the hag is “comen of so lowe a kinde” (WBT, l. 245). He is simply articulating the practical marriage standards of gentlefolk:

one can marry up or across but never down, certainly not without a great deal of money to offset the match.

This is not the way genteel people ought to argue, however, and the old hag will have none of such reasoning. She takes up the young criminal’s objections in their proper order, treating the most serious at greatest length. And that, of course, is “gentilesse,” which she takes to mean innate moral worth. Her teaching on the subject could come straight out of a deportment book, particularly from a tale such as the one about Denmark’s daughters: “Heer may ye see wel how that gentyre / Is nat annexed to possession. . . . For gentilesse cometh fro God allone” (WBT, ll. 290–91, 306).

The next most important subject is money, and again the hag takes the genteel position: “The hye God, on whom that we bileve, / In wilful povertie chees to live his lif” (WBT, ll. 322–23). This is also a deportment-book lesson, exemplified in the tale of poor Griselda in the *ménagier*’s book. But though Griselda was rewarded for her poverty with a princely hand, the real-life chance of any poor and lowly girl being so advanced for her morals alone was inconceivably small. Age and looks are the last items on the hag’s agenda, as well they should be, for in the light of true virtue only an idiot (or an imperfect human being) would care about such attributes. But the old hag is kind in the end. As she tells her browbeaten bridegroom: “sin I knowe your delit, / I shal fulfille youre worldly appetit” (WBT, ll. 361–62).

The story of the magical hag and the rapist, though it has superficial analogies to Alisoun’s experience with Jankyn, also has crucial differences. Economic power is banished from the tale and replaced by fairy magic. But the relationship of economics to love is a real one, as Alisoun has proved in her prologue “with muchel care and wo.” In the tale, however, the hag’s magic turns her into a gentleman’s dream at the mere casting up of a curtain. She rewards the youth’s pledge to let her “chese and governe as me lest” by honoring his pleasure, just as every good deportment-book heroine should. The hag is a benign despot, who smiles over the wallowings of ordinary mortals in a world in which she knows all the answers and controls all the options. And, as in all deportment books, the

benignity of her despotism requires the absolute subservience of her mate.

The hag's intelligence is limited in ways that Alisoun's is not. Her magic serves as a blind for her, relieving her of the need to test her propositions in "experience." She argues positions that Alisoun has long rejected, especially when she denies any importance to "possessioun." The obtuseness bred by her insulation from experience parallels the knight's moral stupidity. Herein lies a major difference between the Wife's lion and the lions portrayed by the writers of deportment books. The Wife's tale is not just a piece of special pleading. Its real seriousness lies precisely in its refusal to succumb to the blandishments of "th'olde dayes of the King Arthour."

It is an easy temptation to sentimentalize the Wife for telling the tale she chooses. That she does so instead of relating the cruder "Shipman's Tale," however, is Chaucer's respectful gift to the acuteness of her intelligence, not to the pathos of her emotions. Having mastered through "tribulacion" the harsh economics of marriage, Alisoun sought the reward of her demonstrated skills in a sentimental attachment to Jankyn and discovered that marital bliss is really based on economic power after all. The shrewdness that this experience taught her does not desert her in her tale. Rather, painting her own lion becomes an occasion for her to reveal the sentimentality, the romance, involved in any idealistic painting.

The Wife does not identify herself with the lion she paints, the old hag. The hag argues deportment-book virtues, and her magic is certainly showy. But, as Alisoun knows, the truly magical element of the tale is not the hag's transformation, not the bliss issued in by the hus-

band's submission to his wife's tyranny, but the "parfit joye" of their marriage even though she is old and come of low kindred. Unlike Alisoun, magical hags do not thrive "biside Bathe." And thriving Alisoun is, for though one critic sees her as a figure of "aged lust" dancing "over the grave,"⁴² the fiftyish Wife is hardly a candidate for a tombstone. Alisoun herself states, in a fine housewifely metaphor, that the flour of her beauty is gone and only the bran is left—yet Our Lord refreshed many a man with barley bread. To see the Wife as the ugly old crone of her tale, devastated by the loss of youthful bloom, is to sentimentalize her well beyond the bounds of the text. Her portraitist describes her as fair of face, and there is no reason to doubt him.

