

School of Media, Creative Arts, and Social Inquiry

**The Wife of Bath's Tales:
Literary Characters as Social Persons in Historical Fiction**

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Doctor of Philosophy
of
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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

Date: ..04/07/2019..

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Abstract

'The Wife of Bath's Tales: literary characters as social persons in historical fiction' is a creative-production thesis comprised of a work of historical fiction and an academic exegesis. The exegesis argues, as my creative practice demonstrates, that Elizabeth Fowler's 'social persons' mode of literary analysis may facilitate the (re)creation of a complex and multi-faceted literary character. The Wife of Bath, of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* fame, is my case study. In the process of expanding Fowler's theory to creative practice, the thesis offers a fresh interpretive approach to this complex and much-analysed character from medieval literature.

The creative component consists of the first half of an historical novel entitled *The Jerusalem Tales*. (The novel is complete, but only the first half can be presented here due to the length of the finished work. A summary of the second half of the novel is offered in Appendix A.) The novel is set in 1378 and depicts the Wife of Bath setting off on pilgrimage to Jerusalem with a number of companions, all of whom have *Canterbury Tales* origins. En route, they prompt the Wife to relate tales of her previous marriages. Each of these companions, including the Wife's fifth and current husband, are motivated to discover whether any of her previous husbands met with an untimely end.

The exegesis is divided into two parts. Part One describes Fowler's theory of 'social persons' and applies it as Fowler herself does: as a tool for the analysis of character in medieval English literature. Social-persons analysis identifies underlying concepts of personhood current in a particular culture and evoked by textual clues. Crucially, more than one social person typically attaches to any single character. Part One outlines the enormous number of social persons that are conjured about Alisoun of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales*, in large part the key to her complexity, and then examines those underpinning my interpretation of Alisoun in fiction. In Part Two, I turn to modern historical-fiction interpretations of the Wife. In particular, I examine a troubling aspect of the inevitable blending of historical and contemporary social

persons that occurs in modern historical fiction: the representation of sexual violence as definitive of medieval female experience. Each of the four historical-fiction interpretations of the Wife I identify foregrounds sexual violence, a theme present but distinctly understated in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*. A social-persons construction of character, however, can complicate the depiction and implications of such conventionalised misogyny, not only creating a more rounded character but also enhancing interpretative agency in the reader.

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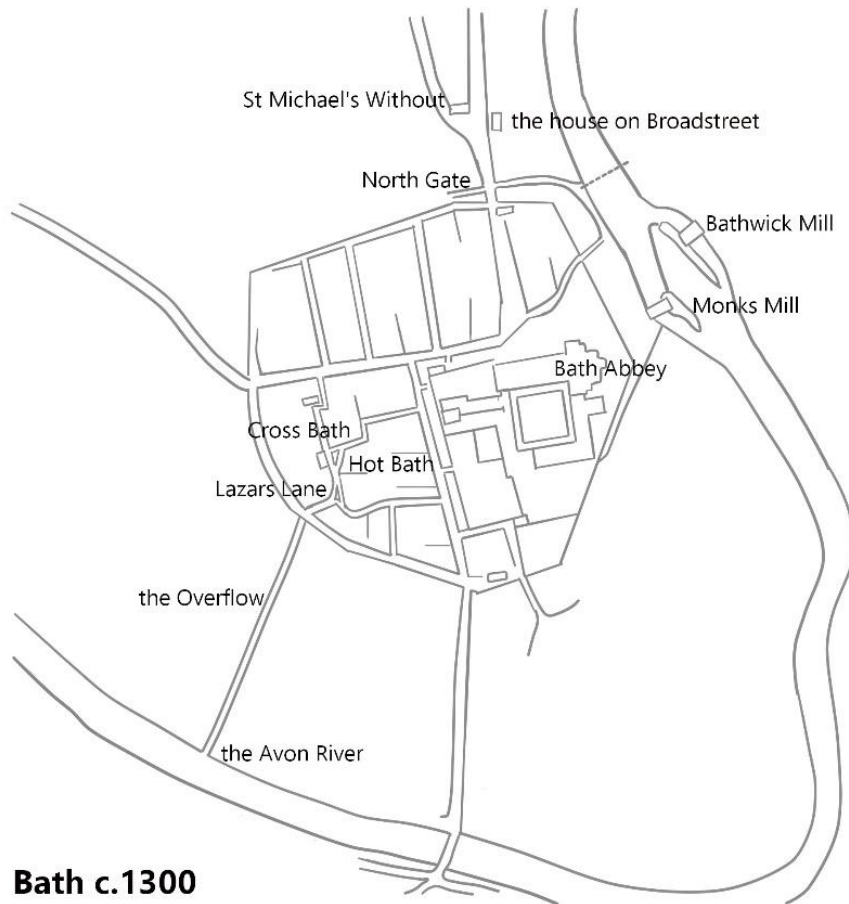
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THE JERUSALEM TALES

1. Bath



Bath c.1300

*A good Wif was ther of biside Bathe,
But she was somedeel short, and that was scathe.
Of cloth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt,
She passed them of Ypres and of Gaunt.*

The General Prologue

Alys is dyeing.

She has barred the doors. She can hear the day-labourer in the yard behind, conducting a massacre of wood. The *thud-thud* of his axe is rhythmic reassurance. He has been banished without, that she may dye in peace. He is instructed to interrupt only if the Antichrist himself descends or a second Sodom manifests upon the woodheap.

For dyeing is a business most delicate. It demands prayer, exacting measurement, and a judgement full discriminating. Oh, and desire. A woman's desire, to be precise. No lumbering man must intrude with his impious thoughts and hands.

Her workshop is awash of watery sounds. The overspill of St Lazar's spring chuckles through its slime-stoned channel, its water the green of early leaf-bud. She had the mason set the channel of Bath stone direct through her floor for it. The contents of the copper seethe and burp. Alisoun of Bath – of child height but plenteous womanly proportions – mounts the stone steps to the copper. (She had directed the same mason to lay three such mounting-places up its sides. Thus is deficiency in leg corrected.) She peers through wisping steam, assessing degree of bubble and ferociousness of seethe. She descends again to flue the furnace that the fire draw less air. The *glub* of water must subside – but only by a little.

The time is used to stand, Lot's wife-like, by the street door. Listening most intent. It is a quiet alley her workshop is on. It abuts the walls of Bath, midway between the West Gate and the South. Only the poorest live hard by Lazars' Bath, particularly in these plaguey times – for here of all places in Bath the miasma is greatest. The blessed spring overflows without cease, steaming and stinking, trickling pease-green along rust-rimed streams southwards to slip under the wall to

the Avon. The holy waters heal, doubtless, but their vapours? One must always suspect plaguey vapours. But Alys does not live here – she only dyes in the place – and it is the water that draws her here. And now, as she waits to tint, she gives ear to the outer door for footsteps or voice. But she does not look out. It would only direct stray eyes to her.

No sound but water and axe.

It ought to settle her, but it does not – for this is the last dribble of her dye-stuff. She has no more beetley grain. Besides, the kermes of the east are contrary creatures. Sometimes they shout bright scarlet, at others they murmur but muddy pink. Alys has not achieved perfection so many times that she is confident in its occurrence. And so bubbles more fierce the desire: certainty of satiation produces but lukewarm reward. Raise the risk, dangle the imminent deprivation of the desired, and need builds volcanic.

It is time.

Alisoun of Bath takes in her two small hands a glazed bowl from the trestle. A sea of red sand is contained within, fresh-ground, fresh-sieved. She dips her head to sniff, taking care that her wimple drapes not in. It is a dry scent she snuffs – dusty, like old blood. Metallic and richly dead. Eyes close. She will seal the scent in her memory, burn it upon her senses. This she must remember – but how to pin down a scent?

She must supplement the recollection.

She licks a finger and dips it in the dust. Lifts it to the firelight. It beads on her damp digit, fire-red as a new wound. *Scarlet*. Her innards contract. She places the fingertip upon her tongue. There. A dissolving, a spreading, a permeation of the mouth. It is a taste to puzzle the tongue. It makes her stomach rumble and her nose wrinkle up. It trips the boundary between delight and disgust. It savours of warmth and rare meat and the weevil bitten in bread. For this is kermes – *kirmiz* of the east – or grain (for all it is composed of beetle) and it tastes of blood, beautiful-bitter.

This, she will remember. And of course, the colour.

But now to dye.

She mounts the steps, bowl most carefully in hand, and holds it from the steam as she rechecks the contents of the copper – or more properly ‘tin’. Husband the Third’s copper had indeed been of copper. He had brought the lumping great thing with him when they wed, all the way from Bristol. Huge and heavy it had been – like Smith himself – and such a quantity of blushing metal the thing had contained. No wonder the coroner was full happy to take it for death dues (*deodand* to the legal wights), and by God, she was glad never to lay eyes on it again, for all she was put to the cost of replacement. The current one is of iron, lined with tin, and smaller by far. No true master dyer’d have a bar of it – but then she is no master.

The copper is seething still, but now the seethe is gentle. It dimples. It smiles at her. It cries out sweetly for her grain.

She lifts the bowl.

“In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.”

She speaks the words. She angles the bowl, and the last of her grain slips easy as death beneath the burbling surface.

And resurrects itself in a spume of red. Grain of Ararat roils and dances on the spring-water’s surface, a spreading, blazing glory, ever reddening. She stands quite still, watching, breathing shallow and short.

And then begins to pray those self-same words Lord Jhesu did teach:

“Pater noster, qui in caelis es...”

Our Father. It must be said twelve times, once for each apostle. (The bastard Judas, of course, is excised in favour of the red woman redeemed, the Magdalene.) That is what the grain demands, nor is this a thing known only to her among dyers. It is holy perfect timing. Smith taught it her, this saying of *Our Fathers*, but it was she who discovered the perfection of twelve. Timing varies between dyes, and grain of Ararat demands a full blessed number.

“Fiat voluntas tua...”

Her face grows damp, her legs grow damp. The chill of a January day in frosted Bath is banished. She is transported to a Holy Land, she climbs a holy mountain.

“...in caelo et in terra...”

The colour seethes. She bends over a cauldron of darkening blood. The scent of it tickles her nose and seeps into her wimple, to the bright hair beneath.

"...ne inducas nos in temptationem..."

There is a thud at the door. (The street door, that is. The Antichrist, it appears, has yet to arrive from the rear.) She ignores it. The prayer must continue. Perfection must not be marred. Besides, the door is barred from within. *Thump all you like, whosoever you been. It'll ne be opened by me – no, not til the dyeing is done.*

"Alys! Open the cursed door!"

A hiccup in her paternoster. He never comes to her dye-house. Not since ...

"My son, I will return later. It is not imperative I speak to her now."

A different voice this, quiet and yet somehow entirely audible, even through wood. It is a voice that may be comprehended clear from the west door to the Lady Chapel of St Michael's upon a crowded Easter day.

"...libera nos a malo."

She descends the steps. Seven fingers are curled around into her palms. She has but Matthew, James, Thaddeus, Sim and Mary Mag to go.

Perhaps her desire has waxed too great. It has summoned *them* here.

She approaches the door.

"What dostow here?" cries she through an inch of good oak. "Can you nat see I'm dyeing?"

All the while, she is making her way mentally through St Matt.

"Cock's bones, Alys, unbar! Sir Parson here comes thumping at my door and what has he to say but that my Wife has got Prior's permission to swan off to the Holy Land – you heard me right, the accursed Holy Land! – and yea, that her poor unwitting husband is—"

She throws back the bolt with a rasp and an, "*Amen.*"

Jankyn, her pretty blonde spouse with legs so nice-wrapped in bright hose, bursts within like an angel in a hurry. Her Parson follows more slowly after – tall, brown of garb and hair, and restrained of mien. Alys glances out into Lazars' Lane on a murmured, "*Qui in caelis,*" just to see what gossips have gathered – if any upon such a frostbitten morning. One or two shutters are opened, to be sure, but only

one personage has set his pattens upon the sucking street. A glimpse of him, and she bangs the door to. She has seen the fellow before, and, certain, she has no wish to see him more.

She brushes off a stool and upends a dryish pail.

“Sit you down, my loves.”

It is said abstractedly. She has half of James, then Thadd, Sim, and Mary to go. They were better said aloud, but doubtless Jhesu can hearken to a heart as easily as to a tongue. And then of course there is the cloth itself – this roiling red is but one step along the pilgrim path. What use is coloured water in absence of broadcloth? Red is not scarlet until it meets fulled wool. No, not just a meeting but a full-blooded embrace, a sinking of the one into the other.

If only her men will sit quiet for the space of a few paternosters more.

“Alys, what a-God’s-name have you done?”

Of course it is Jankyn and, of course, he doesn’t sit. He stalks about the workshop, managing throughout to avert eye-beams from the tinny copper by means of turning his swish-cloaked back to it.

“Done, my love?” she asks, most innocent.

... *debitoribus nostris* ...

“The cursed Holy Sepulchre, of course! Alys, tell your pet Parson he got it all wrong. He’s mangled his dates, nothing more. You trotted to Jersualem two years back, and no Wife, no matter how many sins she has stored up – and doubtless you’ve got a few – need go traipsing there again.”

Oh. She wonders if she will be permitted space of thought to achieve St Thadd’s *Amen*. She peeps, tiptoed, at the brew. It bubbles sweetly still.

Jankyn does not like to be ignored.

“Hearken when your husband speaks! How goes it? – *Let the woman learn in all subjection!* But what? Oh no, it is *me* you seek to subject, me, your wedded spouse, your master-by-law. If Sir John here has got his story straight – and pray God he has mixed his tits with his toes – it seems I am not only unconsulted in this matter, but must accompany you all the arse-sore and sorry way to Jerusalem.”

No, it was too much to expect that he hold his peace for half a prayer. Yet this excess of spleen is confirmation for her action. The pilgrimage is a needful thing. Jankyn must sweep his soul. She is doing it for her boy's own good.

And now she has but two paternosters in which to rid herself of menfolk.

She looks up at her priest.

"Well, Sir John? Speak it plain. Hastow got me good news?"

John glances with some wariness at his companion. Indeed, his caution seems warranted. Jankyn sports a hectic flush, his feet will not still, and he appears to draw breath only for further invective. Poor John. She should have warned him or at least bundled up the courage to confront Jankyn first. But she hadn't, just in case ... well, in case the Prior had seen fit to deny her Jerusalem. Not that that would have stopped her. Another way would be found. But in the meantime, why poke the bee-skep for no purpose?

Then he speaks it in those mild and mellow tones that make St Michael's ring: "Prior Petrus does indeed grant you and your husband permission to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Dame Alisoun."

There are two intakes of air preparatory to outburst. Jankyn's is the swifter.

"There! He says it again! Hear it? Je-ru-sa-lem. So tell me, Wife – do my ears deceive me, or it is just my Wife? Deceiving me, that is. *Again.*"

Of course her John is looking bewildered. A pilgrim needs the permission of a bishop, it is true, but more important still is the consent of one's spouse – especially if he is coming too.

... sanctificetur nomen tuum ...

So she speaks calm unto her beautiful boy: "We make pilgrimage to the Holy Land with the spring, my spouse. You and I. Han't you always wanted to gad abroad? Why, you speak Latin fluent, dostow nat, my scholar? And a touch of French too? And certain, you'll stalk by my side to protect me. I cannot gab in foreign gale, my dearling. I been just a poor, feeble woman who desiren to prostrate herself before the Sepulchre for her sins."

“Yea, for your manifold and scarlet sins,” mutters Jankyn, but she can see she has begun to butter him the right way. “And chief among those is deceiving your husband,” says he, and then more loud. “Is that not a sin, Sir Parson?”

... *debita nostra* ...

John looks at her. She looks at the dirt and dirty floor in all seeming penitence.

“It is,” says Parson John.

... *in temptationem* ...

She can feel their eyes upon her. John and Jankyn, yea, the very rats in the rafters, and just possibly too, one who lingers upon the street. And she is running out of prayer. The dye grows impatient.

“Well?” demands her spouse. “Why go there again, Alys? Have you committed so many sins in, what, just two years? How many times do you need to traipse to the Sepulchre before you’re forgiven? You confess regular enough. Why bother with another pilgrimage, and to Jerusalem of all places? *Why, Alys?*”

Of course it is what a man will assume. Jankyn will not be the only one, nor is he merely representative of his sex. Why, every man, woman and infant-in-arms will assume that she, the many-times Wife of Bath, is journeying to Jerusalem to reap plenary indulgence in the quantity only the Holy Land can provide. They will reason she must lighten her sins if she is not to spend a millennium in grey limbo.

... *sed libera nos* ...

“Full certain, I been a sinner, my Jankyn,” says she. “I gat lust and wrath and pride enough. Oh, most especially lust, my lover. Lust been deadly sin if your pricking been not for procreation, you woot it well. Shall we *traipse* over my sins of lust, my lover?”

His strawberries-and-cream cheeks turn more berry than cream. He mutters something inaudible and possibly blasphemous but he lets her say on.

“But sin ne been the whole reason, my love. No, not even by quarter. For the land of Our Lord’s birth han the power to turn all lust to gold. Christ Jhesu were an alchemist, I declare. He flicked His blessed fingers and, lo, the water was wine. By God, He moote as easy turn grain to gold or lickery to love.” She looks down her own person with meaning. True, her bosom threatens to obscure all lower view, but

she manages to sight some waist below, encircled by girdle, and distressingly small to boot. "Bethlehem, my dove. That's where the Holy Child was birthed. Nazareth, whereat the angel descended on Mary. With our sins sweetly purged at the Sepulchre, we'll convert all lust to sacred blessing."

"Christ above, woman, you want a cursed *child*?"

Amen.

And she has reached the end of the Magdalene.

There is silence, broken at length by John. "St Elizabeth grew large with the Baptist when she was long past childbearing."

"Well thankee, Parson. I ne been *quite* the age Elizabeth was, I trust."

Jankyn laughs. It is not a pleasant sound. "You've seen forty summers, Wife. More, I guess. You're no bride of twelve no more."

"Hence the Sepulchre, my love. We ne quite requiren a miracle, but every crumb of holiness helps."

Jankyn snorts. "You went before and stayed as flat as ever."

"Well I ne took my spouse with me that time, did I, my love?"

It takes a heartbeat, but she sees it plain – the moment he puts two and two together.

"What? You think *I* need shriving?"

Jankyn isn't laughing any more. His eyes are the blue cores of candle-flame.

2. Abbey

*A good man was ther of religioun,
And was a povre parsoun of a toun,
But riche he was of holy thoght and werk.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk*

The General Prologue

Omnipotent and All-Seeing Father, I pray you. Aid your lowly servant. Make sharp my sight. Does she speak the truth? Guide me, O Lord: have I been too quick to believe she who is both daughter-in-spirit and mother-by-marriage?

She was nearly my sister instead.

Or Wife.

Lord, Thou knowest I stand too close to Alys. My superior, from his vantage of greater distance (perhaps too great), has cast doubt upon her motives. And now, here in this vaporous workshop, there is evidence of some strange tension – some division – between these two who should be as one in flesh and mind.

I know not what to believe. The skein is too tangled. / am too tangled in her.

Father, grant me grace. Shine Thy light upon this fragment of Thy Holy Plan, for what is this earthly life but a pilgrimage of thorns towards Thy celestial Jerusalem? All is but a miniature of Thy greater purpose.

Yet one thing I do discern is true: her desire for a child. For do not all parents crave sons to inherit their wisdom and worth? Witness my own father. Witness his questionable actions. Then too there is Alisoun's firstborn. She has not recovered from that ordeal, and it occurred over two decades ago. It has been twenty years of denial. More than twenty barren years. *This* is why she holds the Holy Land so vital.

With your help, O Lord, I will purge her of her distemper. I will rake the soil of her soul and make the barren field fruitful again. She will admit what is past that her future may be white as snow.

Praise be to You, Lord God. You make the matter clear to me, here within these same sulphured and clammy walls wherein a man once lost his life. Here, before the second man to doubt my mother-daughter's purpose in the Holy Land.

The first was the Prior of Bath.

It is nearly two months since I first begged audience of the Prior. Not long after Twelfth Night – upon the Feast of Holy Innocents, to be precise – I entered the labyrinth of crumbling limestone that is Bath Abbey and made known my parishioner's request.

From the other side of the storm-tossed sea of parchment that was his desk, Prior Petrus stared.

“What? What's that you say? She wants to go to Jerusalem? *Again?*”

“Yes, Reverend Father. Dame Alisoun of Bath begs permission to journey to the land of Our Saviour's birth and passion. Again.”

The Prior's elbows descended upon curling calf-skin. I winced, but my superior noted not the damage he made to his multifarious records.

“Why?” he demanded.

O Lord, Prior Petrus is not normally a man sparing with words. His economy at this juncture struck me as ill-omened.

“For piety and for the health of her soul,” I replied. “Why else does one go to the Holy Land?”

The Prior snorted.

“Piety? The woman's as pious as His Grace of Southwark's geese. Scarlet, she is, and I don't mean her dress. Piety, my ...” At which point the Prior paused.

“Oh. Pardee, Sir John. I had forgot. The woman's your mother, is she not? Legally speaking, that is.”

He had not forgotten, of course. No-one save You, Lord, knows more of how matters stand between Alisoun and I.

“She is my mother by marriage, Reverend Father.” My reply was calm. Any fact is stripped of shock given the passage of time.

“You say sooth. Married your old Pa, and that was just the beginning of her career, eh?” The Prior chuckled. “Near bigamy, all the husbands she’s had since your sire. Bigamy ... or is it adultery? Oh, and then there’s her current lap-dog. What is he – twenty years younger? What do you term that, master clerk – incest? Child-dighting? Ah, the distinctions of canon law.”

Thus the Prior tested me, O Lord. Thus he prompted and prodded me. In the spirit of dialectic, he offered an inordinate point of view, distance to balance my over-nearness, mud that I may wipe her tenderly clean. As careful shepherd, he observed me close for all which went unsaid. He is my superior. He is proxy for the bishop in Bath.

“The Samaritan woman had five husbands and yet Our Lord gave her grace,” I replied.

“Tsk. Don’t puff off your preaching on me. You trying to tell me Alys of Bath wants Jerusalem because she repents of them she wedded? Or them she didn’t?” Did my superior smirk? “And what does she propose to do with Number Five, eh? Stow him in a monastery? Tow him along as a pup?”

Then he sobered abruptly.

“So, tell me, Sir Preacher, what reasons does she give to warrant a second trip to the Holy City? So she asks permission of her Parson – that’s well and good – but it’s the bishop who decides.” He spread his hands wide. “And I am Bishop of Bath and Wells when His Excellency is from home. So convince me, Sir John. Why must the Wife of Bath go to Jerusalem? Again.”

“I have spoken to her at length, Reverend Father.”

“And? Don’t bung it up, man! Let flow the ale.”

“I am persuaded that she is moved by genuine devotion. She speaks with reverence of the land of Our Lord’s birth. She desires to renew again that connection between the eternal and temporal that the Heavenly City best facilitates.” Seeing the Prior as yet wore a doubting face, I made bold to echo Alisoun’s own words. “And she says she wishes to conceive a child.”

Prior Petrus’s eyebrows sprang ceiling-wards. His lower lip sagged. The effect, Heavenly Father, might at another time have been comical. Yet this too was a test, and one which I failed.

“A child? Her? Conceive a *child*?”

Upon which, to my ire – followed immediately by my shame – the Prelate of Bath roared with merriment. I attempted not to focus upon his chins, O Lord, nor the quake of his belly, yet uncharitable thoughts arose nonetheless.

“By God, but it’s not for want of trying, I’ll give her that. Conceive, eh? Ah, me. She’ll be taking her puppy along then, and no doubt about it.”

I sat on my bench in silence, awaiting the subsidence of my superior’s jollity.

After some duration, the Prior’s person at last ceased quivering. Forgive me, Sweet Saviour. It is not my place to judge whether another be intemperate in his habits.

He wiped his eyes, chuckled again, blinked at me once or twice – and then sent me away.

I was recalled two days later.

The Prior’s desk was somewhat neater this time. The rolls of parchment were piled out of elbow’s way. My superior had but one pinned open before him when I was ushered in. He was gazing at it as if expecting it to burst imminently into flames. Upon registering my presence, he tucked it away with alacrity.

I made my obeisance and kissed his ring. I was waved to the bench I had occupied upon my previous appearance. The room was stony cold: a decaying priory in winter, its spiritual head huddled in his furs.

When at last he spoke, it was to utter a single word.

“Sin.”

“I beg pardon, Reverend Father?”

“It’s the only explanation, John. *Sin*. Your step-ma’s seen, what, forty summers at least, eh?”

I nodded. Cautiously.

“Past it, then, is she not? Put the brood mare out to pasture. Dunk the old hen in the stew-pot. Even *she* can’t be that blind. She’s short, but not of wits. She’s not going to Jerusalem to conceive, John. There’s got to be another reason.”

I began to defend my daughter *in spiritu*, but I was overborne.

“Now, all due consideration for family feelings and what-not, Sir John, but your erstwhile Ma has accumulated a worthy account in Purgatory over the years.”

“We none of us can avoid limbo, Reverend Father.”

It was a near miracle the words escaped between my teeth.

“Well, your Dame Alys ain’t growing any younger and I’ll lay warrant she’s starting to feel those decades in Purgatory a-creeping up on her. Entirely reasonable too, I say. If you’ve got the gold, by all means go to the Sepulchre and blanch your soul. But consider, Parson John – the woman’s already trotted her donkey to Jerusalem once, and only a brace of years back at that. You’d think she’d amassed enough indulgences from one trip to clear her accounts, but it seems not. The question is – *the question is*, Sir Parson – what heathenish crime has she committed that requires a second attendance?”

An instant answer, perhaps too quick: “There are more reasons for pilgrimage than indulgence for sin, Reverend Father.”

Prior Petrus heard not my words.

“Five husbands she’s had, John, and done exceedingly well for herself out of ‘em too. And how, ask you? Four of them died. How convenient. How very, very convenient for Alys of Bath.”

“Reverend Father, I must protest. The coroner cleared her of blame. There has been no indictment. No jury has decreed against her. If my ... my daughter has blemishes on her soul, as must we all, it is no more than the result of her living so unfortunately in the world.”

“Unfortunately, hah! Most fortunately, more like. And a fortune is what she is raking in from that accursed mill if she can afford to drop everything for Jerusalem. May I remind, John, your father’s business weren’t enough for her, but she must throw herself at Burgher Sam before your Pa got cold in his grave. And then there was Smith, and – who was the fellow after him? Some monstrous great creature. Hairy too. And now that Jankyn.”

“What choice has a woman in the world but to wed a worthy man, my lord? She must be subject to some man.”

“Man? *Men!* She went on marrying them, and they went on dying! Don’t that seem strange to you? And she needn’t have stayed *in the world*, as you put it. A decent widow would have stayed unwed, or retired to a nunnery long since.”

I made no reply. What could I say, Lord, when my superior only voiced thoughts I too have entertained?

“So she wants to go to the Holy Land, eh?”

It was all I could do to nod. I thought I saw what was to come.

I was wrong.

My superior rested upon me a look most benign. “Well, Sir Parson of Michael’s Without, who am I to deny a humble pilgrim? By the power vested in me by His Excellency, Bishop Harewell of Bath and Wells, I will grant this Wife of Bath her desire.”

Had I seen my visage in a glass at that moment, Sweet Lord, likely I would not have recognised it.

But the Prior was not quite finished.

“On one condition, John. No – on three.”

3. Lazars' Lane

*My fifthe housbonde — God his soule blesse!—
Which that I took for love, and no richesse,
He som tyme was a clerk of Oxenford*

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

She has no time left. The prayers are done. It is time to wed cloth and colour.

But first, she reaches to stroke her Jankyn's cheek. Her fingertips, wool-tender, are barely prickled. Her husband is fresh-shaved, as smooth as any boy. He affects a blonde squirrel-tuft of a beard upon his chin only, in indication of manhood.

"Oh no, my dove," she coos. "You requiren no shriving – least not for no thing special. Namooore than any other wight. We all need a touch of shriving, my lief. Now just you take seat and let me steep my cloth – lest you'll lend a hand, that is."

Jankyn jerks back like a scalded cat.

Ah, now that been precisely the point, my love. She need not say the words, she knows he knows. So instead, Alys moves resolute to where the rope is tied – the hempen rope that secures the dye-wheel that hangs from the beams above, direct above the steamy copper. Upon its sunburst spokes drape ells upon ells of finest broadcloth, still damp from mordant. But she goes not alone. Jankyn's words bound after her, ricocheting from wall to wood-strutted ceiling.

"You want *me* to go all the way to God-damned Jerusalem just to do some holy hip-work? To prick you in Palestine? To dight on the dust Our Saviour trod? That is, if I survive the foul fare and pirates and shipwrecks and Turks and Saracens and the cursed English-eating French along the way."

The Parson makes a noise akin to a puppy kicked, and Alys looses the knot.

"Forgive me, Sir John," snaps Jankyn. "I forget such activities are beyond your ken."

But her Parson rallies. He has an answer.

"If you die upon the way, my son, you are granted the same indulgence you would have reaped on Holy Soil."

And the Wife lowers the wheel. The rope creeps through her fingers and over the beam above. Down, until the steam is wreathing the pale ells about. Down, until cream kisses red, until broadcloth droops in slow spreading ripples into the bloody and boiling water. The water ceases its bubble, and she watches, thighs tight, as colour bleeds into pale cloth.

She must get rid of them, and soon.

“Oh, and a great comfort that’ll be when I’m drowning or shitting my insides out,” retorts Jankyn. “But brats aside, what about the *cost*, Alys? Have you thought of that? You’re forever wailing that business isn’t what it ought to be. Jerusalem’s no pittance, you mind. No, by Christ, it costs a cursed fortune.”

She knots the rope in place. She remounts the steps, and, pole in hand, she begins to prod and poke. Each ell must submerge. No wool must go undrowned.

“I been there before, my spouse,” she declares unto the dye.

She descends to mount from the opposite side. Now the ells are sunk, they must be swished through their near-boiling bath five full times – no less, no more. One for each Holy Evangelist and a final for Preacher Paul. Besides, she can watch her menfolk the better from here. She notes that Jankyn keeps his gaze most resolute upon John. His eye-beams light not upon the copper.

“And what if you get robbed along the way? Brigands are fond of a bit of pilgrim, I hear. Pirates too,” says he.

Alys leans in to take hold of an up-raised haft. The wooden handles rise from the wheel-rim that the dyer may turn it without cooking their flesh. Then she pulls the wheel slow and steady for good St Matt.

And hears the smirk in her beloved’s voice. “But never fear, Wife, your virtue’s safe enough. Even filthy infidels prefer their women somewhat young.”

The copper spits red for St Mark. By God, anyone would think her spouse had out-travelled old Mandeville. Certain, he was birthed in sea-faring Bristol, but he’s not set toe on a ship to her knowledge. As for gadding abroad, Oxford and Exeter mark the extent of his travels.

“That’s why you’re wending with me, my lief. To protect me,” she says, most patient.

“Of course I’m coming with you!” bellows Jankyn. “I know damn well what you get up to at your shrines and hallows, woman. You’ve told me tales enough. How goes it?”

*He who spurs his horse over fallows,
And lets his wife go gadding to hallows,
Is worthy for to be hanged on the gallows!*

That is, if I let you go at all,” he concludes.

And with that, she knows she has won. The first bout, at least. True, her spouse will demand a steep price, but Alys is not the arch-clothier of Bath for no reason. A merchant-woman can out-haggle any clerk.

But more imperative: St Paul’s stir is done. Her cloth has drunk its first draft of grain. Now the wheel must be raised that the ells drip and cool, the copper reboil and its water be fortified.

“Dearlings,” she declares. “There been swinking to be done. I am but midway through my dyeing and, God woot, scarlet waits for no man. Sir John, I thank thee for thy message, but—”

“I have not delivered it all, good Dame.”

She has padded to the wall where the rope is knotted. She pauses, hand on hook. The cloth must be lifted and *now*, but John, instead of speaking, sees fit to make inspection of his cassock. (God knows, there is little of interest to inspect, so coarse and brown it is.) Alys frowns. Her John is not a man given to nervous habit. He cultivates stillness and calm. He is the tranquil centre of the whirlpool that is her Bath.

“Well, Sir John? What goodly donation doth our Prior demand? By God, his Abbey falls about his ears, all Bath knows it. Certain, I will do somedeel to prop it up.”

“Dame, it is not that.”

Tranquil John is definitely perturbed. Eyes of woad-blue stare at a mouldering patch on her daub-and-rubble wall. But needs must while cloth and dye dance – Alys loosens the knot and begins to heave the sodden stuff up.

“Well? Cough it up, Parson! What does the fat fellow demand?” Jankyn demands.

Alisoun’s teeth clamp as she heaves. (God knows, wet wool is wondrous heavy.) Her boy is getting mouthier by the day. When he was yet a sweet child, no such language issued from his berry lips. This journey cannot begin too soon. That he turn his talk on her she can understand, if not condone, but that he should exercise it on her Parson?

Silent, sweating, she continues. The ells stream steaming blood. The spatter of water almost drowns her Parson’s words.

“Good Dame, it is a matter not of money,” says he, in manner full stilted for one who is her son-by-law and father-in-spirit. “No, nor of charity to the poor, as you did two years past.”

Upon which her Parson pauses. And clears his throat – yea, he makes something of a meal of it – before he speaks again. And when he does, his words halt her in mid-heave.

“Prior Petrus, in his concern for your health, temporal and spiritual, has decreed you take certain companions with you to Jerusalem.”

There is silence, but for the background gurgle and the red rain a-pattering into the copper from the wheel above.

Then Jankyn: “The Prior be damned! The fat fellow oversteps his altar. Christ, he overleaps his abbey altogether. He cannot order who accompanies my Wife.” A pause. “Can he?”

That same Wife focuses upon reknitting her rope. Her cloth must drain and cool before it may be dunked again. In the meantime, there is a fresh bath to prepare.

“My superior stipulates this condition in place of coin,” John says.

And Alys knows Prior Petrus to be quite within his rights to demand a hefty weight of silver in return for blessing such an undertaking. It is custom. It is part of the price of sin. The rope secure, she picks up a pail and moves to the water-channel.

“So tell it me,” says she. “What wight doth he want a-trotting at my heels?” *And why, when money would serve him so much more?* adds only to herself.

“See, Alys?” Jankyn observes her fill the bucket. “The Prior flings boulders in your way. Yea, he tosses very mountains. Christ above, the man is a verray trebuchet. Alys, the thing is plain: God Himself is against this God-awful plan.” His gaze flicks away as she lugs the bucket back copper-wards.

His Wife has no breath to answer. She tiptoes to tip the water in.

Then she looks the question at John.

“The Prior provides you spiritual succour to ease your holy path.” The Parson addresses the wall.

It is not an answer. Alys descends the steps. Another bucket-load is required. From the constipated look that has settled upon her Parson’s face, she will not be over-startled if he names Beelzebub himself.

John draws breath. “A Quaestor,” he says. “A seller of pardons for sin. One Thomas of Rouncivale.”

“That sin-sucking leach!” cries Jankyn.

She is inclined to agree. Beelzebub himself’d likely be more hallowed company. The Prior may as well propose a fiend, for only an inmate of the seventh circle of Hell would ally with that peddler of pardons. Alys is acquainted with Long Tom by sight, by reputation, and worse, by hearing. The man (if one can term him such) has a goat’s bleating laugh and pains her ears with his over-loud and under-pious preaching. He has Bishop Harewell’s patent to sell indulgences up and down his diocese, and has done for a year or more. The fellow harvests coin for reduction of time in Purgatory. Alys has not seen fit to give him her custom.

All of which is considered as she slops another bucket to the bath.

And John examines her wall.

“And?” prods she, when the second pail is done.

Watery silence.

“Sir John, my popelote, my pigsney. You woot I love you well, but canstow not see there been work to be done? So – the Prior requires one wight more? You clept *companions* ...”

“A knight,” says he.

“A *knight*?” She near drops her bucket in the drink. “What, a genuine lordling, replete with sword and armour and such? But why in Christ’s sweet Heaven or toasty Hell doth a knight lower his precious lordliness to amble with us?”

John does not reply.

Alys’s eyes narrow, her feet descend. “Well then? What dirt hath the Prior got on him? What’s yon noble mushroom done, Sir John?”

“Perhaps we’re not so almighty low as you fancy, Wife. Least, not *all* of us.” A smile fidgets her Jankyn’s lips.

“Ha! That tickles thy heart-root, don’t it, my love? A shiny knight to go roule about with, all courtly and courteous-like.” And she scoops up the arsenic and alum-of-lees, most meticulously pre-measured and set out in ceramic.

“You’ll pay steep for his services, though,” Jankyn continues more doubtfully. “Pilgrims hire men-at-arms. A knight’ll cost a pretty penny more.”

“Well, John?” she demands, climbing the copper yet again.

“His protection comes free of charge, Dame.”

“What? And him courtesy of the Prior? Certain, there been a catch, John, and a lumping fat one at that,” she declares. She tosses in the arsenic, then follows it with alum, and descends with alacrity. “So, will yon knight carve us for our coin? Poke us in some privy part? By God, he’ll reft our verray maidenheads!”

Jankyn hoots at that. “Woman, you’ve been wedded five times and bedded a multiple more – or does it slip your mind? Heaven help me, do you drop into dotage now too?”

“I speak story-wise, my love,” says his Wife, most lofty. Now she has the sal niter and salt. They too approach the copper. “You’ve read suffisant of knights and maidens, han’t you? You know what japes they get up to. And I trowe you got no great lust to wear the cuckold’s horns, even courtesy of a knight. Or do I mistake?”

“The man’d be blind and witless both to mistake *you* for a maiden.”

“The knight in question is excommunicate.” John speaks calm onto troubled waters.

Alys doctors hers with sal niter and sal.

“He must kneel at the Sepulchre to be numbered again among the Faithful,” Sir John goes on. “It is laid upon him to protect pilgrims as part of his penance.”

Jankyn’s brow lowers. “Well? What’d he do? Is the man heretical? A foul Templar? Does he plot against our lord king Richard?”

Now Alys kneels before the copper’s fire-door, she raddles the coals – quietly, in case her Parson sees fit to answer in the interim – and tosses in another log. The copper must reboil, and by then, with any luck, her menfolk will have dispersed.

She looks up to see something like amusement cross her Parson’s face.

“Not to my knowledge. Sir George is excommunicate by papal decree. His Holiness, Pope Urban, declared all who fight in brigandage in France be anathema.”

“But that was years ago!” Jankyn, that keen student of politics, sees the flaw.

“Sir George cannot enter into his inheritance until his soul is cleansed,” replies John. “His father specified it so.”

“Ah, so his father is just lately sunk beneath the sod—”

“The church nave, my son.”

There is a thinking pause. Storm clouds gather upon her Jankyn’s brow and then clear as if blown hence by a strong wind. “It is a noble cause,” he decrees. “A knight makes quest to clear his gentle name. He pledges protection to fellow pilgrims upon the road. By Christ, it is a nobler quest than some, even on the doubtful premise that a certain woman speaks truth.”

His gaze flashes to her, then flickers faster away. (She is stirring the copper again, that new-met substances dissolve.)

“The Prior desires that both thy body and soul are guarded on the journey,” says John.

Alisoun’s stirring acquires vigour. God above, anyone’d think John believed his Prior has naught but tender care for his wayward flock.

“My body, certain, but my soul, Parson dear? By God, I’d sooner pass Tom of Rouncivale my purse and leave the lickerous worm in Bath.” She stabs at her copper. Sweat rolls a tear down her cleavage. “But lat us talk over this thing *later*, sweet man. My dye ...”

“The Prior decrees that one more be of your company, Dame Alisoun.”

“What? Christ in Heaven, will he purvey us a ship withal? Horses too?” she cries. “Quaestor Tom I well hold the Prior wants rid of. And a knight who’s over-fond of smoting – doubtless. But how many other benighted wights doth the Prior want hente out of his hair?”

Which latter gives her reason to snort. Between receding hairline, tonsure, and generous neck-roll, the fat man of Bath doesn’t have much hair in the first place.

But John is looking at her at last. It is a regard most solemn and blue.

“Myself,” says he.

“Cock’s body and bones, stuck between two prosy preachers all the way to the Sepulchre? I’d sooner be walled up as an anchorite.”

Thus Jankyn declaims to the roof-beams. The orator looks not at his Wife as she continues to stir, as she hearkens with hand as much as ear for whether any solid arsenic or alum remain. But at least John is gone. He relayed his superior’s demand and then no doubt observed the thundercloud fly back to roost on Jankyn’s

brow. Not that her John is cowed by one youth's displeasure, but he knows when it is diplomatic to depart. She only wishes Jankyn had followed suit, but no – her boy is stalking about the dye-room again, working himself up into God-knows-what fever of the humours.

She can hear her copper begin to glub. All is turned to liquid, no grains to mar the grain. It gurgles for her cloth. The last of her scarlet. She moves back to the rope-hook.

"A God's name, Alys ..." An errant cloud of steam intersects her husband's pacing. "Christ, that reeks like the devil's own hole. Will you stand and listen!"

"Speak on, my love," says she. She loosens the rope and lowers the wheel for its second bath.

He draws ferocious breath.

"I come here – here, to this stinking pit of Hell – to confront my Wife of her heinous disobedience, and what does she do but continue with her dabbling and pay scant heed to him who is her lord on earth?"

She remounts the steps, dye-pole in hand, and checks the cloth is well sunk. The wheel must be turned again, and this time to the sacred count of twelve.

"I am paying heed, my love."

"Well then, *come away from that accursed pot!*"

There is something in his tone. She considers its implication. She makes the first turn. No, he will not approach her here, not while she leans over her still-steaming, occasionally glubbing, scarlet sea.

"I can hearken as well up here, my lamb. Speak it plain: why dostow object to the company of our John?" When there is no answer save for a runic gesture or three of his hands: "You woot the way of dye, my dove," says she, most reasonable. "If I ne wallow the cloth now, there'll be a-spotting and a-spoiling. This been scarlet, if you han't noted. The verry colour of kings. Dye it well, and it'll send us all the way to the Sepulchre. By God, it'll even forgive thee of thy madder. So? Dostow want me to toss my silver and thy soul aside as one?"

Too late, she knows she has misspoken.

Her lamb twists about, his face more twisted still. It twists at her. Two long paces, and he leaps up the lower-most step of the copper – the hated copper – and grabs her two shoulders. She rocks forwards. Her stomach concaves against the boiling cauldron edge.