Practicality and shrewdness are surely not enough to get Alisoun into heaven, as she immediately tells us, but neither should they condemn her to hell. Purgatory is the state she is most familiar with from the trials of her marriages; yet we know from Dante that purgatory is characterized by kindness and hope as well as by pain. The Wife's cheerful acceptance of a lowly place in the Lord's vineyard invigorates and infuriates those pilgrims who attempt to answer her and who, in pointing to her self-confessed shortcomings, manage not to disarm the strength of her practical concord with her world and time but to reveal the weakness of their own understanding. For lion painting is dangerous sport, apt to redound badly upon the artist unless she is conscious of the underlying game, and that knowledge Alisoun shares with very few of her fellow pilgrims.

University of Illinois, Chicago Circle
Chicago

Notes

¹ The Wife of Bath's Prologue, ll. 701–02; hereafter cited in the text as WBP. All textual references to the *Canterbury Tales*, cited parenthetically by abbreviation, are to E. T. Donaldson, ed., *Chaucer's Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ronald, 1975).

² The *MED* glosses of "maistrye," "maister," and "maistress(e)" make it clear that in Middle English "mastery" connotes skill and the authority or control deriving from superior ability, rather than the idea of

simple dominance devoid of merit or skill.

³ Eileen Power states that in 1310–11 English wool exports totaled 35,509 sacks, virtually all of raw wool, whereas in 1447–48, exports totaled 21,079 sacks, of which 13,425 were cloth (*The Wool Trade in English Medieval History* [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941], p. 37). A chart showing the growth in cloth exports in relation to those of raw wool for the period 1350–1540 indicates that in the last decade of the

fourteenth century cloth and wool exports were equal for the first time (E. M. Carus-Wilson, *Medieval Merchant Venturers*, 2nd ed. [London: Methuen, 1967]).

⁴ J. M. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York: Holt, 1926), p. 229.

⁵ Carus-Wilson, pp. 239–62, esp. pp. 259–60. See also Power, *Wool Trade*, p. 101; May McKisack, *England in the Fourteenth Century* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 356–57; and T. H. Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 315–16. It is worth noting that by the time of Richard II royal cloth purchases were virtually all from English clothiers dealing in English cloth, though in the reign of Edward II such purchases had been mainly of foreign-manufactured cloth. Flemish cloth, which dominated early in the century, disappeared almost completely from the royal accounts by the 1330s (Carus-Wilson, p. 242, n. 3).

⁶ Carus-Wilson, p. 262. See also Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 67.

⁷ Carus-Wilson, pp. 92–94. See also Power, *Medieval Women*, pp. 56–57, and Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (1948; rpt. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1962), pp. 169–74.

⁸ *MED*, s.v. "Cloth," def. 8(a). Manly believed that the Wife was a weaver, a member of a guild of weavers in the suburb of St. Michael's *juxta Bathon* 'beside Bathe.' But Chaucer does not say that she is a weaver, let alone a guild member. Alisoun's trade follows a newer organizational pattern than the one of which Manly was apparently thinking. A cloth maker is a manufacturer of cloths, the person responsible for the production of broadcloths or half-cloths, those units of regulated size in which woollen material was produced and sold. The organization of the industry in the west counties at this time placed that responsibility in the hands of the clothier, not of the artisans who performed the various tasks leading to the final product. While it is true that the phrase "maken cloth" can be used in a restricted sense (as in *Piers Plowman*, B.v.215–16 and B.vi.13–14) to refer, respectively, to the activities of weaving and spinning, Langland specifies in these lines exactly which cloth-making activity he intends. When the phrase is used without such qualifiers, it refers to the general manufacture of cloth, as Chaucer makes clear by his reference to "hem of Ypres and of Gaunt," the Flemish manufacturer-merchant-exporters whom the Wife and her peers have now surpassed. See, in addition to the citations in *MED* and *OED*, s.v. "Cloth-maker," the usages quoted by E. Lipson, *A History of the Woollen and Worsted Industries* (London: Black, 1921), pp. 44, 112, and by Thrupp, p. 272; and the remarks of Kenneth G. Ponting, *The Woollen Industry of South-West England* (Bath: Adams and Dart, 1971), pp. 19–20.