Heat. Even through the layers of apron, kirtle, and smock, she feels the shrivelling sear of it. But even this proximity is not enough for her Jankyn. He must shove her forward, tipping her waist-wards. Her bosom dips down, down towards the red and raging surface. The steaming, stinking waters. She screws her eyes against the scorch. She should scream for the day-labourer. Perhaps he'd even hear – above the smack of his axe, above the ever-running spring. But she doesn't. No. Instead she squirms like the Avon eel. His fingers merely clamp the harder.

“You threaten me, woman?” hisses he who has her pincered by the shoulder-bones, who continues to press her towards red water. “You pay more heed of your cursed cloth than me and what do I get of it? Oh, others have slipped in their work before. Others fall into wells, under carts, get scalded in their own brew. You work with dangerous tools, Dame Dyer. No-one’ll be startled if you slip. It’s happened before. So tell me – *why* should my silver be spent on Jerusalem? *Why* should I go? Of what do I need forgiving?”

Her vision blurs in vapour. It is an impossible. He would not harm her, not his Alys. And yet the steam scalds. Her eyes burn. The scarlet sea creeps closer. Only her pole, gripped between two fists, slows her descent.

“No soul is free of stain, my popelote. We all need our shriving,” she squeaks, but his grip does not slacken, and hers is slipping. It seems she must go further, say what ought not to be said. She sucks steaming breath. “And yours been more stained than most, Jankyn my love. Well? Dostow want me to give the Guild what I know?”

At which utterance she loosens her grip, lets herself dip momentarily towards bright death, and, in Jankyn’s jolt of unbalance, wrenches herself sideways and swings the dye-pole around in a stream of hot droplets. The stick smacks him fair across his fair cheek. His arms fly up. He topples from the step.

Jankyn lands upon his pretty posterior, arms out-splayed. He curses all cocks and their bones, twists to his knees, and begins to rise. Alys skitters down the steps and puts some goodly distance between herself and the dye. She scrambles for the rear door. If she can but draw the bolt and give yell, the day-labourer’s presence must surely restrain her husband. (Certain, a husband may reprimand his Wife, but he cannot cook her.) But she retains her prodding stick. It is just as well, for Jankyn has achieved his feet. He advances. She raises the pole. It is a weak and wambling defense, and the door is still shut behind.

“Jankyn, my lovely, my popelote. You’ll do me no ill. Consider! Even if it been judged accident, you’ll get scant good of me. The Prioxy’ll snatch the mill back, the house’ll pass to John, and even this place—” She risks a glance at the workshop. “—I hold but for life. In death, it’ll go to the cousin of him who left it me.”

There, it is said.

In death.

Is that what stutters Jankyn in his step? That word, or some realisation else? Certain, he never meant to threaten her life. It is just momentary rage, some madness of jealousy over her dye and Sir John. She hastens to shore up her advantage.

“I nil nat inform on you, Jankyn my dove. No, never, my sweeting. Namooore than you’d harm one curl on my pan.” She sees his fists droop. The storm recedes. It is safe to assert one last word. It must be said. “But hearken well, my spouse: you’ll come to the Sepulchre all the same.”

Given time, she might have been surprised at what follows. She might have warded him off with her bloody stick. But there is no time. There is only rushing air.

His blow swipes her head sideways and her body tumbles after. Her head cracks upon a sandstone block, and there is redness.

No, blackness.

She is lying, limp, as crumpled as cloth. Her ear gongs a knell. Her thoughts are crushed beetles, and her eyes will not open. How long has she lain here? Where is her boy? Did he think her dead and flee? Or just hope that she would ...

“Oh, hastow slain me, false thief?” Her lips scarcely stir.

There is a thud and scuffle close by. A ghost of breath on her face.

“Alisoun?”

She blinks, and manages to focus. Her beautiful boy is kneeling over her, all the rage scrubbed from his face. Instead, it is a white sheet – struck with the brand of her one red blow.

“Sweet Alys. God help me, why do you do it to me?” He strokes the hair back from her brow. Her wimple has parted company with her head. His hand is soft and warm. “I didn’t mean it, Alys. You know I did not mean it. You rile me so. Forgive me, sweet Wife.”

Yea, forgiveness. It is the key.

“You will come to Jhesu’s Own Land,” she murmurs. “With John and me and whatever wight else the Prior decrees. It been *His* forgiveness you need, you and me both. Then, Christ willing, He will grant us a babe.” The words shoot needles through her skull. “You gat on me an heir, my spouse, and there been no-one can snatch my good from you and yours when I’m gone.”

No need to mention the other purpose for which she journeys.

Jankyn’s hand is removed. He sits back on his heels. Silence.

Alys struggles up onto her elbows. Red bees swarm. She blinks them back.

“Now, just you lat me back to my copper, Jankyn love. Yon scarlet’s in its second bath. It moote be turned twelve times, you mind. Yea, then it requireth stirring ere it cools. It ne been worth—”

An inhuman cry intervenes. The cheeks that were a moment ago white are now blotched madder red. His hand is up-raised.

“Devil take you, woman, will you never let up? You are *my Wife*. It is not a Wife’s place to order her husband’s goings. Heark you: *man shall not suffer his wife to wander about*. Man, I say! Me! *I* order your goings.”

Ah, she recognises this tune. Jankyn is launched into lecture. His scholardom has flooded back to him. She sinks back on the dirt, and feels the slap and smack of words upon her.

“*Better to share thy habitation with lion or foul dragon,*

Than with a woman using for to chide!” cries he.

Oh, she has been here before. There is no point biting back. Jankyn must have out. He must purge himself of bile, and he will be her own sweet lamb again. And maybe then she can stir her scarlet.

*“Better high on the roof to abide,
Than with an angry wife in thy house!”*

She did bite back once. It earned her the one buffet he has given her up until now. Admittedly, she had compounded her crime by tearing forth a page of his one precious book. Not that he needed it. He’d got the thing by heart from reading it at her. Over and over. Some tripe about Hercules, about Samson, and most particularly about the womenfolk who’d wrought their heroes’ doom. A pointed lesson if ever there was one.

He is leaning over her now, barking like the rabid dog.

*“Wives been so wicked and contrarious,
They hate that their husbands love aught but them.”*

True enough, although the reverse is as much the problem here.

Then fresh realisation drifts in. This tirade is a salving of her lad’s pride. She has delivered her ultimatum, laced it with a little threat, sugared it with incentive. Now he must have his reaction.

It means she has won.

Her face must have reflected her thought, shown a faint flicker of triumph. He has seen it. It dries up his bile. It turns his lips and eyes narrow. There is silence and stillness. Alys begins to hope that the sermon has worn itself out.

But no, her husband has one last lesson for her:

“A woman casts her shame away, when she casts off her smock.”

Whereupon he seizes that garment. Yea, Jankyn casts up her smock, apron, kirtle and all. There on the dye-splotched floor, her legs are bared to the wintery air. But Alisoun does not look at her legs. Her gaze is trained upon her love. A fresh expression has settled upon his face.

“You want a child, Alys?”

Spoken not in his orator’s voice, but in tones altogether more direct and purposeful.

“You would drag me all the way to Jerusalem – spend my silver by the bucket load, risk all our lives – just for a bit of holy dighting?”

She does not answer. She sees clear Jankyn doesn’t require an answer. He just wants a bidable bit of woman flesh – or he thinks he does.

“Well, best we get on with it, then,” he says.

This is why Eve was cast from Adam’s rib. The marital debt. Any canon lawyer would declare her boy entirely within his rights. They have *all* been within their rights, all

her five husbands, though some exercised them a deal more than others. *Be thou my debtor and my thrall.*

But he is done, for now.

His heart batters her still. His breath is fire on her neck. The weight of him flattens her like dough to the damp, dirt floor. He seems in no hurry to move, and Alys begins to gasp for air.

Then his fingers reach up. They stroke. They twine in her hair, slackening and slowing as his breath softens. And he slips off her, curls about her childlike, and sleeps.

At least now she can breathe.

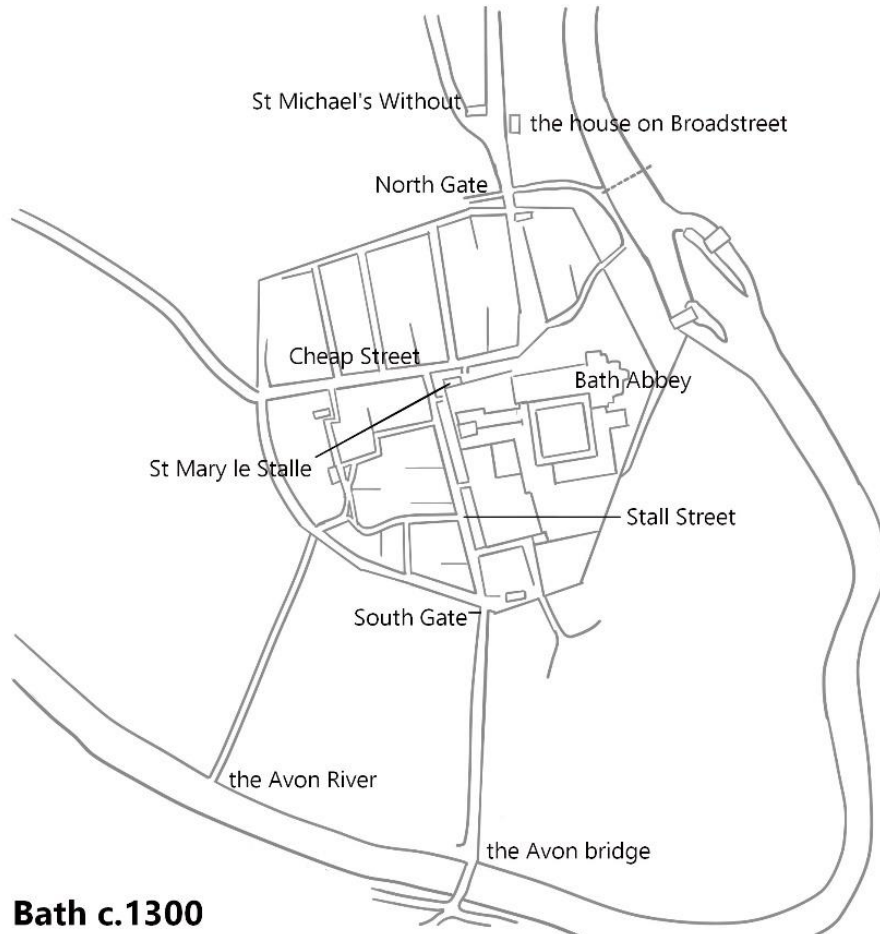
Water trickles, wood chops. And knowledge seeps into Alys, as bitter and honeyed as the herby brew her maid presents her with at every dawn. Her boy just had to assert himself. This was but a declaration. Jankyn must assert his sovereignty, and when he awakes he will submit again.

He will go to Jerusalem.

And her scarlet? She hears it. It cries out for her stirring. It simmers, uncared for, spoiling, and mere yards away. And yet she will not move – not quite yet. She can only pray it is redeemable. Like her boy's soul.

The Holy Land must redeem them both.

4. St Mary de Stalle



Bath c.1300

*With hem ther rood a gentil pardonere
Of Rouncivale, that eek was clept quaestor*

The General Prologue

Lordings, I am released. I am led from carceration in the ruinous cellar of the ruinous Bishop's Palace (now Abbey junkyard), ten steps around the corner to the parish church of St Mary de Stalle. It is the very umbilicus of Bath. In the Abbey of St Peter I am under the paw of its Prior, but this golden-stoned edifice which now encases me is spiritual home to the burghers of Bath.

I am released, my lords, but note well that this Pardoner is not pardoned. No, not by many thousand thigh-jolting and purse-pricking miles yet. No, this Quaestor needs go on a most devious and deviant holy quest before he may preach folk out of their paltry coin again, at least under the auspices of His Pudginess of Bath.

Which recalls me to my present situation, to wit – malingering most conspicuous before the rood-screen of St Mary de Stalle.

O my audience – for I must preach to somebody, else my Quaestorly skills wither – I declare that it makes no sense. Why has the Prior stirred himself to Mary de Stalle? A pilgrim is properly farewelled from the bosom of his own parish church and by his own parish priest. Nevertheless Prior Petrus, the fat man of Bath, is arming himself with holy water and his quasi-bishop's cope before the rood of St Mary's.

The door from the street thuds again. I jump. Again. Jumpy, that's me – today, least ways. (Understand, I am not at my best. I am unfresh out of a cold stone gaol of the most uncomfortable ecclesiastical kind.) A couple of tailors and a cordwainer stroll in, take up position among their fellows before the chapel of the Guild. Behold a convocation of cock-o-the-dung-heaps, puffed of chest and puny of wit. Un-Worthies of Bath, come to ensure I am blessed and booted out of their sodden and stinking town.

Thus our audience swells. The choir begins to warble. But where are the chief actors?

Not wishing to draw attention to my lone and lonely state, I eye the floor before the splendour of carven saints that is the rood-screen. Cold stone, bare of straw, and scratched with illegible Latin. But is it passing clean? Perhaps. I will be lying face down on said surface as soon as my companions arrive. I will find out.

The choir finishes one antiphon and begins a second. Where *is* the woman? Perhaps she has pulled the plug on the whole farcical plan. She will remain in Bath, spinning forth money and weaving fresh scandal. But where will that leave me? Thomas, a Quaestor with no quest, a Pardoner stripped of pardons.

Even the fat man begins to look restless, never a good look on one with so many chins. They wobble over-much. The south door is glanced at.

And, as if summoned, she who has kept us waiting arrives. The oaken, iron-barred door is flung wide and a chill breeze gusts her in with a swish of skirts the colour of blood. Strange how such a small package can make such a big entry. Behind her, and somehow lesser although evidently taller, crowd others. A drab priest, a slight and gaudy youth, and a grey-clad girl.

The bloody woman trip-traps up the nave, right down the middle, looking about her left and right, pausing to twitter greetings to those she knows – seemingly everyone, which renders her progress exceedingly slow – and finally achieves a position like to mine.

It is my turn. The Bawd of Bath looks me direct in the eye, or as direct as one who only attains the level of my chest is able. She makes survey up and down, nose wrinkling at my garb – none too clean, courtesy of the Prior's hospitality, and never of great quality – and deliberately takes a step nearer the rood than I.

"Quaestor Tom, I trowe," she casts over her shoulder.

I sigh. Not Good Thomas of Rouncivale, nor Honoured Quaestor. Mere Tom, and that seasoned with a goodly pinch of disdain. Not that I am accustomed to much else. He who trades pardons for coin is not assured of respect.

"Dame Alisoun of Bath." I assay a bow. "Thomas of Rouncivale at your service."

“Oh, artow indeed? At my service, I mean.” Her brow displays scepticism. It is an expressive brow, all the more so for its upper boundary being plucked back at hairline and framed by a wimple of impressive folds. A few curls have escaped its confines. They glint like scrapings of copper.

But there is no time for chat. Prior Petrus is lubricating his throat by means of a gurgle and a rasp. The choir has paused at the end of a psalm.

“Now that we are all present ...”

The fat man’s knuckles (made lumpy with gems) sweep St Mary’s nave. It is a shepherdly gesture, yet an expression suggestive of a satiated toad has settled above the flowing chins.

Are we all present?

I glance behind me – and startle yet again. By Christ, I declare it is not characteristic that I turn skittish as a hare. Our fifth member has joined us, although how such a blacksmith’s collection of ironware approached me unawares, I cannot conceive. Oh, but *what* a member, audience mine. Yea, he is lofty as me – I look him direct in the dark and glowering eye – but truly, he is of a sight more well set-to.

Shoulders, lordings, he has them.

And as I look, this Knyght sinks down upon one knee. The moment is unreal. It is courtly romance come to clanking life. I am the Maiden and he, the Knyght Errant, is bending the knee to me.

But then he sinks still further – lays an iron-clad chest that any maiden would sigh to be pressed against to the stone floor – and I realise.

I am the only one of our party left standing.

I scabble stone-wards with a good deal less solemnity.

And here we are, five nearly-pilgrims, face-down upon the only slightly grimy floor at His Pudgyness’s feet, and the mouth above the chins is giving voice to that most soul-searing of churchly commonplaces:

“O God, to Whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts ...”

Burning cheek against a stone cold slab. The lick of eternal flame. Is that the sulfur of Hell I sniff, or just that of Bath?

And Prior Petrus warbles into yet another antiphon. In Latin this time. I recognise the odd word, if not enough to make head or tail of it. Then there is a *Kyrie Eleison* – has no-one told the fellow he can't sing? I have heard more tuneful swamps. And now we have the verses. I kiss the floor with my responses. It causes me to squirm a little, this thigh-to-stone contact. Not from physical discomfort, mind you, my lords. No, a posture so intimate with such an immense hardness strikes me as ... pleasant. Ill-timedly so.

The paternoster saves me.

And lead us not into temptation. That much Latin I do understand. *Tentationem.* Oh, *how* I understand it. I journey to Jerusalem because of it, although believe me when I say the timing was not of my choice.

"You may stand."

Grunting. Shuffling. It is always easier to go down than up.

Now the fellow is busy blessing scrips and staffs, the essential accessories for any well-dressed pilgrim. Petrus splatters them with water most holy. He sputters forth prayers. Finally, the Fat Man is done. The Prior has sung and spat and splattered. Now he may give us our bags and sticks.

"Dame Alisoun of Bath."

She is first, of course. She is our leader. The profane shall lead the holy. The Dame sinks to her knees in a puddle of red, forcing the noble belly to bend in manner most discommodious to his girth. He drops the scrip about her neck – its leather strap barely compasses her wimple. (Now there would be scandal – exposing the raw red hair of a Bawd beneath God's august roof.) Disaster avoided, Prior P places a staff in her hand. He signs the cross, mutters a few words, and lo, the Bawd of Bath is become a holy pilgrim. Her first action as such is to employ the staff to attain her feet.

"Sir ... George."

Lordings, I note well the loaded hesitation between the honorific and the appellation. Is it possible? Petrus is being ironic? Sardonic, even? I didn't know the man had it in him. Our latest arrival steps forward. *Sir ... George.* But of where and of what lineage? His surcoat is silent. There is no blazon on it but black. I was told of this fellow, of course. Only I was not told I would be co-conspirator to a ghost.

The leather pouch is hung most incongruous about the Knyght's naked neck. (It seems one may wear full clinking harness into a church if only one leaves off the headcovering.) The wooden staff is inserted into a hand more accustomed to slithering steel. Words are whispered from above. The bare head bows. Straight, dark hair feathers a noble brow. *Deliver me from evil.* The Knyght returns to his place.

"Sir John, parson of the parish of St Michael's Without."

The blonde-haired youth jolts as the Parson steps forward and I read the matter plain upon his pretty face. He, the esteemed burgher Jankyn, husband to a Wife, has been bypassed in precedence by a sparrow-dowdy priest. Noticing my notice, the youth scrubs the expression from his face. Meanwhile, the pious Parson has knelt before his superior, looking entirely the palmer in his undyed and sincerely unflattering robes. Sweet St Stephen, the man might cut a reasonable figure if only he would wear something more than a corn-sack. He has a manly jaw and a yeoman's build. Now His Brownness is bowed humble before the Prior, and I observe the cross splashed clear upon the back of his scratchy cloak. I squint. The light is dull, but it seems to me the fabric is of a startling contrast to its ground. It is of fine-fulled scarlet, and attached with near-invisible stitches.

Yon Parson bears the brand of a Wife.

"John, burgher of Bath and husband to Dame Alisoun."

The gaudy youth flounces forward. Lordings, now *I* am somewhat started. John? Well, it makes sense, I suppose. Jankyn is diminutive of John, and one Wife cannot have two Johns in her life, can she? It is only that in all the time I have frequented Bath – and I have drunk full deep of its gossip – I have never heard the Bawd's fifth husband referred to as aught but Jankyn. But then a diminutive is, perhaps, appropriate for one who – for all his superior height – is indeed diminutive to his Wife.

"Thomas of Rouncivale, quaestor of this diocese."

I step forward as if jerked on a string. It seems I have precedent over the maiden at least – unless she, as serving wench, gets no staff and scrip at all.

I kneel and stare at the fat man's feet. They are encased in embroidered slippers, a-glitter with golden thread. Their owner stands slightly above me, upon the step before the rood.

"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti," is muttered as the scrip descends like a leash about my neck. Like a dog, I will be led to the Sepulchre, and she who leads me is the chief sinner of us all.

Or so the Prior would have it.

As he bends to push the staff into my hand, the Prior murmurs a less conventional benediction upon my sinful head. "Return from the Sepulchre twice cleansed, Thomas of Rouncivale. Your bulls await your return."

The marginalia to this text is, of course, *Fail, and you will never work as Quaestor again.*

Thus I am blessed and banished.

The maid gets a staff and scrip after all.

Now it is official. We have our valediction. The fat man has laid his porcine paw upon us and we may now depart this sulphurous bath of a town and tramp our way footsore – or cheek-sore, given the mode of transport – across Christendom and into the heathen wilds of the east.

I tap my moist and holy staff on the stones of the rich and dead as we progress down the nave and towards the south door. He who has blessed us makes waddling progression at our head. We palmers trail in his wake, ordered according to rank.

Palmers. That's what we are now. I have peeked inside the pouch. It contains two things: a leaf of parchment, blobbed with wax – my hopefully bland and rote-written letter of licence – and a twig of pussy willow. Sunny England is short on palm-trees, but why a sprig of pussies is acceptable substitute is beyond me. We palmers will get our real palm-leaves when we enter Jerusalem, just as Jhesu did on his stolen donkey. Pray God I do not sacrifice my life shortly after too. I tread behind blonde Jankyn and gloomily admit the possibility. There is a reason why palmers make their wills and set their affairs in order before seeking the

Sepulchre. There are those who return only as boiled bones – if they do so at all. Not that I have aught to set in order. All my substance I take with me, stuffed in little bags about my body. Some as coin, some as bills of exchange, and all of it co-opted against my will to fund my path to forgiveness.

Our mostly-merchant audience drifts like flies to our rear. The Dame bleeds self-satisfaction. So many notables of Bath and all present just past dawn on a March morning for her. Oh, trust it well, it is not me they swarm to see, and unlikely it is a blazonless Knyght. Less likely still that they are there for Burgher Jankyn.

I step into the pale sunshine of St Mary's porch and look about me, up and down this borough of Bath's chief thoroughfare. Two streets form a T within the town: Souter Street and Stall, and St Mary's marks their juncture. She is the stony heart of Bath, and her steps command the market-fare. This I know full well, for I have preached here when I could – when I still had bulls, and for as long as it took for some worthy or other to inform me that *quaestors are not consecrated. You are no chaste nor godly man. A pardoner does not preach.* Yea, I gave discourse on sin upon a sinful market day, when the stalls filled Stall Street.

Today is not a market day.

And therefore I blink. It is not the limp light that has me shielding my eyeballs. It is the people, and the more people for having no stalls to obstruct them. It is a crowd as to be encountered only in my most quaestorly dreams. It is a golden opportunity in silvery dawn light. I might speak forth even now, sing of the sufferings of Hell unto the crowd, croon coins out of sinners' pockets in exchange for pardon.

Save that the Prior has my bulls. And worse, my few scraps of relic.

But the crowd is not here for me. Bathonians of all shapes and estates huddle before St Mary's on this chill March morning for *her*. As do the burgers and merchants, and the Pompous Prior himself. For she is notorious: Dame Alisoun, the much-married, the suspiciously wealthy.

The Bawd of Bath.

I look upon the crowd from the vantage of St Mary's. Some – mostly women of a lower order – smile and call blessings upon *Good Dame Alisoun*. Others speak loud only with louring looks. Older worthies, men and women both.

I look towards the object of their attention. Trust me well, it is not easy. The Dame is of such compromised height that she is rendered invisible by the merest bystander. It occurs to me that this is one reason why the Bawd garbs herself all a-scarlet. *Hey, look at me! Don't trample me underfoot, and a-God's mercy, ne ignore me!* It is the pipsqueak shout of a ladybird or robin. Oh, but there is another reason, if one nevertheless allied. I know it well. I, who am visually damned by my scruff and motley garb, yet know the hierarchy of cloth and colour. Scarlet is at the very top. Not red – *scarlet*. The Dame is a low-born wanton of no morals and less breeding who proclaims her worth by means of kingly cloth. Not that I hold the former against her. How would I, a seller of pardons, make my way if the world were entirely populated with saints?

Finally, I view her clear.

The Bawd is radiant. Her face is flushed, her eyes shine with purpose. Her bounteous corsete swells beneath quick breaths. And I wonder: should one be so glittering-excited when entering upon the longest and harshest pilgrimage of them all?

But then, she is no ordinary palmer.

As I watch, she lights upon one in the crowd and, just for a moment, the radiance is dimmed. Lordings, I see it plain. A cloud passes over her sun. I strain to view that which caused the shadow. It is just a man. He is dark-dressed and nondescript – although something subtle about him declares a non-Englishness. Perhaps it is that very subtlety. It is not an English quality.

Then she glances away and the cloud passes.

Now we must descend the steps. The Fat Man forges the way. An altar boy precedes him, it is true. A Prior cannot tire his pudge with raising the processional cross on high. The gaudy thing is all gilt and glitter in the cold morning light, wavering in a small boy's arms. We follow the cross. The crowd parts before His Portliness like the Red Sea, and so we proceed south down Stall Street.

And are ushered out of the South Gate.

Prior P declaims a paternoster and bids us depart with the blessings of the Almighty – and of St Chris, over-muscl'd patron of travellers when the Almighty is off-duty. Then our spiritual mentor turns and waddles off, under Bath's unkempt

battlements of pale-gold stone and back up Stall Street, eager no doubt for the warmth of a crumbling Priory.

Thus begins our journey – or so I think.

“Woman, it is an extra horse!”

“Certain, my dove. I can count, least when my fingers been out. But what of it?”

“Only that you’ve been at me the last how-many-days about taking too much baggage. Recall? *Oh, certain you ne need that book, dear Jankyn. God woot, you may close your eyen and quote from the Wicked Wives if it be a thousand mile away. And Oh, ten pair of hose, my Jankyn? Hastow ten pair of legs? Your words, Wife. Recall? And now look what you’re at. Two cursed barrels and a whole nag just to carry them! And you demanded that I pack just one bag.*”

And on it goes, round and round. The sweets of wedded life, and half of Bath to waggle their ears to its tune. Much more of this standing about in the cold of a not-yet-spring morn and my shrivelling balls will be no better than the crunching grass beneath my too-thin soles. I approach my faithful mount, lashed by its rein to the railings built a-purpose by the gate.

The beast lays back its ears.

I am tempted to retrieve my staff. Those blessed bits of wood are now roped to a pack beast. They are to be left at the leper hospital of St Maud’s as we pass, that shunned and shambling haunt just over the Avon. God knows what the lazars will do with them – burn them on All-Hallows to Hecate? – but they would merely hamper our present progress, such as it is. We ride and sail to the Sepulchre, we do not trudge, sandle-shod and staff-propped. Although, at this moment, a stout length of wood might sweeten the reunion between my mount and me.

Lordings, when the Prior detained me, he likewise detained my ... steed. None would name it horse. The creature’s ancestry and dubious pliancy of nature aside, I can only hope he fed it better than me. (My Lenten fast was enforced with an enthusiasm that stretched holy hospitality thin, and the cellar in which I was

confined is as near a dungeon as the Abbey can achieve.) Now my steed awaits, courtesy of the Prior's stable boy, and I am almost glad to see it.

It seems not to share my half-sentiment. I proceed to unloop the reins. It takes this as cue to make feint with its teeth. I step out of range with ease of long practice.

Is it a gelding or a mare? Neither, O my lords. It is a mule. And yet it suits my humble role. Almost a donkey. It has carried me from hamlet to piddling market town, up and across this soggy diocese for a year and more. It has Bath and Wells written in its sinews. It has been my faithful audience while I preached. It has been the close companion of my thighs by day and bedfellow in more than one starlit meadow. And I will sell it come Exeter – if I get that far.

Which, for one reason or another, seems particularly distant now.

Jankyn's bluebell orbs have narrowed.

"What's inside, Wife? What's so precious important that needs a horse all to itself?"

"God's love, ne you mind, my spouse. Could be wine. Might be ale. Thrice-blessed holy water. Distillation of flatulence. Doth it matter?"

They still have not mounted.

The maid – one Cecily, I am told – has the reins of the Bawd's beast in one hand. Waiting. The mare is as dainty a palfrey as ever a lady sat. Small, of course, but not under-fed. They do say a steed resembles its rider. This one has a bright chestnut coat and a set of haunches most abundant. It jigs and snorts with excess noise. It is eager to be off.

The Knyght is astride by means of a mounting block. Lord knows how he would have achieved his destrier's back without it. A fine-looking beast, not unlike its master, but a considerable climb to the top.

Even the Parson has managed to bestride his mount, though, if expression be anything to judge by, he'd much rather have not. His nag is looking crafty. Horses discern full well when those aboard are but barely in control.

"Well, it's all knit up and stowed now, my spouse, and we been put on our path. We moote not trot home now, and I'm ne casting it by the way. So wriggle thy shanks, and lat us amble! Heaven beckons, my pigsney. Jerusalem cries thy name!"

Jankyn casts a hand at the lingering Bathonians. “Just hand the beast and its cursed barrels to one of these. There are folk enough here. Jingle some groats and half of them will oblige.”

It is the most pointless argument I have heard since the Prior last preached, and Jankyn knows it. But the boy will not back down. He conceives his pride is at stake.

Then the Bawd leans close. The creature tiptoes and aims a whisper at his ear. I observe the passage of its import across the youth’s face. A creaseless brow acquiring decades with the progress of a thought.

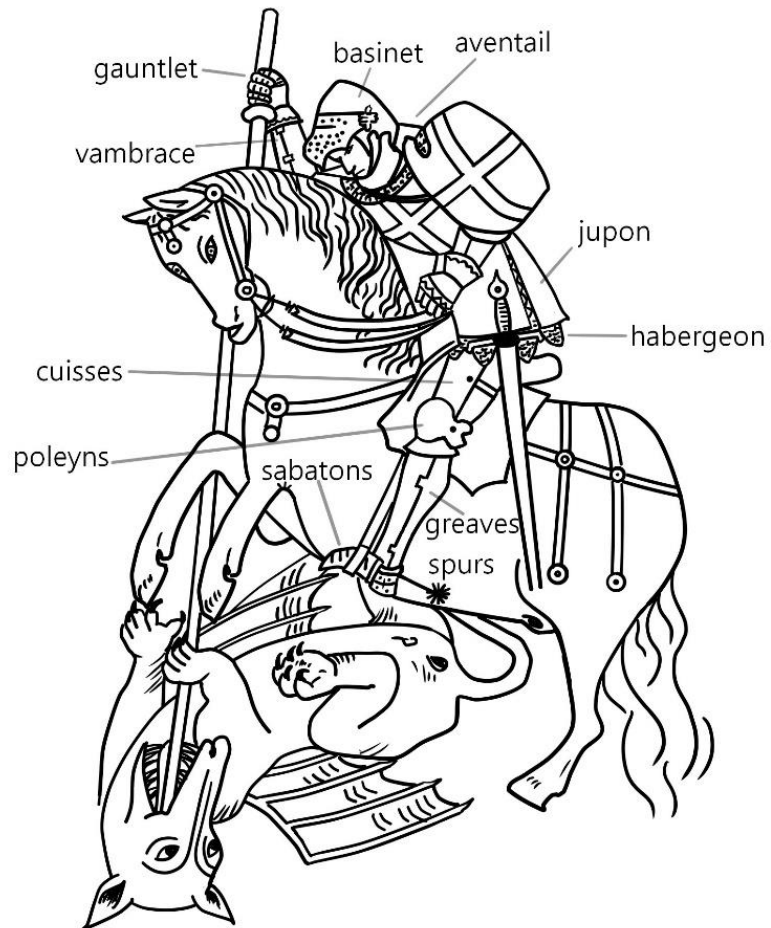
Now here indeed is an interesting phenomenon.

The lad jerks back. Lips part as if to spit poison, but his eyes think the better of it. With those two chips of sky, Jankyn takes in his audience. He beholds me, lordings, and all the gawkers of Bath.

Then Jankyn jerks about in silence most loud and stalks to his horse.

Thus it is that Wife, Parson, Maid, Knyght, Husband, and Quaestor finally depart this sink of steam and corruption in the green west of England. With a barrel-loaded horse trailing obediently at the rear.

5. Heere Bigynneth the Knyghtes Tale



*A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.*

The General Prologue

The Knyght is walking.

It is utterly beneath the dignity of a knight to trudge like a peasant or pedlar along the road. His greaves carve skin from his shins. His sabatons ooze mud with every step. It is not hot – indeed there is a misting rain – but the Knyght’s unvisored face is warm with effort. And humiliation.

Sir George swivels his basinet to eye his not-mount a hundredth time. His visor is thrown back but still his vision is blinkered, edged by iron. Now those edges frame horseflesh: polished flanks gleaming with moisture. It is a noble beast on the face of things, this bay-black destrier that has pranced to war in France. Except now the creature is barely plodding and still it sheens with sweat.

The dealer’s willingness to drop his price should have been a sign. George had thought it awe of his knightly estate, but one does not purchase a warhorse for the price of an ambler. Now the thing can scarcely amble, let alone prance.

The beast should have been fed to the dogs in France. Or to the French. What fool shipped a maimed destrier back to Bristol only to sell it to a likewise returning knight? A richer fool than him. A destrier is a prince among horses in build and training. It is the proper steed for a knight. George sold his own in Bordeaux before boarding the ship to Bristol – only he was not *George* then. The passage to England lightened his purse to the extent he was glad to purchase a bargain beast on arrival. Now he is Sir George the Excommunicate Knyght of Nowhere in Particular and he cannot afford to purchase another.

The others dawdle in front of him, their mounts softening the mud of the Glastonbury road that it may suck more effectively at his sabatons. Even at a walk, a horse – a sound horse – may move faster than a man. His companions must lean

their plump posteriors back to slow their mounts in order that he, their infinitely superior, may not be left behind.

No, to do them justice, only one rump before him is noticeably well-padded.

As if feeling his eyes upon her, the Dragon twists about in her saddle.

“Well, Sir George, artow ready yet?”

An indrawn breath.

“Madam, I am indisposed.”

The infernal one chuckles. “Naught that a horse nil nat cure, eh? Least, one that has a full four legs to it. Han’t you had enough of walking yet? Take pity upon us, Sir Knyght! We been in tormentrie. We brenne of boredom for lack of thy tale.”

She reins in her ambler so he draws level with her in a few mud-sucking strides.

He declines to look up at her, this commoner, this woman on the edge of ugly old age, this social clamberer by means of the multiple men she has wed. She unites within one distinctly lowly body all the things he despises most.

And now she want him to tell her a story.

“A God’s name, Sir George – and Heaven knows I know that ne been thy real name, but that’s a matter for thy tale – have done! Lat us unpack one of the packhorses – not him with the barrels, Christ forfend – and we’ll set you up on him and you can tellen forth your tale. Well? What say you, Sir Knyght?”

“No.”

It comes out a little harsher than intended.

He keeps his eyes fixed on the mud in front. Her ambler ambles beside. He can feel her eyes upon him.

“You hinder us, Sir Knyght,” she declares. “You slow us down. We left Bath only this dawn, and already we been delayed. Oh, I woot well you’re a sinner, Sir Knyght, but are thy crimes so bad you moote crawl to the Sepulchre and maken us crawl too? By God in His Heaven, get thy noble arse on a horse and lat us have movement!”

He is lost for words, but then Sir George has always preferred actions above hot air. His sword hangs by his side. The scabbard bumps his thigh with every

slurping stride. Would it be premature to strike the Dragon's head off while still on English soil?

Unfortunately, he knows the answer. His quest is not so easily fulfilled. Besides, dwarfish though the Dame be, she is mounted on a horse while he, a man nobly born, is earth-bound. It is not easy to decapitate even a short adversary from the ground.

A knight needs a horse.

A knight also needs a name, and hence Sir George-who-isn't-Sir-George needs Jerusalem.

And to achieve Jerusalem, the Knyght needs the doubtful Dame of Bath.

In fine accordance with his thoughts, his destrier stumbles yet again. The first time it did this, Sir George (on top) was nearly deposited in the mud. The third stumble, right on the heels of the second, and he had found it politic to dismount – with some clanking and a resounding splat. Now his warhorse buckles under the mere burden of the Knyght's baggage – a single leather sack. George wears his harness still. His basinet remains firm on his head. Beyond these – armour (chain habergeon over padded aketon, neck-guarding aventail, arm-plate, leg-plate, sabatons over feet, and gilded spurs), and weapons (long-sword and daggers) – George does not require much to journey to Jerusalem. Which is just as well. George does not own much. Not yet.

"Well?" the Wife demands.

He doesn't need to turn his basinet to discern the steam. The goutts of fire will follow shortly after.

They do. Two heartbeats hence, and the Dame is bawling for a halt and that a nag be made vacant, post haste. Then she sees fit to clarify her – and his – position.

"Saints preserve us, you been engaged as our sword-waver, Sir Knyght, not the lame leper that can't keep up. What use is all thy pretty weaponry if you gat no beast fit to jog it along? I took you on in accordance with Prior P, but I been full happy to consider our bargain void if you do naught but slow us." The creature pauses for an overdue breath. "Or if thy tale – which you have yet to tellen forth, may I remind – been contrarious or ne convenable."

And there it is. He, a Knyght and heir-imminent to a noble estate, is given ultimatum by a dwarfish crone. There is no recourse. If he is ever to become more than Sir George, blazonless excommunicate, pending heir to a penniless estate, he must stalk this Dragon to the east.

A packhorse is stripped and a rough saddle revealed (unpadded). Both are utterly unfit for a knight. He is tempted to kick the spavined beast in the hock with his steely sabaton. He does not. His feet are hard-used enough as it is.

And now a man is at his elbow. The fellow is possessed of straw-pale hair, somewhat lank under weight of a moist atmosphere and drooping hood, and a long and knowing face. He is perhaps of the Knyght's own age.

"Let me assist you, Sir George." The fellow affects a bow. "I am Thomas, once of Rouncivale, now Quaestor of Bath and Wells. Pray place your boot in my hand."

The Knyght hesitates. He looks down at the proffered hands, at long pale fingers linked together in a human stirrup.

And does as invited.

And so a nameless knight is squired by a Quaestor and begins to clank his way south on a lead-footed pack-nag for as long as his current company will have him.

Which, if a Dragon is to be believed, all hangs upon the Tale he is to tell.

The rain has ceased, their mounts move Glastonbury-wards at a mile-eating amble, and George is near out of excuses.

There is but one more to try.

She is looking at him, eyebrows up. (Verily, she must pluck them. It seems an aging Dragon panders to appearances yet.)

"The Prior has told you of my situation, lady. There is no more to say. I am no storyteller. Spare your ears, and trust he who advised I accompany you, for ... for your greater safety." He pauses again. "I thank you for the use of the horse."

There. It is quite a speech. He has hopes for it yet. Somewhat miraculously, it even manages to avoid falsehood.

The Dragon chuckles. “Lord love thee, Sir Knyght, it were a valiant attempt. But, God above, I ne require a tale for jollity alone. Doubtless, you been more practiced with yon big knife than with thy tongue, and certain, the Prior hath spoken of thy situation, but churchman’s gab at third hand won’t wash with me. I desiren to hear the matter direct from the nag’s mouth – or from your helm’s hole, as it were.”

“Basinet, lady. The helm was last worn to war in my grandsire’s day.”

Or perhaps your youth.

“Basin, helmet, kettle, or lid, it matters nat to me, Sir George. But don’t it broil thy head like a haunch?” She leans to give it a rap with her knuckle. He jerks away. “Oh, take no kep. My point, Sir Knyghtling, is that perhaps the Prior knit up thy tale imperfect, or let some vital thread aside. Certain, he could ne purvey the eloquence writ plain across thy pan.”

Spoken to a face part-encased in polished steel and the rest kept habitually blank. A Knyght ought not to wear his heart upon his gauntlet.

George opens his mouth.

“Make gab, Sir Knyght! Spit forth thy tale and render it good, or seeken other company to the Sepulchre. The way been perilous enough. Them of France thirst for English blood. Robber-wights line the Rhine. Brigands bedeck the Alps, and all hunger for unprotected Dames. But if you wene I wolde clasp an excommunicate knight to my bosom without some testament first, you been full mistook.”

“The Prior—” he began.

“The Prior be shrewed. I gat his pilgrim pass to *protect* me, not that I been poked through by some precious outlaw of high parage. Persuade me, Sir Knyght. Spill forth thy beans. Tellen thy tale. Wiltow defend me and mine? You’ve done a goodly bit of briganding, I hear. Why shouldn’t we lose you before ever we cross the Channel, and acquiren ourselves an honest sword-swinging instead?”

He is not feeling eloquent now. One word will suffice.

“Coin.”

She chuckles again. “Oh, I see plain you been no merchant-man, Sir George. Certain, you come gratis – courtesy of thy crimes – but any pedlar knows it been a poor bargain that sheaths its sword in the buyer’s breast.”

They are all listening. He is herded about by commoners on common nags while his destrier limps at the rear. They are all agog with ears a-cocked and she – a Dragon, a red Whore of Babylon – is tongue-lashing him.

“You did *not* buy—”

“Oh no, saints be certain no, Sir George.” She leans to pat his arm. God be praised he is wearing steel arm-plates. “Take it not agrief. I just witter away, I do. Twitter like the larklet in spring. Don’t I, Jankyn my lief?”

The golden-curved lad seems inclined to agree but disinclined to give his Wife the pleasure. The Knyght feels a passing breeze of fellow feeling. Verily, it seems the role of bed-boy to a wealthy Wife is not played out entirely upon a feather mattress.

His packhorse plods on. Southwards to Glastonbury and hence to Exeter. There is weight of expectation in the air. *Spit forth thy tale or seeken other company to the Sepulchre*. But Sir George is not a practiced liar. It behoves a knight to speak sooth – besides, to dissemble requires a certain facility with words – and planning, if one is not to trip-oneself up on one’s own spurs.

He has planned – a little. But it does not feel enough, not now.

A breath, a squaring of shoulders. In a show of boldness, he tugs his headpiece off, hangs it on his saddle-bow.

Thus he takes up his lance and assays the lists again.

“Lady, I am Sir George, Knyght and heir to a noble title.”

Success. He has spoken.

“Nat under that name, you never,” the Dragon declares.

“I am a knight errant. I choose to wander. It is custom amongst men of rank to void our names when we quest abroad. Likewise my garb.” He touches the jupon worn over his mail. It is of unrelieved black. “Observe the lack of device.”

“You ne *chose*, so I hear. You got pushed,” says the Dame.

“Wife, let our noble companion speak his tale in peace,” says the boy-husband. “A man can’t think with you gabbing.”