⁹ E. Lipson points out that the clothier-entrepreneur is a figure distinctive to the west-country cloth trade (*A Short History of Wool and Its Manufacture* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953], pp. 68–73). Carus-Wilson argues that a rudimentary capitalist entrepre-

neurial system was a feature of English cloth production from at least the early thirteenth century, even in the cloth towns of the north and east, which were then the center of manufacture (pp. 211–38). See also E. Miller, "The Fortunes of the English Textile Industry in the Thirteenth Century," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 18 (1965–66), 64–82, and Ponting, pp. 7–20.

¹⁰ Carus-Wilson, pp. 4–9, and Power, *Wool Trade*, p. 47. The factors that led to the change from urban- to rural-dominated cloth manufacture in England are examined in Miller and in Carus-Wilson (pp. 183–210). On Bristol as a fourteenth-century port, pre-eminent in the wool trade at mid-century, third behind London and Southampton at its end, see J. W. Sherborne, *The Port of Bristol in the Middle Ages* (Bristol: Historical Association, 1965), pp. 9–11. Ponting suggests that in the late fourteenth century much west-country cloth was shipped from London, Bristol never regaining the domination it had enjoyed earlier (pp. 15–16).

¹¹ Theodore F. T. Plucknett, *A Concise History of the Common Law*, 5th ed. (London: Butterworth, 1956), p. 313. On the trading rights of married women see Mary Bateson, *Borough Customs*, Selden Society Publications, xviii (London: Selden Society, 1904), 227–28. A representative entry is the following from Torksey, dated 1345: "Item dicunt quod mulier mercatrix respondebit cuicunque et debet responderi sine viro suo et potest amittere et recuperare." Accounts of these rights are given in A. Abram, "Women Traders in Medieval London," *Economic Journal*, 26 (1916), 276–85, and in Power, *Medieval Women*, pp. 53–59. Margery Kempe describes her ventures in the brewing and milling trades, undertaken with her own money and against her husband's wishes (S. B. Meech, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Early English Text Society, OS 212 [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940], pp. 9–10). On the property rights of bourgeois married women, see Mary Bateson, *Borough Customs*, Selden Society Publications, xxi (London: Selden Society, 1906), pp. 102–08. In 1327, the mayor and bailiffs of Oxford wrote to the mayor and bailiffs of London for their confirmation of a judgment that recognized a wife's right "to give and sell to whom she will" of her own property. In 1419 a London customal states, "ne le baroun ne poet my deviser les tenements de droit de sa femme, ne lez tenements queux le baroun et sa femme ount joynetement purchacés." John Kempe exacts a promise from his wife, Margery, to pay off all his debts before he will agree to a vow of connubial chastity; this incident strongly suggests that he had no right to use her property as he chose (*Book*, pp. 24–25).

¹² In one interesting case from 1389, the Court of Common Pleas bowed to local custom in ruling that a husband was not liable for the debts of his wife incurred during her trading (Plucknett, pp. 313–14). On the respect of common law for local custom, see N. Neilson, "Custom and the Common Law in Kent," *Harvard Law Review*, 38 (1924), 482–98.

¹³ See H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England*

(1922; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), p. 59. See also *Fifty Earliest English Wills*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, OS 78 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1882), esp. the following, from a codicil to the will of Stephen Thomas of Lee (1417): "More wryt y nough[t] vnto yow, bot þe holy trinite kepe yow now, dere and trusty wyf . . . wer-for I pray zow, as my trust es hely in zow, ouer alle opere creatures, þat this last will be fulfyllet, and all odere that I ordeynd atte home, for all þe loue þat euer was between man and woman" (pp. 40–41).

¹⁴ Plucknett, pp. 566–68. See also Cecile S. Margulies, "The Marriages and the Wealth of the Wife of Bath," *Mediaeval Studies*, 24 (1962), 210–16. Unfortunately, Margulies confined her argument to dower right under the common and canon law only and overlooked the crucial area of town and village customary laws. A similar argument (and error) was made by Thomas A. Reisner in "The Wife of Bath's Dower: A Legal Interpretation," *Modern Philology*, 71 (1973–74), 301–02.

¹⁵ Plucknett, pp. 568, 586. The importance of jointure to a woman's security in all classes may be judged by Margaret Paston's continuing efforts to marry her daughters or, failing that, to introduce them into worthy households; "for I wuld be right glad," she writes of one of them, "and she myght be profferid be mariage or be servyce so þat it myght be to here wurchep and profight." (Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, Vol. I [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971], No. 186 [30 June 1465]). The Pastons belong to a different class of the newly rich than does Alisoun, for their wealth was in manorial land rather than in trade. Agnes married William Paston I (1378–1444) in 1420 and died in 1478; Margaret married John Paston I (1421–66) in 1440 and died in 1484. Though one must evidently exercise caution in using the Paston letters as evidence of the customs and opinions that prevailed more than seventy years earlier, there is no reason to dispense entirely with the rich picture of marriage they furnish, provided that their contents can be corroborated by evidence contemporary with Chaucer. For the reader's convenience I have provided the dates of probable composition assigned by Davis to each of the letters I quote. A recent analysis of some of the Paston material is Ann Haskell's "The Paston Women on Marriage in Fifteenth-Century England," *Viator*, 4 (1973), 459–71.

¹⁶ WBP, II, 415–18. The *OED*, s.v. "Ransom," indicates that the word during this period always carried the meaning of a money or a property fine, except in the specific context of Christ's ransom (his life) for the redemption of humankind. Chaucer uses the word six times; once in the Parson's Tale to mean Christ's sacrifice and elsewhere to mean a monetary fine, as it does in each of its four occurrences in the Knight's Tale and as it does here in the Wife's prologue. Alisoun exacts a fine from her husbands for their freedom of access to her body.

¹⁷ Recent criticism has at last rescued the Wife from charges of religious heresy in regard to her frank ad-

mission of pleasure in married sex. Among medieval pastoral theologians a majority opinion held that pleasure in married sex was at worst a venial sin, and a minority even considered that it was no sin at all; the canonists believed that it was possible to contract a valid marriage from the motive of fulfilling sexual desire as long as no effort was made to prevent conception. This theological background has been examined most recently by Henry A. Kelley in *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), esp. pp. 245–61. See also E. T. Donaldson, "Medieval Poetry and Medieval Sin," *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York: Norton, 1970), pp. 164–74. On the orthodoxy of the Wife's theology, see Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), pp. 248–51.

¹⁸ Indeed Jerome did "not condemn even octogamy" twice in his writings: *Adversus Jovinianum*, I, 15 (*Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina* [hereafter, *PL*], ed. J. P. Migne [Paris: 1844–64], xxiii, 234) and *Epistola XLVIII seu liber apologeticus ad Pammachium, pro libris contra Jovinianum*, Ch. ix (*PL*, xxii, 499).

¹⁹ On the controversy during which Jerome was nearly condemned for heresy because of what he appeared to be saying about marriage in the *Adversus Jovinianum*, see the biography by Jean Steinmann, *St. Jerome*, trans. R. Matthews (London: Chapman, 1959), pp. 216–27. Anne Kernan refers to this controversy in relation to the Wife of Bath ("The Archwife and the Eunuch," *ELH*, 41 [1974], 1–25). See also the remarks of E. T. Donaldson, "Designing a Camel," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 22 (1977), 1–16.

²⁰ *Epistola XLIX ad Pammachium*, Ch. ii (*PL*, xxii, 511).

²¹ Eileen Power details the sources of this material (*Medieval People*, 8th ed. [London: Methuen, 1946], p. 184). An example in English verse is "How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter," in *The Babees Book*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, OS 32 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1868), pp. 36–47.

²² *The Book of the Knight of LaTour-Landry*, ed. Thomas Wright, Early English Text Society, OS 33 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1906). All my references to this work are to this edition. *Le Ménagier de Paris*, ed. J. Pichon (Paris: Société des Bibliophiles Français, 1846). All references are to the English language version, *The Goodman of Paris*, trans. Eileen Power (New York: Harcourt, 1928).

²³ Sir John Maclean, ed., *John Smyth's Lives of the Berkeleys*, II (Gloucester: Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, 1833), 62–63. Lady Isabel was the eldest daughter of Sir Thomas Mowbray; the letter was written in 1447.

²⁴ James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters* (1904; rpt. New York: AMS, 1965), I, 155. The quotation is from a letter of Scrope, part of a collection in the British Museum relating to Sir John Fastolf, Scrope's stepfather and Paston's benefactor.