She who leads them shrugs. “As you leste, my love. Only you,” she flashes at the Knyght. “See you tellen your story true!”

What does she expect of him, she who is Dragon curled upon a hoard of secrets and evil doings? She suspects him, but then her guilt prods her to see danger in all. No, he will tell a selective truth. It is the best he can do.

He begins. Again.

“Lady, I am descended of full noble blood. Since the day I could stand, I desired to be a knight and perform deeds of valour. My father sent me to be a page and then squire to a gentle kinsman, to learn the things of knighthood. Thus it was that I was raised with a sword in my hand and words of chivalry upon my lips.”

He is a little startled at his own eloquence. But then the opening pages of his life might well have been lifted from courtly romance. It is an oft-iterated narrative and so slips off the tongue easily. Thus far.

“Those were the days in which King Edward of gallant memory was embarked on righteous war with France. My kinsman had served him in battle. He had been at Calais and Poitiers. We squires were raised on tales of those deeds, of victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, of noble feats of arms, and the courteous ransoming of French lords.”

The Wife snorts, and words that might have been *courteous*, *be shrewed* suggest themselves, but the Dragon refrains from speech more clear.

“And yet, by the time I came to arms, our late king had grown old and his glorious son was fallen into sickness. War with France had stalled. Du Guesclin was snatching lands rightfully our Sovereign’s back. Such was the time in which I was knighted. I received my spurs. My father equipped me with arms and accoutrements. Thus I joined our Lord of Gaunt’s great *chevauchée* across France. In seventy-three.”

He enunciates those last words clear and cold, and sees from their faces they comprehend, if only in an abstract sense.

But they could never truly know. It had been his introduction to war, and nearly his exit out of this world. A disaster of monumental, corpse-heaping proportions. The mountains of central France had shredded Gaunt’s forces as the

French never could. And when they'd stumbled into Bordeaux, he had naught but his armour left. No horse, no money, no food.

"We were not paid for months after that. Over half a year. My father could send little, not even the passage home. My father ... since the Plague, my father's lands ..."

George falters, slips into the past. France was to have made his fortune. Christ knows he needed it. Instead, it stripped him of almost everything.

"The Pestilence struck your father hard." It is the Parson. The man is eyeing him with what seems to be sympathy.

George finds himself nodding. The priest's voice is mellow and measured. His accents soothe and seduce. Such a voice is dangerous.

"Serfs vanished," the Knyght snaps. "They didn't die. They left. Bondsmen bound by law and custom to my father's demesne deserted. Those that remained demanded wages for work. *Wages*. Payment four times as much as their miserable hides were worth. Yes, the Pest struck my father hard, Sir Parson, but it was the peasants who dragged him to his knees."

And so his father had been sucked into debt – or nudged. But Sir George knows better than to mention that. Besides, he – the sole son and heir – only discovered that sad circumstance later. Much later, when his father was but rotting flesh beneath the chapel nave. All he had known in Bordeaux was that his father had not silver enough to ship his son home. Or didn't want to.

"And so you turned routier."

It is the Quaestor who speaks. George is inclined to bristle, but there is a curious lack of blame in the yellow-hair's tone.

"I did not intend it," the Knyght declares. "It was more ..."

... a choice between brigandage and begging. Pestered by penny-grabbing Gascons to pay credit, refused further loans, surrounded by soldiers in the same circumstances, what could he do? So he employed his knightly prowess in the service of survival. He joined a brotherhood of routiers. Sometimes local nobles hired their services. More often, they scavenged far and wide. Certainly, he did not become rich, although he did acquire a horse. For they were scavengers tearing at the carcass of an already-torn land.

“Oh, thou poor Knyghtling. You ne intended to rape and murder, didstow sweet lamb? You ne desiren to live by plucking the livelihoods of others, no, not for naught.” Of course it is the Dragon. “Thy Pa couldn’t dish out the silver, so what couldstow do? Why, find a hive of bully-bees and go reft the stuff off others. Course, Pope Greg nolde not stomach thy japes in the end. All them Frenchies complaining, matins and terce, been enough to give him indigestion of his peacock-pie. So what doth he do but excommunicate the lot of you?” She shrugs. “Seems full fitting to me.”

“We were at war,” he snarls, before recalling he is required to be nice. “Edward, third of that name, was true king of France.”

“Don’t reckon old Gregory divined it that way. The war bit, you woot. But — O Lord above, seal up my gabbing mouth! — I interrupt. I stint thy tale, Sir Knyght. Go on, clep forth. I am all ears.”

Indeed, she makes his task easier. It will be no hardship to expose this creature to justice, no compromise of knightly ideals. She is no damsel, she is a man-eating Dragon.

“I was a *routier*,” he says. A knight does not turn brigand. The distinction is fine, but it is essential. “It was necessity, not choice.”

The Dragon huffs, but purses her lips upon further words.

“I did not profit much in coin, but I learned much of warfare.”

“Routier-fare,” supplies the Wife.

“You may mock, lady, but the experience has furnished me with prowess more than adequate to protect you and yours.”

“But wiltow, by God? That been my verray point, Sir George. Once a brigand, always a brigand. Oh, pardee — routier, I wene. I doubt nat thy knightliness for one instant—”

His teeth clamp.

“—but shouldstow get a higher offer — and, God woot, I ne intend to pay you at all — or take a shine to my scant coin, what’ll stint thee from smoting our neckbones with thy shiny sword? Eh?”

“If you will permit me to finish.”

“Oh finish, and that anon, Sir George. Only ne omit to supply why you been Sir George and not some other Sir.”

And this woman has wed five husbands? He begins to wonder whether they died at the lashing of her tongue rather than any more felonious cause. The other question that arises is: does he truly want to travel to the Holy Land in train with this termagant? Is there a choice?

“I was a routier for near five years,” he says. “Then I had word of my father’s death. I sold my horse in Bordeaux and took ship. I returned to find ...”

A manor in ruins – a disrepair not so much physical as financial. Little to inherit but debt, the full extent of which was explained in painful detail by the merchant who visited shortly after his return.

“A duty was imposed on me. My father cast his testament in such fashion that I may not enter into my inheritance –” The sum of which being a couple of crumbling manors, scant serfs and quantities of sheep pasture. And a noble title. “—until I have made penance at the Sepulchre.”

The Parson nods. “As Gregory of blessed memory required.”

The Knyght draws deep breath.

“And that is why I wish to accompany you to the east, Dame Alisoun. I will not be one with Holy Church again until a Franciscan at the Sepulchre declares it so.” The Knyght gazes limpid at the Wife. Verily it is the truth, if only part of it.

There is a silence of hooves-in-mud and songbird twitter.

Broken by undue merriment.

“Yea, I see it plain,” the hag-upon-a-horse cackles. “You gad to the Land of Our Lord that you moote inherit your own. You trundle penniless like a true palmer that you may get of the clinking stuff. Oh *that* I understand, Sir Pilgrim. It been as plain as thy surcoat. But how didstow come to discover *us*, sweet Knyghtling? Oh, through him of the Priory, I woot well. By why’d he shape you in *our* direction, and why sellen thy services for free, Sir Routier? That been strange shift for a mercenary, I trowe. Why not hire thysel out to some well-padded pilgrim instead? Explain it to a Wife, do. Make words most pured and plain.”

“I required a letter of passage,” he growls. “In absence of a Bishop at Wells, I was directed to the Priory of Bath.”

Directed by a certain burgher, and under direful threat. He, a Kynght of noble blood and heir to manors, was dictated thence by a mere merchant. Worse, he had to accede.

Which detail, of course, he does not tell the Dragon.

“Yea, that much is plain as the thirls on thy face, Sir Pilgrim. What been as hid as the nose-hairs within is *why us?* And why gratis? Certain, the Prior’s ne paying thy way. His priory crumbles and his mill ne maketh enough to keep the fat man in figs.” She glances back at his proud destrier with a smirk. “And you han’t enough for a horse with four feet.”

“My path to Jerusalem is one of penance, not gain,” George retorts. The suffering requisite to penance has, it seems, begun early.

The son shall pay for his father’s sins. He would never be perched upon this inelegant steed, subject to the battering of a Whore of Babylon, if it weren’t for his father. His bad governance – surely he could have induced the serfs to stay? His misguided piety – *thou shalt have a son communicate that he may pray for thy soul, thus thou shalt force him to Jerusalem* – and, most execrable, his choice of creditor in time of failing finance.

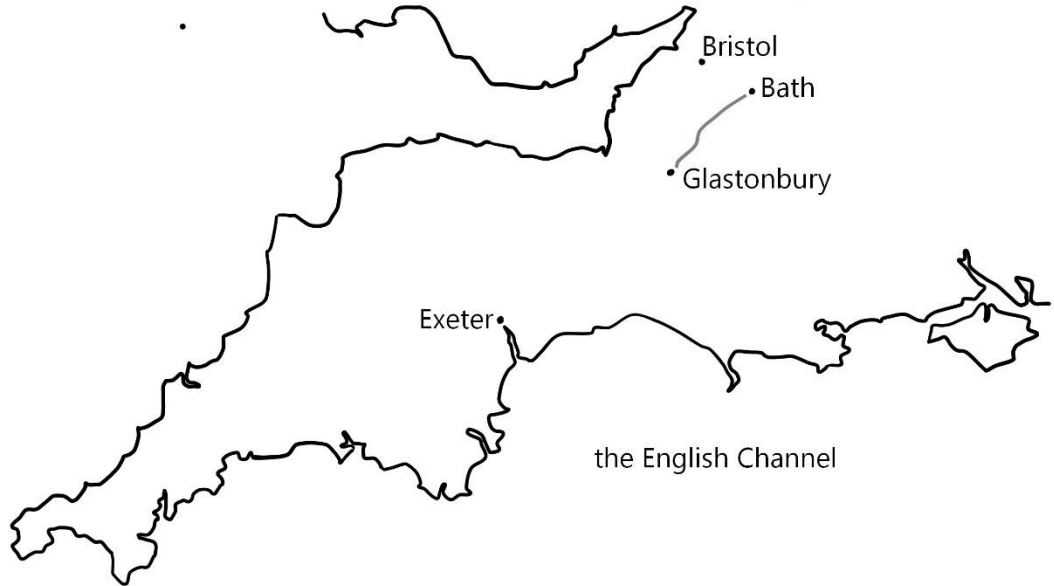
One burgher of Bath.

“Well *that* clears the matter up, I trowe,” declares the Wife. “Rejoice, my sweetings, for we been shepherded by a knight of the highest principles.”

A twitch of her spurs – should a peasant woman possess such a gode? – and the Dragon’s ambler is no longer ambling. The Knyght’s breaks into a lumping trot in echo. He leans back in haste upon reins and seat. The increase in pace makes a bouncing percussion of his posterior against a saddle that seems entirely of wood.

Besides, he has no wish to draw level with a Dragon. Sir George knows a promise of battle to come. This was but the first skirmish.

6. Glastonbury



*His legez lapped in stel with luflych greves,
With polaynez piched therto, policed ful clene,*

...

*His thik thrawen thyghez, with thwonges to tachched;
And sythen the brawden bryne of bryght stel rynges*

Gawain and the Green Knight

Lordings, we do not make Exeter this night. Nowhere near. Rainclouds draw the Lenten dusk in early. I am sodden before we squelch into Glastonbury and happen upon what passes for a hostelry. I am dripping like a gargoyle, cold as a stone, and my thighs are entirely rubbed raw. And this is but the first day of pilgrimage. I wonder if my bulls are worth it. Which do I value more – soul or arse?

I shudder the harder when the hosteller gives his price. Does the lout conceive himself keeper of a fancy inn in Southwark? I do not bother to inspect the room. The stable will do for me. It has a hay-loft. Said structure will lift me above hard hooves and the softer matter in which they inevitably tread – if not beyond its smell. Besides, the hay will be ennobled by Sir George's snores. How in St Stephen's name does he think to make it to Jerusalem if he can't afford a decent bed in Somerset – or a horse that don't hobble? I at least dine under the smoky, skull-cracking beams of the hostelry taproom. Heaven knows what Sir George dines on with the nags. Oats?

When I clamber the ladder to our lordly lodgings, lamp in teeth, Sir George is still accoutred in his metal casing. He has made himself a nest in the hay, and now strains to dislocate his shoulder in an attempt to render himself fit to lie in it. I observe him slant-wise a few moments as I fiddle for a non-inflammatory location for my lamp. God knows who poured him into his habergeon and laced up his leg-plate this morning, but they did a good job of it.

He gives me a helpless look.

Helpless, from a pillar of masculinity like noble George? It is irresistible.

But I must. I have a soul to save and bulls to retrieve.

"Have you misplaced your squire, Sir Knyght?" quoth I.

Flame flares in his face, but is quickly doused by reality. He hasn't been battered about the head so often that he fails to realise he must be nice for a change. To me.

"I had a lad ..." he begins.

Oh, I have too, Sir George. Quite a few of them, Heaven help me.

"He ... he remains behind."

I smile. Sympathetically, I hope.

"Well, God knows I am no squire, my lord, but – if you will permit?"

Mutely, he inclines that sculpted head and bends over. I approach. I take hold of the hem of his habergeon.

Why is it that my knees are unhinged? I have been mule-bound all day – that is it. Even I, a roaming Quaestor, am not accustomed to grinding groin to saddle-tree for as long as light is in the sky. No wonder my legs have gone limp. I begin to peel the shirt-of-mail up and over his back, carefully – for the chain is inclined to catch in the worn linen of his aketon. His arms hang down. His dark hair droops level with my hips. I observe him all unobserved, and lordings, I hear the soft whisper of fiends. It is near a relief when the habergeon jingles to the hay, my Knyght may rise, and I sink to my knees before him.

Let us see what we may make of these leg plates.

I have clever fingers – when they do not quiver – but they are shaped to grip a quill or a coin-purse, not thigh-shaped steel and half-rusted buckles. Eventually, I prise his harness off him by the wavering lantern light, piece by clunking piece. No wonder the man is muscled like a stallion if he must wear this ironmongery every day. Doubtless it has kept him warm, though – if not free of sweat. His aketon is redolent of it. I breathe deep, O my lords. I taste the essence of Adam.

He breaks the silence at last.

"We are to share the same lodgings?"

"If you will permit a humble Quaestor to sleep in your stable."

I lay the last piece of iron on the hay.

He looks grave. "A stable is not an ignoble place to spend the night. Our Lord was born in such." He looks about him. The dim of our small lantern hides the rat-shit and webs. The place looks almost cosy. "You may sleep over there."

He indicates a far corner.

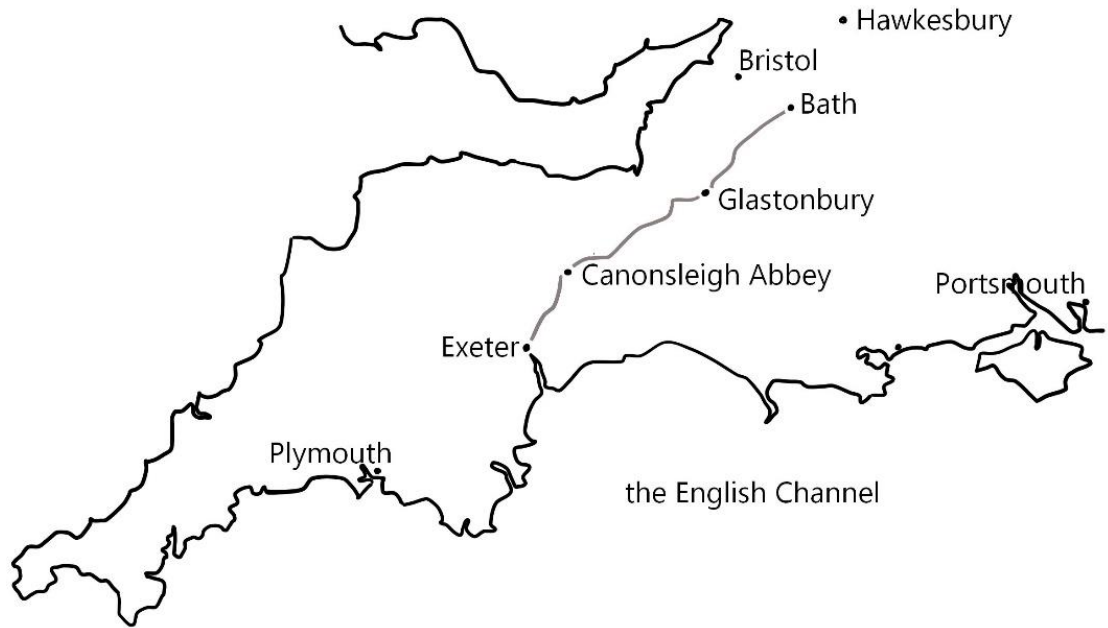
So magnanimous, my lord.

I drape my soggy cloak over a beam. I divest my body of various bundles – but not, note you, of my coin – and arrange them about my corner. And I smile as I settle into my kicked-together couch, even as sharp-ended stalks prick me most intimate. It seems I am promoted to quasi-squire. Should I continue to roll my dice with care, I shall remain lackey to an excommunicate Knyght, whence, with luck, I shall crawl upwards to role of confidante.

Before I snuff out the lantern, I permit myself one last glance at my new lord. What is it about sleep that turns a man's face – even a murderous Knyght's – defenceless? Of course, it is mere illusion. I have peeled him of iron, but I am yet to penetrate the palisade.

But I will, O my listeners. I promise you. For of one thing I am sure, he did not tell the whole truth in what passed as story-telling today.

7. Exeter



*ther is a ful noble wey ... which may nat fayle to no man ne to womman
that through sinne hath mysgoon fro the right wey
to Jerusalem celestial.
And this wey is cleped penitence*

The Parson's Tale

Heavenly Father, I am troubled. These days of travel have furnished me food for thought and I am uneasy.

I follow my mother-daughter out of the inn.

Cecily flows in her wake. As for the others – Quaestor, Knyght, and husband – they are elsewhere. For which I am glad – and yet disturbed that I am so.

O Lord, is it Thy Will that Alisoun journey to the Holy Land in such company as this? Tell me, Father, what must I do? The Prior deems that my mother has sinned, yet he grants her leave to embark upon the longest and most hazardous pilgrimage possible. Worse, he sends her in absence of a confessor.

What have I done, O Lord? It is not enough that Alys be suspected of murder, but must she also travel in danger of her soul?

We lodge in the Inn of the White Hart, hard by the South Gate. It is entry to Exeter for travellers of all kinds: merchants, beggars, friars (holy beggars), and herdsmen. I stumble out of the way of a small flock of sheep. They are bleating their way to Exeter flesh-ambles and a butcher's bloody knife. Alys skirts them easily and she and her niece turn onto the thoroughfare leading north-east, towards the castle. Sheep do not slow her. She is leaving me behind.

I hasten to catch up. It is not seemly that my daughter wander about a strange city with none but a maid by her side.

But to approach the meat of the matter, Heavenly Father: I, as chaplain of our party, may shrive all and sundry along the way. I may even confess that creature of doubtful conscience, the Quaestor. (*Mea culpa*. Lord, grant me compassion of him.) But I may not extend that grace to the Knyght or Alys.

An excommunicate is, of course, cast out of the embrace of Holy Church. He may not be shriven or partake in any sacrament. It is to mend that sorrow that Sir

George travels, and it is to be commended. But that Alys might not be shriven? No, the fault is wholly my own.

The lowliest priest or friar could say *te absolvo* over Alys – except for me. Thus my superior decrees. *She is your mother by marriage, my son. It is not meet.*

I am Parson of her parish. I have confessed her for two decades and more, I have been shepherd to her soul, but now my superior comes to consider the matter, he finds it *not meet*.

Guide me, Heavenly Father. It is deplorable that I doubt my superior. The Prior may well be right. Perhaps this strange consanguinity ought to have struck me as unfitting – a veritable incest of the spirit – decades before.

And yet that same Prior urged me to accompany her. No, more than urged. Lord, I fear he thought only of my soul and those of my companions. He omitted to consider Alys.

Or he considered her too much.

We forge a path through Exeter Cheap. At least, Alisoun forges. I follow as best I may. She and Cecily rove from shop-front to stall, twittering like two gossips out to market. As ever, my mother is drawn, moth-like, to displays of cloth. Rich colours, dense fabrics, samites and brocade. She shuns the coarse worsted and the undyed bolts. It is the conditioning of her trade, Lord, this material obsession. Only consider the lilies of the field, Alisoun! *They labour not, nor do they spin.*

I tangle with wimpled women and peddlers hawking pies. Chickens gabble, a pig shrieks, a rat near trips me in the muck, yet despite the crush and bustle, the notion creeps upon me that we are being followed. I turn abruptly and am near brained by a low-hanging ham. Perhaps it knocks some sense into me. *I* can barely keep Alisoun in view. Who could shadow us through this? Who would want to? I struggle on. Misgivings of the past and present clash with the business of negotiating a strange street on market day. Still, the past repeats on me, persistent as the Lenten fish in Canonsleigh, two dinners past.

At first, O Lord, I thought the Prior's decree mercy. My superior suspects Alisoun of wrongdoing (however falsely), yet he grants her opportunity to cleanse her soul. But I have come to doubt that mercy was the motive foremost in his mind.

In part because I was his first condition.