²⁵ The arrangements are described by Elizabeth

Clere, Agnes Paston's niece (Davis, Vol. II, No. 446 [no later than 29 June 1449]). Cf. Agnes' own thoughts on the subject, written to her son John with a warning for haste, because "*Ser Herry Ynglows is ryzth besy a-bowt Schrowpe fore on of his doghteres*" (Davis, Vol. I, No. 18 [no later than 1449]).

²⁶ Scrope himself had been bartered shockingly by his stepfather; see Gairdner, Vol. II, No. 97. On the practice of selling marriage rights, see Bennett, pp. 28–29; it is condemned in *Piers Plowman*, ed. Walter W. Skeat (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1886), C.xi.256–57: "for thei zeueth here children / For couetise of catel and conynge chapmen."

²⁷ Manly says they are old-fashioned (p. 230). D. E. Wretlind has argued, however, that hats with large kerchiefs were making a comeback at Queen Anne's court ("The Wife of Bath's Hat," *Modern Language Notes*, 63 [1948], 381–82), but Howard points out that large hats were the contemporary rural fashion (p. 105, n. 32).

²⁸ *OED*, s.v. "Scarlet," and see Carus-Wilson, p. 218, n. 4; scarlet may often have been dyed red, but the word at this time was a technical term for a type of fine cloth of any color.

²⁹ LaTour-Landry would have approved: "a good woman shulde arraie her after her husbandes pusaunce and hers, in suche wise as it might endure and be meinteyned" (p. 67).

³⁰ Davis, Vol. I, No. 398. Ecclesiastical easiness concerning the remarriage of widows is attested by a letter of the late fourteenth century from Roger Kegworthe, a London draper, to Robert Hallum, one of the most distinguished churchmen and canonists of the period. Kegworthe asks Hallum to help him arrange a marriage with an eligible widow, "*de bone conversacion et poet ore bien expendre par an quarrant marcz,*" who is being actively courted also by the Marshall of the Hall of the Archbishop of Canterbury (M. D. Legge, ed., *Anglo-Norman Letters and Petitions*, Anglo-Norman Text Society, III [Oxford: Blackwell, 1941], 118–19).

³¹ Two commonly held assumptions about the Wife of Bath deserve comment, because they have crept into the realm of "facts" about her without a shred of evidence to support either one. The first is that she is childless, the second that she is "oversexed"; indeed the first has led to the second, for, being childless (so the argument runs), she has no right to any sexual encounter, and therefore any sex is "oversex" for her. But we do not know whether or not the Wife has children; we know only that she does not say so. There is no reason to attribute any significance to her silence. Chaucer's concern is wifehood, not motherhood. Wifehood and motherhood were not linked concepts at this time, as they are today, for wives had little to do with the nurture of their children (see, e.g., Bennett, pp. 71–86). The books of deportment, while covering every conceivable concern of wifehood, never mention the bearing or nurturing of children. The "problem" of the Wife of Bath's children is of exactly the same sort as the most famous of literary nonproblems:

"How many children had Lady Macbeth?" and it deserves to be consigned to the wastebasket of critical inquiry for the same reasons. It is simply not a question we can legitimately ask of this text, because the text provides us with no basis for an answer.

³² Twenty was a common age for marrying. Margery Kempe was twenty "or sumdele mor" when she married (*Book*, p. 6); the daughter in the Reeve's Tale is twenty; Elizabeth Paston (born c. 1429) was nearly twenty when her mother began to bargain in earnest for her marriage. The *ménagier's* wife, however, was only fifteen when he wrote his treatise for her, and Thrupp says that the daughters of London merchants in this period usually married at about seventeen (p. 196).

³³ Charles E. Mallet, *A History of the University of Oxford* (1924; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), I, 151–52. Mallet suggests that university undergraduates could be as young as fourteen; in 1386, however, Oxford petitioned to have the minimum age raised to sixteen (J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge* [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974], p. 72, n. 2). The arts course leading to the bachelor's degree took at least four years to complete, but many students took longer. See representative careers cataloged in A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to 1500* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957–59), *passim*.