Initially, I thought that too was kindness. In the leap of my heart at his decree, the deluge of joy, I conceived that You, sweet Lord, had moved Prior Petrus to grant this, my unvoiced desire. I, who have not even kissed St Thomas's tomb, may now lay lips to stones on which our Blessed Saviour bled! Of course I craved to go. To do so as spiritual advisor to my misguided daughter, perhaps even steer her back onto the strait and narrow path, appeared a holy dream come true.

Heaven be praised, we have emerged from the Babylon that is Cheap Street. We now bear left onto a quieter alley. Such is my relief that I do not bother to see whether any follow after. Let them if they will – if they have survived that maelstrom. Alys is heading as if to Exeter Castle itself, but halts before a plain half-timbered building. She eyes it for a moment – up and down, squints at the thatch above the second storey, narrows eyes at a snaking crack in the cob. Then she bounces up the step and raps loud on the door.

The fellow who creaks it open is all alacrity to let my daughter in. Well he may, for the building is hers. It is a warehouse, the sole gift of her fourth husband. He was naught but a carter, trundling goods from town to port. I hesitate to speak ill of one in Your keeping, O Lord, but the edifice we now enter was all the good she got of him. Yet I do not judge by rank or material standing. I thought then she could do no worse for herself. I was wrong.

We are ushered inside a cavernous and low-beamed chamber, stuffy with all the scents of the East.

She rents the building to a minor merchant of Exeter. This she has explained to me. He is a dealer in spices, not cloth. Alys says the stink of his mercery keeps her bales and dye-stuffs sweet. It frightens the moths and worms. She lets him space for a pittance in return for his managing the comings and goings of her stock up the Exe. But that does not mean she trusts him. Now she inspects her bales minutely. She interrogates the mild merchant at length and demands to view the accounts he keeps on her behalf.

She is bending over the crabbed parchment now, small finger tracing the columns. I know she knows her numbers and can recognise those few words she cares most for. *Broadcloth. Ells. Alum.*

The spice merchant wears a wavering smile and hovers a pace behind. He is anxious to retain his warehouse, no doubt, but also eager to please Alys for her own sake. I wonder yet again at this power she exerts over men. A fascination, an unwilling admiration. Like the earth itself she is the centre of the spheres and men circle endlessly in orbit. I glance at Cecily, standing quiet behind my mother. She observes much and says little as usual.

I shift from foot to sandled foot. I am anxious to proceed to the Cathedral. *We are on pilgrimage, O my daughter, not a trading expedition.*

At least, I pray all who accompany us to the east do so for reasons purely divine.

Holy Father, You to whom all hearts are but blown glass, reveal to me the truth. The second of my superior's conditions has come to concern me almost as much as the first.

When the Prior insisted upon the inclusion of Thomas of Rouncivale, I had thought the burden solely that of keeping company with an inveterate sinner. I do not cultivate common gossip, O Father, but even I have heard of this Quaestor's ... proclivities. Even had I wished to ignore such rumour, my superior saw fit to spell it out to me.

What impels men to such iniquity, O Lord? My soul shrinks in horror. Suffice to say that Thomas has grievously offended important men in Bath. The Prior was forced to take action, he said – for Thomas's own good. As he made discourse on the Quaestor's vice, it occurred to me that my superior was enjoying the effect of his words upon my person: my recoiling, the flaming of my cheeks. Of course I was wrong, and most foully so. No godly man takes pleasure in airing such transgression. It is wholly unsurprising that the Prior passed sentence of the harshest pilgrimage of them all upon this miscreant.

Yet within the last four days, O Lord, it has lighted on me that things are not entirely as they seem.

Or perhaps I do Thomas an injustice. Am I suspicious simply because I know of his sin? Grant me compassion, O Lord, but it seems to me his eyes are too assiduous, his attention is honed too sharp. But not in all directions. Only two.

The first is towards my daughter.

But my musings are interrupted for, as abruptly as she plumped down, Alisoun springs up. We exit the warehouse in a flurry of spice and *God speeds*. My daughter seems content. The merchant glows. We retrace our steps to the thoroughfare of Cheap, but only thrash in its torrent for a blessedly brief interval. We turn instead towards an edifice more imposing by far than the castle we have now turned our backs on. Alys has expressed a desire to visit Exeter Cathedral. This is why I accompany her – that, and I must speak to her in privacy before we leave English soil.

Beyond the hearing of either Quaestor or he whose presence on this pilgrimage was its third condition – the Knyght.

We pause before it, this new-old massif squatting in the sacred heart of the city.

Your cathedral at Exeter does not soar to Heaven, Lord, not like that sacred wonder of Salisbury. It possesses no spire but two old, squat towers, battlements bearing strong resemblance to Exeter's castle. The rest is new-built. A painter still daubs upon its West Front. He colours a host of kings, each sat upon an angel. Their statues stare down at me, stony-eyed. They interrogate my soul. I am glad to focus on the door and slip inside.

To utter glory.

Lord, I enter the Leviathan's belly, but it is a beast shaped of light and space. Ivory ribs arch high overhead. Golden florets of vertebrae dot its inner spine. Saints beam down, beatific, from walls and windows. I genuflect. Indeed, I crumple to my knees.

Alys smiles down at me. Momentarily she is a saint too, illumined by multi-hued light. O Lord, even Thy Magdalene turned saint in the end.

“Full fair, nis it not, Sir John?” For once, her voice is hushed.

I can do naught but nod.

“Abide here, if you leste,” she says. “As for me, I moote acquire myself a man.”

Whereon she steps with purpose down the nave, niece at her heels, scattering men of business and skirting a stump-legged beggar. I move more slowly after, fumbling for a coin for the beggar’s bowl. A hollow *thunk*. Now that I observe this heavenly demesne without up-tilting my chin, I descry its earth-bound roots. It is a church like any other, even my own St Michael’s. A holy cathedral nave, a place of common meeting, a-chatter with gossips and bargainers, and scattered with the destitute and desperate.

A chantry priest glides out the south transept. Truly, men materialise about Alys like bees upon heather. She speaks to him. I catch stray words. *Blessing ... shrine*. The priest murmurs and well-nigh rubs his hands.

I watch with less than Christian charity. Do the lucre-fuelled rote-pattered prayers of chantry priests truly please you, Father? What works do they perform? Do they really abbreviate a soul’s sojourn in Purgatory? But You stoop not to answer my venial questions. I sigh. Who am I, a mere parson, to judge?

I direct my gaze at the wondrous pulpitum, a wall of carving and colour a-flicker with candleflame. It cuts the church in two. It divides the holy sanctuary from the nave, that portion of a church given over to the populace and their affairs. None may pass without permission. A cross marks its centre, glittering to airy Heaven. I attempt to lift my thoughts likewise, but am distracted by fluttering fears. An unquiet conscience. *I must speak to my daughter. It is not too late to turn back, to begin anew.*

Alisoun pit-pats back to me, Cecily ghosting behind.

“Now then, Sir John. Lat us sit a while and cast our thoughts Heaven-wards.”

But my thoughts are not on the hereafter. This is my chance.

“Dame Alisoun ...”

She lifts a brow.

“Why so ceremonious, John m’dear?”

“If I may have a word in private?”

She smiles. I feel a little warmer in this cold place.

“Certain, Sir John.”

We three walk towards a side chapel, this one deserted. I strive to catch Alisoun’s eye unperceived (for all the world like a secret lover), and when the thing is achieved, I direct my glance at our shadow, Cecily.

Alys plays such games better than I.

“Cecily love, wistow where our Jankyn went?”

“He said he sought concourse with other scholars of Exeter.” The maid speaks the words expressionless.

Alys chuckles. “Concourse. Yea, that’s what he cleps it, and doubtless he’s found a cosy alehouse to do it in withal. No matter. A lad must have his scholarly talk. Go seek him out, my love, but full subtly, mind. Just rest your eyen on him and see he comes to no affray.”

Is she wife, mother, or jealous lover to this Jankyn?

The thought is unworthy. I say a silent paternoster in contrition. When I look up, Cecily is gone and my sometime mother is gazing at me.

“Well, Sir John? What’s so privy that our Cecily moote nat stay by our side?”

I gesture. We slip into the chapel. It is tiny, empty but for an altar (candles and saint presiding) and kneeling cushions. It is dedicated to the Baptist, he of the locusts and hair shirts. St John. We kneel on cushions, side by side.

“Dame, are you sure you wish to take the girl with you? To Jerusalem?”

“Saints above, Sir John! Nis that all? And where’s the woe in our Cecily, I ask? My niece she is, mine own true blood. Known her from a brawling brat. Closest thing to a daughter I gat. Besides, it was Jankyn himself who avisen she come, and full courteous it were of him, too. God knows we requiren a maidservant, and who better to entrust than one of our own?”

I close my eyes. Where to start? I had not intended to begin with Cecily, although the subject scratches at me like a hair shirt.

“She is your niece, Alisoun. Your heir. What if –”

“Niece, certain, but mine heir she nis nat! A child of my own body shall be mine inheritor, and in default of that ... well, there wol be no default. But what of it?”

Dostow wene the way to the Sepulchre so perilous that we all perish, Wife, husband, and niece?”

“Others have died on the way.”

Her laughter skips off stone. “Oh, John dear. You forget. It is I who have ambled to Palestine before, not you. Dostow espy a ghost before you, Parson dear? Whether we perish or no been in God’s hands alone, as well you woot. If it been our time, He’ll pluck us whether we been beside Bath or Bethlehem.”

I persist. It is hard when Alys is in full flood.

“She is your niece, Dame. Is it seemly for her to serve you and your husband as maid?”

She smiles indulgently at me. “It been plain you han no maid of your own, John. Yea, it is more than seemly. It been normal and to be avised. Besides, my Cecily been no thrall. I pay her passing well, and say sooth, when else will she han opportunity to kiss the Sepulchre?”

It is all true and still I am uneasy. I am not free to lay before her the root of my disquiet in this matter. I gave oath. All I can do is warn. But I digress. I avoid the meat of my concern.

Alys wriggles. Her skirts feather my cassock.

“Nis that all, John dear?”

“No,” I reply, over-quick and over-loud. The sound rebounds. “No,” I say more quietly, and then more quietly still: “Alys, what do you bear in the barrels?”

She stops wriggling.

If only I could divine her thoughts, O Lord. I am a passing-skilled confessor. You have granted me that gift. I read the tiny hesitations and side-glances of my parishioners with ease. But not Alys. She hesitates now – but for what reason? Send me wisdom, sweet Lord.

Then her chin lifts. “Do I poke through thy packing, Parson? Do I enquiren *why this* and *woltow take that*? You been as precious as my husband, Sir Priest. You have care of my soul merely, nat my purse.”

All this said at a whisper.

“I would not have noticed, Alys, save that others directed my attention thither.”

“Jankyn? Take no kep of him. He’s just sore I nolde not allowen him a second bag of gytes.” Her chuckle is not convincing.

“It was not your husband, Dame, but Thomas. And the Knyght.”

“A God’s name, that Georgie’s just dribbling from a tun. Tavern talk. You woot these chivalrous types, John. Ne getten two grunts out of hem ‘til they been as drunk as any mouse, then they’ll spout courtly-talk ‘til the bats flit home.”

It seems to me a bat-wing of anxiety likewise flits over her face.

“You are in a place of worship, Alisoun,” I reprove.

“And priests been some of the best sozzlers I know,” says she. “Present company excepted, doubtless. So tell it me, John: when didstow notice Tom and Georgie noticing?”

Thus my daughter uses words to attack and defend, ferocious as any knight. I try not to retreat.

“It is given me to be spiritual guard and guide on this journey, Alisoun. You are all souls under my care.”

She snorts, but quietly. She is, after all, before an altar.

I continue. “In respect of this, the Prior vouchsafed certain details concerning the Quaestor’s reasons for pilgrimage. It seems” I hesitate. It was not exactly told under seal of confession, but nonetheless such information ought not to be bugled abroad. I clear my throat. “It seems, my daughter, that Thomas of Rouncivale has indulged in no common degree of iniquity.”

Alys peels with laughter. She claps a small hand over a mouth wide with merriment.

“Oh, Lord love’ee for a newborn, John. Sweet God, you been as sely as a bare-bummed babe. Didstow truly not know? Why, all Bath and beyond woot what hobby-horse our Tom liken to ride.” She lays a hand on my arm. Forgive me, O Lord, but I let it linger. “Doon no despite over that, John dear. What can he do – turn us all to coillon-clutchers like himself?”

“Alys!”

“Well, I han more dread of that Knyght, say sooth. He gat no sweet, spiced conscience. He gets his disport by sticking swords in folk, then refts hem of their silver too. What’s a bit of fundament between friends, by God?”

I choose not to pursue this argument. She is trying to divert me. Ordinarily it would have worked too well.

“Because I am chaplain upon this journey, Alys. And, because the Prior has confided to me matters touching upon Thomas, I have bent myself to observing this Quaestor upon the way.”

I pause. What I am about to say is incriminating. I am doubtful I should even voice it.

“He eyes the Knyght, Alys.”

What is this chapel become – an alehouse? My daughter crows with laughter yet again. The echoes have barely died from her first bout of mirth.

I look severe. It does not have the desired effect. Perhaps I appear merely confused.

She subsides with some effort.

“Full certain he eyes the Knyght, John. Lord love you, but / take my fill of the fellow, and he’s ne my draught of wine, I tell thee full true. Doubtless our Cess casts her eyebeams Knyght-wards too.” She chuckles. “He’s a pretty piece, Sir John. Admit it! All glowering brow and shoulders fit to drag a dray. I’d hold Long Tom parted from his nether-purse did he *not* lick his lips upon Sir George!”

Lord, have I entered a bawdy-house or a blessed cathedral? Even now a priest eyes us through the stone lace-work. Likely he comes to evict us from this place of supposed peace. I cut to the point.

“It was in Glastonbury, the hostelry of our first night. I rose early, and ... well, I could find no pot to relieve myself, and so I went outside.” I hurry on. “There was a midden behind the stable. I ... well, as I was about my business, I heard voices within.”

“Oh, I envision it clear, Sir John. You all sleep-aslack, with one hand leant upon the wall and the other” Alys grins. “And lo, a sweet voice tickleth thine ear. One Quaestor, no less – save if his voice been sweet then so is a rook’s. By God, but his cawing must have stint thy stream!”

Heavenly Father, her mind does not run ever in the gutter. I have known her since she was a tender child. This is but a façade, a vulgar mask. It is just ... well, at

times I fear my daughter has worn this mask too long. Lord, grant me that, by Jerusalem, I may prise it free to reveal the shining soul within.

Even now, Alisoun's visage shifts to something like solemnity. "Well, John? What whisper filled thine ear upon the piss-heap?"

I stare at the chapel floor. Stone and straw. A mouse scuttles.

"I am ashamed to say I lingered to listen. I did so primarily because I feared that Thomas might stray. He shared the Knyght's sleeping quarters, you know."

"Yea, the commodious stable!" My daughter chuckles. "Well, then? What didstow hear? I am smote with suspense, John. Tell a Dame all."

"Thomas plied the Knyght with questions, Alisoun. True, he received but a handful of words in return, yet his was no inquisition." I pause. The priest approaches. Our time expires. How to explain the sum of all I heard? "No, Thomas of Rouncivale stepped as soft-footed in his probing as a confessor with a king. Yet one thing was clear, my daughter. The Quaestor believes Sir George has more motive for pilgrimage than penance."

Alys eyes me sharp.

"Well? Does he?"

"I cannot tell. I doubt that Thomas could either, so few answers he recieved. It was then he turned his attack upon your casks."

"But my barrels sate snug in my chamber!"

"So the Quaestor found to his sorrow."

I cast upon her a steady look.

"What is in them, Alys? Thomas of Rouncivale makes it his business to know. Now he makes it Sir George's too."

8. Cathedral

*In al the parishe wife ne was ther noon
That to the offerynge bifore hire sholde goon*

The Wife's Prologue

Alys springs up. The priest is back. No, it is a Feretrar, a ferrety shrine-keeper. She curtsies and arranges her expression into one approximating solemnity.

The Feretrar bows, a slight slope to the torso merely. "You desire to pay homage to the Burning Bush, my child?"

"Oh, out of doubt, your Lordship," she coos. "To *all* the relics, if you leste. Our Heavenly Father hath given me especial yearning to see thy Cloth of Antioch."

The cleric's tone acquires condescension.

"Indeed, my child? You are aware no miracles have been attributed to it? No saint is associated with it to my knowledge. It is an altar-cloth merely, although naturally of exquisite working."

"Oh certain, Sire. And God woot, I desiren with all my soul to lay eyes upon the Blessed Hair of Jhesu too, your High and Holiness."

The Feretrar's face clears. "Ah, the Hair of Our Saviour, brought hither from the Holy Land by Bishop Brewer of Blessed Memory. Perhaps our most potent relic." She sees his gaze survey her scarlet skirts – no fading nor patching there – and the parcel tucked beneath her arm. He permits himself a smile now. "A wise choice, my daughter."

He beckons. They follow.

The Feretrar ushers them through the pulpitum – a side entrance thereof, not the central gleaming gate used solely by the consecrated – and a few paces up the aisle beyond. He pauses before a doorway seemingly sinking subterranean-wards – likely from the weight of the treasures within – and fiddles with a walloping great key.

“It is a sad thing to consider, my son and daughter,” the Feretrar murmurs over his shoulder. “But thieves are known to risk the wrath of a saint and remove a holy relic by stealth.”

Alys trills in horror. Her Parson stays silent behind.

They descend stone steps and squeeze along a right-angled passage – to be unborn into a cavernous womb. It is a low stone room that opens its jaws about them, a place of golden dim only part-illuminated by flickering wax. Shrines waver as candle flames shift in stony air, fresh-disturbed.

It is a holy inhuman place.

Yea, behold St Margaret’s imperishable head. Her skull is encased in silver. The saint wears a circlet of glowing stones and a resigned expression. Her neck ends on a bed of silk, but not before it has been encircled by yet more grassy gems. The relic rests on an altar and is ringed by candles. But Alys has no time for emeralds. They glint a poison green. After genuflection and a perfunctory perusal, the Wife wafts on.

A handful more assorted reliquaries – crystal-encased bones, bits of mouldering cloth, unidentified vials – and then there is. The Bush, or so the Feretrar informs her. Alys tiptoes and peers. There – a twisted twig entombed in watery rock, cradled in gilt. The Bush burneth not. It is a stick, the kindling of a long-dead Jew. She barely bobs. The Feretrar inhales, but Alys is moving on.

For she has seen The Hair.

It is not enclosed within your usual relic-mounting, that is to say, not chalice-shaped like the vessel that cups Jhesu’s blood at mass. Nor is it cast in echo of the body part it contains, like beheaded Margaret. No, this reliquary mirrors the verray dish that offers the body of Our Lord up for-the-remission-of-sins. It is a sign. His winey blood is sipped only by priests, but the Blessed Body of Christ is distributed to all the faithful. This reliquary is a gilt and golden plate, enamelled with images of the Saviour’s death, and at its centre is a shining blister – crystal, of course – sealing upon white silk a single, black hair.

The Wife of Bath neglects to genuflect. The Feretrar clicks his tongue and hurries towards her. The Wife stretches to reach, but she is too short.

“May I assist you, Dame?”

Admonitory tones.

"This been the Hair," the Wife breathes.

The Feretrar nods.

"The Hair of Jhesu's own blisshed body."

He nods again.

"I wol make offering to this shrine," declares the Wife. She pats her parcel.

"Not unto Martyred Margaret? Or there is the oil exuded by the Tomb of St Katherine, Dame. A woman best intercedes on behalf of one of their own fallen kind."

"That I nil nat! Why make offering to an oily old tart when I can have blessings from Himself?" she retorts. And then, seeing the scandalised expression, amends: "There been no thing more potent than a relic of Our Saviour, gracious Sir."

The Feretrar directs his gaze to the bundle beneath the Dame's arm. His smile spreads.

"You wol array this beneath The Hair, your Divinity. Upon this self-same altar." She gives him a level look. "No selling it off nor kitting it up, by God. No, nor filching it for church furnishings elsewhere."

"I cannot promise in perpetuity," the shrine-weasel says with hauteur.

"Oh, I clep nat of *forever*," says she. "Never is forever save God Himself, God woot. Solely for a year. See, we been palmers a-pilgrimage to Jerusalem, your Feretrarness, and I moote get protection from some saint or another, so why not goon direct to the top? And doubtless it'd confuse Jhesu something contrarious if my cloth were hente forth before we return."

"A cloth?" says the Feretrar in tones of distaste. He looks upon her bundle now as if it contained lepers' remains.

"Oh, nat just any cloth, your Highness. Oh no, Christ forfend," says Alisoun, unwinding a fustian wrapping for all the world like a shroud. "This been cloth the like of which you, on your paltry shrine-wight's pay, could ne purchase. No, nat if you sold your son to the King of Babylon himself."

The Feretrar is spluttering at the very notion of progeny from himself, a celibate churchman. Behind them both, the Parson sighs most audible and takes the discarded wrapping from Alys's hands.

"Now," says she, arraying the revealed cloth lovingly over her arms. "I wolde han your oath that this cloth will stay fast by The Hair for a full year and a day. Your Eminence."

She holds it out.

And smiles at the Feretrar's expression.

The churchman curves over the outspread fabric as if his spine is melting. The stuff flows like a river of gore across the Wife's arms. It drips from either elbow nearly to the flagged floor. The Parson too steps forward. It is the dye that does it, she knows. It draws men like flies to flesh. It is the colour of life, of Jhesu's Passion, of fire, of monthly blood, of kings, and death. Scarlet. Not mere madder-red or the fleeting blush of brazilwood, but scarlet.

And the Feretrar knows it. He has loitered about a moneyed cathedral long enough to recognise Quality. No matter how determined he was not to be impressed, it is with reverence that he reaches out a finger and strokes the fabric.

"Soft as a kitten," he nearly purrs. Then withdraws his digit in haste. "Well, woman? What is it?" he snaps.

But Alys smiles on. Such reactions are Holy Wine to her. They water her soul.

"It been broadcloth, by God. Fine-fulled broadcloth of mine own practik, and wove of best Cotswold wool."

"No sheep is that soft," the Feretrar declares.

"What? You think I shored a covey of cats?" Alys laughs. "Well, it's a notion, I trowe. But cat, kit, or sheep, what saystow to the *colour*, Sir Feretrar Clothier?"

The man focuses on the fabric.

"Is it of grain?"

He bends closer. Much nearer, and he'll lay his floppy lips to it.

"*Veramente*, you do well to doubt your eyes, *signore*. I have not seen grain like that before."

It is a new voice. It has a smoky, soft-accented tone.

She turns. A man stands behind, leaning likewise towards her offering.

“You!” she declares. “I han laid eyes on you before.”

He bows. His cloak fishtails with practiced elegance. Then he looks at her cloth, and Alys looks at him.

The creature is garbed entirely in black. The Wife’s eyes diagnose the fabric. One cloak of fine broadcloth, and no skimping upon the ells either. It fairly sweeps the floor in its luxuriance. Hose and tunic likewise dyed midnight. It matches his hair. She itches to pick it up and examine (cloak, not hair). Most attempts at black fail in some degree, as well she knows. The usual result is murk-brown or, what with the multiple layers of dye, acquires a dull, overworked air. She cannot tell for certain in this light, but this too-familiar stranger is not dull, nor in any way brown. Not that she cares much for black, of course. It is a not-colour, an absence. Scarlet is her love. But still, she wouldn’t refuse to examine this man’s hue at greater length.

“You set this item to dye, *signora*?” The man smiles at her. It is meant to be charming. It *is* charming, but Alys discerns intent behind it too.

“I might’ve, Sir Foreigner,” she says. “Then again, I might’ve purveyed it off some Italian. Why? You take interest in such-like?”

“I take interest in all things of surpassing beauty,” he says, looking at her direct.

The Wife feels a smile twitch, but smooths it away. She turns to the churchman.

“Thine eyes tellen you true, my fine Feretrar. It been of grain, and with no madder admixed. It been finest scarlet and embroidered most delicate by mine own niece.” She raises a corner of the cloth to candlelight for their inspection. An angel appears thereon, the gold thread of its hair shivering in the light. “See? She wields a needle full subtly, my Cess. Doth she not?”

“I have greater admiration for she who dyed the cloth,” murmurs the black man. “Now *there* is skill, and something else besides. Pray tell us, *bella signora*, however do you produce such a deep and glowing *scarlatto*?”

“A God’s name!” The Wife trills a laugh. “Wiltow peck my brains outright, Sir Italian? You southerners are precious privy with your tricks o’ the trade. Dostow wene I’ll spill mine for a mere buttering or two?”

“You mistake me, *signora*. I merely complement a queen of her craft. We of Venice appreciate fine cloth. Do we not produce the best in the world?”

Alys inflates.

“Oh, dostow indeed, Sir Venetian?”

“*Certo*, we rely on your fine English wool, *cara signora*. That and silk of the east. But I have no need to tell a lady of your evident taste –” Here the Venetian casts an eye at Alisoun’s person. As ever, she is clothed in red. “– that we of Venice have ways of finishing your raw product that are rivalled by none.”

Her eyes narrow upon him. She sees plain he is riling her. He is handsome, in his jet-and-olive manner, and entirely self-assured. Doubtless, he is used to getting his own way with woman-kind. He has asked her direct and failed. Does he think she will spit out her secrets instead at the merest insult?

“You been a merchant,” she says. Is it a statement, not a question.

“Giovanni Balducci Minotto at your service, Dame Alisoun. A merchant late of Venice.”

“Save you’re not at my service, to speak it short and plain,” she snaps. “You been wholly at your own. Well, what dostow want? A parchment with all my practick writ upon?”

He smiles at her sorrowfully. “You mistake me, *cara signora*. I simply desired to meet the incomparable Dame of Bath. I have heard much of you and the products of your making.” The Italian turns to the Feretrar. “*Padre*. San Marco be my witness, this is finest *scarlatto* and as such an offering worthy of the Sepulchre itself.”

The churchman is looking bemused, but he recognises his cue.

“Dame, we of Exeter accept your offering.” A touch of portention – one cannot throw one’s dignity away at a mere gift of cloth fit to clothe a king. “You have my word that your scarlet will rest beneath The Hair for the duration of a year and a day.”

Thus, with the tenderness she hopes to accord her own newborn, Alys passes the cloth to the cleric. With her Parson’s aid, the shrine-wight lifts the reliquary and spreads the angelic cloth upon the altar.

And, as the Feretrar bustles off in search of an accounts-scroll, the Wife sinks to her knees before the shrine. She prays.

Blessed Jhesu, lat us reach Thy Sepulchre safe and whole. Guard us, sweet Saviour. Shield us from them that wish us harm ...

Upon which her thoughts diffuse. They shift like smoke. They wander down half-trodden paths. *Them that wish us harm ...* Prior Petrus and his conditions. An excommunicate Knyght. A queer-garbed Quaestor too curious about her baggage. Her Parson, over-assiduous about her soul. And now this prying Venetian.

Yif us our desires, sweet Jhesu, so ever they been holy. Oh, but they are, Lord. I swear it by my buried babe. And turn my Jankyn back to me. Cleanse him, Christ. Wash him in Thy Blessed Blood.

And what forms before her vision but the colour? Scarlet. Are her eyes open or shut? It does not matter. All is scarlet. Father and Ghost be praised, she is granted a vision. Yea, she beholds the Passionate hue of His Blood. It stains His Shroud, His Tomb, the Holy Land entire. The verray soil is soaked in blood.

And she knows: the Holy Mountain will be laid at her feet.

There is shuffling behind her. It seems the Feretrar is growing restless. This troglodytic Treasury has been open too long. One cannot have uninvited Italians wandering about as they please. Who knows what else might blow in? The Wife sympathises. She is not keen on uninvited Italians herself. She sits back on her heels and looks around.

“And now, Feretrar my lief, I would see yon Cloth of Antioch – oh, and all thy bobance else.”

The fellow looks relieved. It is chill here in this sunken stone room. It is not a space for the living, especially not when they are waiting for the overlong prayers of a petitioner to end. He gestures. They move on.

The room extends before them, sepulchric and shadowy. There are more items, relics, but also sundry other church furniture. Candlesticks, processional crosses, a wooden donkey set on wheels with a carven Christ on top. The donkey’s tail has fallen off and its arse is bared to the world.

The Feretrar unlatches an iron-barred chest and pokes through its innards. Fabrics, a jumble of colours. They glitter with gold thread and minuscule stitches. Alys bends over them worshipfully. They are vestments. Chasubles, copes, and dalmatics. Altar-cloths for all occasions. The one she reaches for is clearly for use in Easter. It is slaughter red.

It is The Cloth.

Alys lifts it to the wavering light. She peers. She studies the weave. No felted broadcloth this, but eastern silk. She leans so close she inhales in its old-incense odour. The cleric hovers behind her, jumpy as a sparrow.

She turns.

“Say sooth, Sir Feretrar – this been thy Cloth of Antioch?”

“Of a certainty, Dame.” He points. “Observe the griffins. You’ll find no such fiends on good English cloth. That is Saracen work for sure.”

She looks for the first time at the design. It is a Paradise picked out in gold and silver thread. Peacocks flaunt their gaudy tails upon a red ground. Bird flutter about impossible trees. And of course there are the griffins. This is no suitable cloth for the greatest Christian feast of the year. It drips with heathen opulence.

“Artow siker and sure it been of Antioch? The Antioch hard by Armenia?”

He blinks at her. “Armenia is no more. The heathen took it, not three years past.”

When she does not answer – for once, she is reft of reply – he rambles on.

“Indeed, it is of Antioch. It is recorded so in the Inventory, Dame. But here – examine this chasuble instead. This is Florentine work from good Christian lands.” He holds up an ivory-white silk, drooping with dense embroidery. St Stephen is being stoned in the lower panel while St Peter and Paul converse uncomfortably above, back to back.

Alys gives it but a glance.

“Antioch was once a Christian land,” her John comments.

The Wife startles. She has forgotten her Parson’s presence, so absorbed she has become.

“But we do not pass that way, do we?” he goes on. “We take ship at Venice, and sail by way of Crete and Cyprus, Christian lands both. We must avoid the infidel where we can.”

God above, must he advertise their goings to a Venetian so plain? She assembles a smile. She is not sure if all its pieces are present. “But we swim close to him, Sir John. Yea, full close. Natheless, for once I am in accordance with hem acquisitive Venetians: the best Mamluk if nat a dead Mamluk is an unmet Mamluk, eh Sir Italian?” She nudges the man in black. “Lest you best him in a bargain, by God.”

Before either man has collected words sufficient for answer, Alys has flitted to the neighbouring shrine. She deprives it of a stately candle, pure beeswax and sizeable too. A drop of wax rolls in slow motion down its slumbrous length. She delivers it to her Parson.

“Here, John. Be a dear and direct the flame so I can see.”

She lifts the Cloth of Antioch.

“Careful, Dame!” the shrine-wight squeaks. “Sir Parson, watch ... no, move back! The smoke alone will stain the cloth.”

Haunted by this restless shade, Alys plucks up the griffins and peacocks. She holds the silk up as far as her meagre height permits. John is commanded to draw the candle near, and together they stare at a crimson Paradise.

Alys says nothing. Her Parson understands his role – he follows her gaze with candle-flame. She switches the fabric about so it drapes, reverse side up, from the up-raised chest lid. Now the trees are turned blowsy and the peacocks shedding, their embroidery a blurred semblance to the frontal images. She beckons the candle closer. She must note every detail. (She notes also that Feretrar can barely contain himself.) The red ground is slightly darker on this reverse side, more vibrant if possible, and as silken as poppies.

“It is of grain, *signora*. No other tincture holds colour like that. Look.” The Italian points to the trees. Their foliage is oddly blue, even on this, the protected rear. “The weld they used for yellow is gone. Green fades to blue.” He smiles. There is meaning in the gleam of his teeth. “And yet the scarlet remains.”

Alys swings about. She bumps the Parson's outstretched hand. The candle judders.

"Certain, I can see," she snaps.

She is about to say more, far more – about prying Italians and the undesirability of their company – but the Feretrar has had enough. A pasty hand shoots out, fingers latch about the pilfered candle, and it is jerked from the Parson's grip. The ferret-man trots it back to the shrine from whence it came, and then returns to bundle cloth-of-gold, samite, and pagan silk back with rather more purpose than care into its chest. Alys understands. It is time.

"*Vero*, it is fine workmanship, *signora*, but old. So old," the man in black murmurs. "*Venezia* produces infinitely better now. How could she not? The finest dye-stuffs in the world float her canals."

Oh, Alys understands. And she has seen quite enough for one day.

"Come, Sir John," declares she, nice and loud. "We have craved protection of the shrine. Now we been fit to sail forth on our pilgrimage. There been ships to board and Channels to cross. We gat a deal more to do than swap japes with a Venetian in a church cupboard."

But as she tip-traps out, between dim-glinting skull and bare-arse ass, along the passage and up stone-cold steps, all she sees is scarlet: blood red silk a-flicker with candle flame, and a man whose eyes reflect the same fire.

9. Mudflats



*Al bismotered with his habergeon,
For he was late ycome from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrimage.*

The General Prologue

Morning. There is noise without. A rattle of voices. The Knyght levers himself upright, iron and all, and passes a grimed hand over his face. He knows a Dragon's roar when he hears one.

He has slept aboard ship for three nights now and the cog has yet to unmoor from its Exeter mudflat. It was never designed for passenger accommodation, this paltry rocking (when the tide is up) wooden pot. It is a merchant vessel, designed for bales and sacks and ferrying the odd pilgrim across the Channel. Not for accommodating knights. This one sleeps propped amongst the ever-increasing cargo, his unharnessed harness wedging into armpit and groin-pit and generally foreshadowing all the comforts of Hell (whence he will go if he fails to accompany a Dragon to Jerusalem). He cannot help but recall the Quaestor's clever fingers and quick apprehension that first night in the hay. He had been just as quick to lace him up in the dim chill of the morn. Now fumble-fingered George sleeps part in, part out of his armour. Besides, who knows what slinking harbour-scum might divest him of it while he sleeps?

The Dragon's roar increases. It is advancing up the gangway.

"Certain, you can bide another day, Sir Captain. Lord love'ee, but you been a-rumming and a-raffing since first I came. *Oh alack, the merchants are delayed! Behold, the tide been contrarious! Oh weylaway, but the wind be full wroth!* And now you declare we moote sail? God and His saints above, Captain, the wind will doon diligence tomorrow. Do a Wife a favour."

The captain's grunt is concise and inelegant. No, it appears the *Madalena* will indeed depart today.

Heaven be praised. The Knyght fears his mail is already more rust than iron what with its constant bathing in salt air and salt sweat. Once the far side of the

Channel is achieved, perhaps the Quaestor will be so good as to aid him again and the Knyght can sand his habergeon from without.

Jankyn's voice joins the melee. "My wife's storehouse has been ransacked, good fellow. Surely you can see this is a matter worthy of delay?"

Apparently not.

"Harkee Captain, yon worthy alderman swears that, lest we bide in Exe least one sunrise more, he nolde not bestir himself on my account, no, nat one wit. No hue and cry, no guildly inquisition." Then the Dragon's voice dips an octave. "The dear lieve fellow, but I been in full accord. Why make shift to seize a caitiff when them that be wronged are fled and nil nat be back for months? Oh, as you leste, thou contrarious Captain. Doubtless there been some wight else'll take us, some other captain more convenable."

The Knyght begins to feel queasy, and the cog is still aslant on the mud. He must arise. Not that he particularly wishes to side with a Dragon, but if she does not board this cog, then there is no point in him sailing either. Worse, this is the only ship he may take. His passage is paid for and not by himself. The few coins left him would not afford a rat's passage. He has no inheritance until he has made penance. The Exeter hosteler demanded pennies even for the use of his stable-loft – hence George's early embarkation. The ship's master at least had no objection to a free guard bedding aboard his cog.

"I'm sure the Captain grieves for your misfortune –" An unidentified voice, probably the alderman.

"She sails on the tide, with'ee or without," growls the aforementioned sea-dog.

God send the hag sees reason – but to do so would be to defy the nature of woman itself. He levers himself up with a thunk-clank of leather and iron and emerges, sandy-lidded and scruff-haired, from the hold.

The gesticulating group turn to stare at this apparition, a knight dishabille, a piece of cargo upon a clunking merchant cog.

"Oh. Sir George," chirps the Dragon, momentarily distracted from breathing fire. "What dostow here? Oh, a God's name, you've ne been sleeping aboard ship?"

She patters up to him. Her nose wrinkles. "By God, you have! Pardee, Sir George, but my dye-house smells sweeter than you, full sooth."

He feels occasion to breathe a little fire himself, but swallows the smoke down.

"Tell me, lady," he manages instead. "What is the damage to your property?"

Her eyes rekindle. "The merchant who hath my warehouse comes a-banging at our bower before cock-squawk this dawn. Still knit up in his nightshirt he was, poor love. He wolde report like the good fellow he is that some swinish knave made free with *my* merchandise under shield of dark while he did snore beside his good dame. By God, but my Jankyn take fright when yon merchant came a-clamouring at our door."

"But the damage, good Wife?"

"Oh, it been a right grisly mess, thankee for asking. Bales slit open, woollens reft about, and bits of dyestuff everich-where. God send hem grief, but I must bide a week just to set all to rights."

The Knyght's patience may fruitfully be compared to an hourglass in which the last grains of sand jostle to drop. He makes one more attempt.

"But what exactly was stolen, Dame?"

"Stolen?" The Wife looks up at him like a small and very irritating wren. "Holy St Win, I ne said naught was stolen, Sir George."

"And your fabrics – shredded, I suppose? Utterly unsaleable? The dyestuffs irredeemable?"

He is surprised at his own eloquence. His slip-tongued stable-companion would be proud. But where is the yellow-headed sinner? He peels his gaze off the Wife. He sees the maid and the husband in tow, but no Parson nor Pardoner.

The Wife flaps her small hands. "No, no, Sir George. Naught is lost, little is shent. But you skirt the point entire!"

She stops flapping. The Knyght awaits the point he is so evidently missing.

"Terce," grunts the captain. "She sails at terce."

St Michael have mercy. The Knyght casts a hand over his brow. If only the Captain could keep his teeth together. Where is a Parson or Quaestor when he

needs them to smooth troubled waters? And what in God's name has he fallen to that he craves the company of butter-mouthed clerics?

The Dragon opens her mouth to vent fresh flame, but halts. It seems she is distracted by the movement of the Knyght's hand. He pauses in the mauling of his brow.

"God's sweet pain, Sir George, you're just smirching your dirt about."

She pats about in her capacious corsete and discovers a linen square. A vial of rosewater materialises from her scrip and is sloshed over the linen, and – he is rooted to the planks in horror – she reaches on tiptoes to scrub at his forehead.

"There. No, lat be, thou noble nuthatch." The Wife bats away the hand that was to dash away the offensive damp. But worse is to come.

The Dragon's nose is wrinkling afresh.

"If we're to bear thee company even for the passage, Sir George, I wol have you smelling something fresher than a tanner's yard," she says.

For some reason he does not shove the creature away nor wither her with a well-deserved serving of distain. The words that emerge are: "I find myself somewhat wedged within my harness, lady."

She takes that in her meagre stride. She peers at the swollen leather straps, the couters on skew, and she grins. "Oh, I woot what you're desirous of, gentil sire. A set of full nimble fingers aside thine own, eh? Well, I han the solution at hand. We'll make a shining Knyght of you yet." She turns. "Cess, my love!"

The maiden makes neither move nor sound.

"Come hither, sweeting! The noble Knyght nil nat eat you."

Sir George steps politically out of reach.

"Lady," he says with some urgency. "Will you sail?"

"Aye," says the captain. "Cog's leaving, be you on it or no." And stumps off to shout at sailors and servants staggering beneath merchantly baggage-mountains.

"Course we're sailing, thou bewelked knave." The Wife addresses the retreating back mildly. "We've given good coin, han't we? Now Cess, my sweeting. Betake yourself of pail and suds – certain, yon sailors can spare some – and helpen this Knyght with his bath. Jankyn and I'll rattle back for our bags and our Parson – your chaffare too – and we'll be back in three swinks of a lambkin's tail, say sooth."

More passengers have gathered: a portentousness of merchants, a pair of pilgrims decked out in the uniform – scrip, staff, the stragglings of a beard (mostly on the man), and russet gown.

“And the hue and cry, Dame? You desire it no longer?” An over-stuffed elder speaks beneath lowering brow.

“Oh no, lieve Alderman. It been an impossible. The sea waiven its waves for no woman – no, nor the salt-dogs that wend on it.” She pats him on the fur-trimmed sleeve. “Take it not agrief. Our noble Knyght sees true: little is lost, less is gone. The foul, sneaking cuckold that ravened my storehouse were disturbed in his misdoings, doubtless. Yea, I warrant my good tenant’s snores were too thunderous for his chicken liver.”

The alderman makes no answer, but bows abrupt, swishes his squirrel-trim about, and progresses back to his mount, dispersing sweating sailors and serving lads in his wake.

Said noble Knyght barely has time to register that a Dragon has taken his advice, for already she is gabbing on.

“Bestir thyself, Cess – time’s a-dribbling with the tide. Scurry about thy task. Why, I see a pail of good oak right there, all it wants is suds. Now take Sir George aside and peel that eternal iron off him.”

He is backing away and raising his hands even as she speaks. This assault by womankind is utterly beyond his expertise. If only it were as simple as planting his lance fair in the maw of the Dragon.

“Scamper along, Jankyn my heart.” The Dragon seizes her husband by his elegant cuff. “We have baggage to betake, and you hearkened the captain good and clear.”

“Aunt, you cannot ask this of me.” A tight-lipped maiden.

“Indeed, it is quite unnecessary,” the Knyght adds.

A cascade of laughter. “If thine own nosethirls have stint working, the case been dire indeed! But bethink thee, Sir George. You know your gestes and your lays. Consider: when all bismotered been the knight in thy fine romance, we know for verray truth he been bismotered in sin as well. You repent of your briganding,

dostow not? Well, proclaim it full loud with thy jupon, noble sir, and thy armpits too, by God!”

“Wife.” The youth is looking flushed. “Cecily is *not* –”

“Oh, doon no dread. She’ll get coin enow,” the Dame interrupts. “Now come *on*, my spouse.”

At which the Wife drags her husband down the swaying wooden boards and towards the distant city.

He stares after them. Cecily stares at him.

The Knyght takes a step back. Any further retreat and he’ll up-end into the hold. “You do not have to do this, maiden.”

She breathes in. And out. Her nose rumples.

“It seems I do, sir. Well, assist you at very least. You do not know my Aunt, sir, if you think this would be the last we’d hear of it. She will have her way, and if she rides iron-shod over others to achieve it she’ll only enjoy it the more.”

She eyes the bucket.

The Knyght attempts to shove his ire aside and produce instead a sigh.