³⁴ The title "magister" was used for a master of arts or a doctor in another faculty or—grudgingly, especially at Oxford—for a bachelor of arts (Emden, I, xv–xvi). By my rough count in the *Register*, there were at least a dozen married arts masters at Oxford in the last half of the fourteenth century; there were married physicians and a few married bachelors of civil law who also held Oxford degrees. Edmund Stonor reported, c. 1380, that his nephew was studying grammar in the establishment of a married master at Oxford ("*magister et ejus uxor*") (Charles L. Kingsford, ed., *The Stonor Letters and Papers* [London: Camden Society, 1919], I, 21 [Camden Society Publications, 3rd ser., vols. 29–30]).

³⁵ The conclusion that many who entered Oxford did so without expecting to pursue clerical careers is supported from a number of sources. A count based on Emden's *Register* of students and masters between 1350 and 1410 reveals a steady thirty percent who did not proceed to orders; this percentage is undoubtedly too low, since most of the sparse records containing information about the subsequent careers of Oxford graduates are ecclesiastical. As Emden observes, "Even more elusive, of course, are the many hundreds of Oxford clerks who never qualified for a degree at all, and who passed from Oxford into secular as well as into clerical employment. The exceptionally full records of New College point to the conclusion that at all times during the medieval period the number of undergraduates who never proceeded to any degree was large" (I, xviii). Sylvia Thrupp points out that London merchants of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were ambitious to achieve educational polish through university training (pp. 159–61). The paternal concern of Clement

Paston (d. 1419) is typical: a "good pleyn husband" himself (according to a fifteenth-century biographical account; see Davis, I, xli-xlii), he sent his son William (b. 1378) to university, thereby starting his family's fortunate rise, and succeeding generations of Pastons followed his example. One of Richard FitzRalph's charges against the friars (made in a sermon of 1357) was that "very many of the common people" feared that the friars at Oxford were taking advantage of youthful students and pressing them too soon into orders; see Mallet, I, 75, n. 2, which also refers to a university ordinance of 1358 forbidding the friars from admitting students under eighteen. The concern of the common people in 1357 is echoed a century later by Margaret Paston, who cautions her son Walter, a clerk at Oxford, "that he benot to hasty of takynge of orderes þat schuld bynd hym till þat he be of xxiiij yere of agee or more. . . . I will loue hym bettere to be a good seculare man þan to be a lewit prest" (Davis, Vol. I, No. 220 [probably 18 Jan. 1473]).

³⁶ The pun on "hende" is noted by E. T. Donaldson in "Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale," *Speaking of Chaucer*, p. 17.

³⁷ The custom of paying mourners to ensure a good turnout at one's funeral is amply attested in contemporary wills. Alisoun may not have wasted money on a fancy tomb, but both her honor and her estate would have required a decent funeral for her husband.

³⁸ Alisoun calls the book a "book of wikked wives," but this is yet another instance of Chaucer's standard joke, wherein books of good behavior are perceived to be books of wicked behavior, because they are more often crowded with examples of the awful ends of evil-doers than with the rewards of the just. The classic examples are the Man of Law's remarks on Gower and

the exchange between Alcestis, the God of Love, and the poet in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. Robert A. Pratt has demonstrated the accessibility at Oxford of the sources of Jankyn's book; one would expect an inexperienced young man whose head is still full of the university to draw on just such bookish stuff in seeking to counsel his wife ("Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves," *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 3 [1962], 5-27).

³⁹ WBP, I, 620. Francis L. Utley reminds us that the Wife's use of the word "love" in this proverb "must not be shrugged aside as mere ignorance or bias"; indeed it makes the proverb in her mouth a complex and ironic statement different in meaning and emphasis from the traditional sentiment, attributed by medieval preachers to the laity, that "lechery is no sin" ("Chaucer's Way with a Proverb: 'Allas! alas! that evere love was synne.'" *North Carolina Folklore*, 21 [1973], 98-104).

⁴⁰ Both the *ménagier* and the Knight of LaTour-Landry tell versions of the same cautionary story about gossip, a story as intriguing in its own way as that of Midas' ears. "Wol ye heere the tale?" A squire tells his wife that he has laid two eggs, enjoins her to secrecy, and by the time the tale has made its way back to his ears, he is supposed to have laid a whole basketful (*LaTour-Landry*, pp. 96-97, and *Goodman*, pp. 182-83).

⁴¹ An interesting analysis of class consciousness in the Wife's tale has been made by Dorothy Colmer in "Character and Class in the Wife of Bath's Tale," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 72 (1973), 329-39.

⁴² B. F. Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1964), p. 127.