“You had best untie me before fetching water.” He indicates his cuisses. “An it please you, maiden,” he adds as an afterthought.

He is lighter a coating of steel and of grime by the time a Dragon, a Parson and a sullen husband hustle down the path from Exeter, herding porters.

Having scrubbed, he had upturned the bucket over his head for good measure and then removed a further layer, this time of skin, through application of a sack as a towel. Now he looks around for his tunic, spattered and rust-stained though it be.

“Maiden, where is my clothing?”

He winds the sack about his waist and peers about the reeds and scrubby bushes. *You water my cargo and I’ll toss you in the drink.* The captain had waxed eloquent on the subject, and so George had disembarked and found himself a rushy rill trickling into the estuary. So long as he remains in the bulrushes, they provide him a passing private bathhouse.

He sees Cecily has filched his pail and sunk it in the stream again. He is opening his mouth to repeat the question when the girl scoops up a bundle and sinks it in the bucket.

“Devil take you, those are my clothes, woman! Are you foul-brained as well as foul born? What am I to wear?”

She does not look up. “You will borrow some of my uncle’s.”

The last word strikes him as somewhat ironically enunciated, but her calm reply has the effect that the cold water did not.

“I ... I pray your pardon, maiden.” Spoken to the bird-claw embroidered mud.

He feels her eyes upon his lowered head. He hears the snigger of a passing sailor.

“Cover yourself, sir.” Her voice is matter-of-fact. “My Aunt comes. I cannot vouch for what the sight of a naked knight will do to my mistress.”

He grabs for the sack at his waist. Heaven be praised, it has not slipped. He closes his eyes. Is he a knight or a knave? A knight does not bandy insults with a serving maid. Nor does he make of himself a laughing stock.

But the damsel is right – her mistress approaches. George ascends the gangway with promptitude, one hand gripping his sack. Best to secure himself some defensible place before the Dragon boards and until he can acquire more befitting garb.

He scans the deck.

The forecastle. It is the obvious choice – quite literally a miniature castle complete with battlements perched at the fore of the cog. He spares a moment to consider this oddity: a merchant tub boasting two clumsy crenelated boxes, one fore and one aft. Well, Richard, the second of that name and a mere child, is still at war with France – officially if not practically – and cogs are regularly requisitioned for military duty, whether their owners like it or not. The crenellations are obviously tacked on in afterthought. The aftcastle is larger and doubles as a roof over the passenger accommodation, so he selects the fortification at the front. He scales its defences, managing to retain his sackcloth, and then notes the trapdoored ladder he might have ascended instead.

The Knyght surveys his demesne from the safety of his castle. His companions are upon the quay – all but one. The Parson is eyeing their craft with evident doubt. George blames him not one jot. The Dragon is directing the boarding of her baggage with much puff and roar – she may as well roll her barrels up the plank herself, the quantity of instruction she imparts. Her husband lounges against the goods shed. Cecily is busy in the baggage nearby – he hopes with clothing. But no Quaestor. George has laid his hopes upon recruiting the yellow-hair’s services in re-harnessing when the time comes. Not that he is in any hurry. The captain’s words have prompted a sobering thought. What if he stumbled overboard in full caparison? He can swim, after a fashion, but even the fish does not float coated in iron.

His companions board, all but one.

And then – the first toll of doom.

The bells of Exeter. The town is at some distance from the dock, courtesy of a weir some countess cut across the Exe, but bells are built to carry. Monasteries, churches, and cathedral, they clang a disorderly farewell. Terce. A last drangle of sailors clatter aboard. The gangway is evicted with a thud. The cog slips its marshy moorings on the Exe, although not entirely of England yet, for two six-oared boats are attached by thick umbilical cords to its hull. They must drag the sailing ship to open waters and fresh winds.

The cog shudders. It moves – inchingly, like a sluggish ox.

“Oy! Hold there, captain!”

The oarsmen ripple but do not cease. They have only just got the cog creeping forward and are unwilling to lose what momentum they have gained.

“I said oy, hold a moment, you crook-cocked seal-lubber! If you don’t want it, well Christ knows I don’t!”

On second thoughts, the rowers realise there is entertainment to be had. They raise a ragged rank of dripping oars and lean back to enjoy the show.

“Y’ve left some of your cargo behind, man! And if you don’t take delivery of this dung-heap, I’ll damn-well toss it in the Exe!”

The speaker is a large man, broad and brown-bristled. He has the look of one who has low tolerance for foolery and has developed efficient ways to deal

with it. A small and appreciative audience has gathered about him. In his meaty paw he grips a hank of yellow hair. The Quaestor is attached.

The captain leans over the gunwale, looking under-delighted. He takes one eyeful of said cargo. "Toss it in the drink."

The Quaestor attempts to stand. "I gave down-payment, you thieving sea-rat!"

"Aye," the captain says. "And you missed your boarding. Your grief, not mine."

"Hold, good sirs!" The Parson lifts his hands. His voice carries over wind and water. "Gentle Thomas travels with us. We are barely unmoored. Surely it is simplicity itself to have one of these boats ferry him over?"

"Gentle?" The man hawks and gobs with wet accuracy upon his captive's neck. "Yeah, and a right gentle handling he's got from me. Reckon he could do with a dose more."

"What'd he do?" the sea-rat barks.

The Knyght reflects that this captain is a man of more condensed verbage even than he.

"Do?" the man bellows back. "If this piece of crawling pond slime had succeeded in his *doings* I wouldn't be offering him to you, by God. You know me – *The Mermaid*? Best ale on the Exe. Reckon you know my Eloise too. Worked the tap since she could toddle and right handy at fending off ungodly swine, but this here string of dog turd got under her guard. What do I find when I go to toss the pig slops, but my Eloise kneeling in fron–"

The man clamps his lips, aware too late that listeners might draw unwelcome conclusions. They do and guffawing follows. The Knyght's lips twitch. The taverner fetches Tom a blow across the cheek with the hand not holding his hair.

"Well, Parson?" The captain's mien seems to have mellowed, although judgement is hard to make for the quantity of beard.

The Knyght eyes Parson John. He finds himself oddly hopeful that the Quaestor be admitted on board. After all, the man is a brother in arms – of a sort.

Sir John, however, looks startled at the taverner's revelation. The man of God is momentarily lost for words.

Such is not the tendency of the Dame.

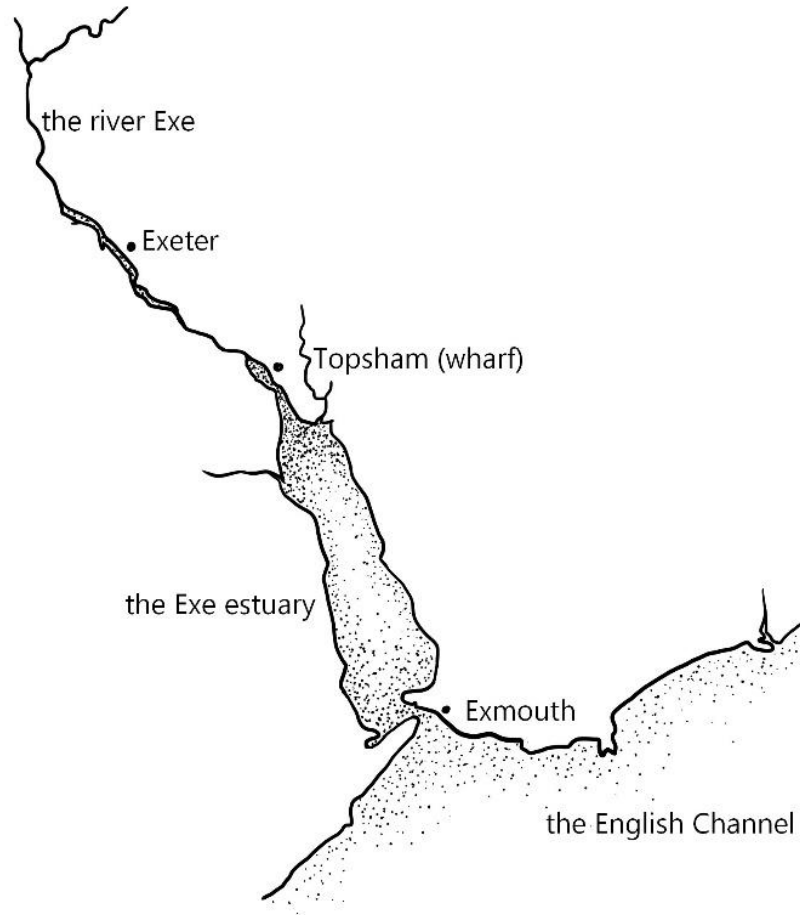
"Lord love'ee for a sinner, Tom Quaestor! What ails you that you were caught? Certain, sweet captain, you can haul him aboard. He been of our company, for our sins – and for his, God woot. You're a-coming with us to the Celestial City, eh Long Tom? Now be a love and lat him aboard, captain dear."

The woman all a-scarlet treats the sea-dog to a dazzling smile. The captain grunts and shrugs. Certain gestures made by leathery arms are interpreted as direction to ferry the cargo aboard. The Quaestor is released with another blow for fair measure and a well-placed boot to the posterior as he staggers away.

"Christ be my witness, I sight your face in my tavern – or this cursed town again – and I'll part your coillons from your chicken thighs!"

Such is the parting eloquence of the taverner, and their sweet farewell from Mother England.

10. Estuary



I am pulled aboard like a sack of meal. I am hauled over the gunwale and dumped upon the crowded deck. I raise my head to meet the circle of avid eyes – and I smile. I smile, lordings, and bathe in the swamp of their attention.

Behold: my skin is in one piece, if tenderised, I am out of yon city that stinks of fish-guts and failure, and I am back on the trail of a Bawd.

They don't question me, these eyes – they think they know. The Wife is chuckling still and making meaningful elbow at her Jankyn. And when the ship is again inching down the mud-slimed Exe and the eyes and mouths have acquired more interesting subjects, I lurch to my feet and go in pursuit of one absent from my view. There are things I must ask of Sir George and in some privacy. When better than in the moments of feeble excitement when this creaking tub finally extrudes itself between sand-dunes and into the sea?

But when I find him, it is far better than I hoped.

I sight his head. I clamber the ladder to the forecastle, poke head through hatch, and my jaw comes unhinged.

“Saints save us, Sir Knyght, you'll freeze in this wind. Where in Christ are your clothes?”

I try not to laugh. No doubt I pull the most peculiar series of faces in that honourable cause. Noble George is encased in naught but a sack, and the effect is beyond appealing.

“The damsel took them,” he mutters.

I grin. I do not laugh, but my lips must have some relief.

“I commend you, Sir George. You had more luck than I. Mine were no damsel, whatever her Pa cares to swear, and we were most discourteously interrupted before she could make off with my attire.”

His eyes flash. Is that humour I detect, or a touch of ire?

“The damsel Cecily helped me cleanse myself.” He jerks a damp, dark head in the direction of the Bawd, she who is fluttering about on the main deck and

getting comprehensively in the way. “Her doing,” George says, as if that fact were not already reliquary clear.

Well, I could continue baiting his nobleness and enjoying the effect of the chill upon his chest, but I take pity on his lordship – and on my own soul. I lean between battlements towards the deck, for all the world like a maiden from a balcony.

“Maiden! Sweet Cecily!” I bellow.

She turns to favour me with a steely-grey stare. With some small consideration for noble George’s feelings, I beckon the girl closer. She does not stir.

I put on a contrite look. “Maiden, I beg you. It is not for my own sake I ask.”

She steps forward with disdain.

“For the love of Heaven, dear maiden, find this Knyght some clothes before his death of chill is on your conscience.”

And it is done. The haughty chit looks somewhat chastened and Jankyn’s baggage is raided for what items may fit. Of course, our Knyght is much better accoutred (pre-clothing) than clerkly Jankyn, and I amuse myself some more in playing squire to his nobleness. Indeed, it is no hardship, lordings, to encase this knightly frame in tunic and hose only to find the seams threaten to dissever at the slightest movement and a disrobing and re-robing must occur post haste. But eventually it is done, and the clerk’s displeasure is but seasoning to my dish.

Thus is my soul succoured after the foul disappointment of last night. No, not my soul. Say, rather, some more tangible part of my being. But the thing had to be assayed. Note you, I am but in minor orders – there is no transgression in my commerce with a woman, provided no injury be involved (say the reeking taverner what he will). Indeed, I have hopes to acquire myself a wife someday – a rich widow, by preference. Security, morality. Boy Jankyn is worth imitating in one regard, at least. That is the plan, post-Jerusalem, and when my soul is clean. In the meantime, I thought to learn some love of marital duties, acquire something of a taste. So Eloise was approached, coin was passed, and a dark corner found. And the result? My hope of salvation proved itself quite limp.

It seems Heaven must be sought by some other means.

For example, there is George.

The sail is heaved up and the row-boats abandoned. The land descends into flat marsh and plover-picked mud. The wind makes a mockery of my cloak, so I huddle below the wooden crenulations within arm's reach of a now-clothed knight. A sailor has bounded up, secured the forestay to the bowsprit (yea, lordings, I have been on a boat before), and departed with a grin. The Bawd of Bath is deep in flirt with the new arrivals – merchants for the most part – who huddle together in what passes for passenger accommodation beneath the aftcastle. The salt wind howling just above our heads removes us from the ears of the world.

And I try again.

"I do not wish to hound you, Sir Knyght, but I know you are with us for a purpose. The Prior said as much."

That carven face will have pigeons perching on it if it turns any more to stone. Or gulls, out here. It seems I must give a little to receive.

"Sir George, I am sent to Jerusalem by the Prior of Bath." I pause before adding, "With certain instructions concerning the Dame yonder." Another pause. "And for the correction of my manifold sins, of course."

I beat my head against a wall. The Knyght has turned into an effigy, only one sat upright and definitely not at rest. The look would be more effective if he were still encased in armour.

"My lord, we can help each other. That's what the fat fellow wanted."

I speak into granite-weighted silence. Silence, that is, if you discount the slosh and spit of the widening Exe, the flap of the sail, and the imperative screech of gulls. Now I know what deafening silence means.

"I need information on the Wife, Sir George. I need to make her cough. In truth, I must make her hack, hawk, and vomit up every unclean detail of her history of husbands." I pause now without artifice as a fresh notion strikes me. "And of them she didn't marry, come to think of it."

Now there's a thought. Is our Dame an adulteress, too? Nothing like a little extra ammunition to the Prior's cause. I glance at the god-like statue beside me and feel rather as one does when appealing to a saint. Has his loftiness heard me? Will

he stoop from his exalted heights to consider my so-lowly appeal? And what, by Christ, does it take to produce a miracle?

“Why do you tell me this, clerk?”

I startle. The statue moveth. It produces words.

“Actually, I am not strictly a clerk, Sir George. I haven’t the education for it, see, and certainly not the inclination. I am just a man in the pay of the bishop ... or I was.”

I have lost my nerve and train of thought both beneath His Lordliness’s stern, dark eye. I hasten to return to my theme.

“It may be that we have a goal in common, Sir George. I humbly reveal my purpose to you that you may assist me – only in the most minor of ways, I assure you. And even if you have no other end than to achieve Jerusalem, my lord, surely it is to your soul’s greater benefit that you help bring a sinner to justice and put yourself in good odour with the bishop of Wells to boot.”

“This is subterfuge, Quaestor, and not worthy of a knight.”

Oh.

And Sir George manifests his granite exterior again. I ramble on a while, chipping away at it with as much effect as a mason with a wooden chisel. I muse aloud on methods of distilling the Wife’s many villainies. I dwell upon the potency of a bishop’s gratitude and a knight’s paramount duty to support justice. And does it sink in, lordings? Do any of my arrows find a mark?

Sir George may be as hedgehogged as St Sebastian himself and I would never know. It seems I forge on alone, in this my noble quest to dredge a Bawd’s soul.

11. Channel

*Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive
To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve.*

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Beshrew this all-male talk of masculine doings. It is her turn. Besides, they are asking too many questions.

They are immured in what passes for a cabin aboard the fine cog, the *Madalena*, making splendidly stomach-churning progress towards the French coast, Alys and a barrel-load of questers after the almighty pound (florin, franc, ducat, or besant). About her huddle a Mercer of Exeter, a Master Weaver from Bruges, a Trader in dyes and bulk imports, a Spicer of Portsmouth, a round Tanner of Cologne redolent of stale piss, and a brace of greenish Pilgrims bound for Aachen. There is the odd servant or three, although most must shiver outside. Oh, and ne forget that slinking Clothier of Venice, him garbed in black. By God, but it gave her a nasty startle, the moment she cognised Minotto aboard her boat. It could be mere coincidence, of course. After all, the fellow has been quiet enough since he got on, which is more than she can say for these others.

For what else does a merchant-passenger do to take his mind off the quantity of sea surrounding him but talk? Yea, jabber like the pye. And a merchant's favourite topic is always himself – or sniffing out the business of others. The Wife has, since departing Portsmouth pre-dawn, suffered through accounts of mercers' sons inheriting Pa's wealth and trade, of the indisputable superiority of German beer (and a certain Tanner's adventures once he has partaken freely thereof), and a Spicer's amorous conquests in the east. And questions, endless questions – *where are you going? Which way do you take? Why not join our company? Certain, it is a sight safer that way, Dame.*

It is time to provide a feminine balance. No, it is time to divert the hounds, to wave a lure at the hawk, and stir the hive. She wants them so tickled by her past they do not care about her present.

Alisoun stands. (Sways.) She spreads her arms and her bosom swells with breath. They desire the Bad Wife of Bath to spill her beans, do they? Why then, she will oblige, and with rather more detail than they require. It will serve admirably as distraction, and there is one that wants distracting more than most.

“Merchants,” she declaims. “Pilgrims, man-servants, and maids. Assorted sires be-shook within this tub. You ask me of myself? Well then, I will tellen my tale, if you will hear.”

“Even in Bruges we hear of you, Dame.” The Weaver masticates his words before mashing them forth around a smile. “I would know how much is true.”

“Deliver us, O Lord,” Jankyn mutters. He sinks blonde curls into his hands.

She spares him a soft look. Certain, the poor wightling is tinged a delicate shade of cabbage and his golden crown is gone wild with salt air. But he is with her still.

“*Signora*, your fame is nosed far and wide. Your skills are incomparable. Pray tell us how you came into them.”

Alys eyes the Venetian. Certain, the fellow was born squealing into a palazzo over some murky canal and bloodying silk sheets in the process. How came she into her skills, eh? *And what skills would those be, thou slinking southerner? Ask and thou’lt receive.* He just ought to be more specific in his asking.

She bows. That it is performed with all the steadiness of a drunken doxy merely underlines her intent.

“Here,” declares she, “beginneth the tale of the Wife of Bath.”

“Sires, I was born a serf-brat in Hawkesbury, hard by the Wolds. Old King Ed were in his prime, the Pest ne but a mushroom-muncher’s dream, and Ma did birth the most undergrown runt as ever put to pap. By God, if I’d been begot of a sow, I’d be turned to crispy suckling pig. If Ma were a she-dog, I’d ‘ve been sunk in the stream full quick. Praise the Almighty that He hath given us souls – even unto the most pathetic plaining she-serf, debate it as you leste. Not that it ne crossed dear brother Dickon’s mind nat to drown me or brenne me betimes.”

Beside her, Cecily murmurs a protest. Alys ignores it. The girl knows full well her Pa regards his sister with a circumspection more commonly accorded elves and succubi.

Alys beams around at the huddlers within this three-sided lurching box, worthy burghers and poseurs all. Some are her companions on the road. Some only desire to be, whether down the Rhine or between strange sheets. They examine her person afresh: one runtish frame overlaid with anything-but underdeveloped attributes, and the whole most strategically arrayed.

That achieved, she plunks back down onto the staggering bench – does the cog shudder some more? – and gabs on.

“Oh, I ne been no serfling namoore, trust it well. No bailiff’ll come galloping after me, least not for that intent.” She grins. Let them make of that what they will, especially them who snoop and sniff for masters not here. “I been a liberous woman now and it were the dank and sulphurous air of Bath as kitte me free.” She pauses a mummer’s moment. “*Free*, quod I? Oh, God woot there was a price. To speaken short and plain, I was bought like a beast: yea, I was a cock for the pot, an autumn porker, no less.”

Sir John shifts beside her on the bench. Any other in this so-called cabin would attribute his movement to the discommodious wooden perch or the vertiginous pitching of the ship. Or even to the disjointed mode of her tale. Not Alys. She knows full well she prods the Parson where he is most bruised.

“*Signora*,” says the dark man, the man all in black. “You tease us. You whet our appetite. I pray you, reveal all. Tell us of surpassing skills, not surpassed stature.”

Alys meets his eyes. They too are black in this limp light. Oh, she suspects his purpose, but she will conceal her doubts. She will not play his game – but he must not know she is not playing.

So she laughs. It would be a belly laugh on any other, but on her it is centred rather higher. She leans forward a little, just enough that every eye is invited to dive into the crevasse of her corsete. They obey with promptitude, except her Parson’s, of course – and, sad to say, the one clothed in black. He dwells not upon her torso but the fabric that encases it.

“My skills, you ask? Why, I wed hem, sweet sires. I have sworn before church door five time. Apprenticeship under five masters been full potent training, God woot. I reft a little learning from each, from them five bed-mates and more. Ne cleave to but one master, I advise. Ne been a mouse with but one hole. No man knows it all, though by God ofttimes he thinks he do.”

Jankyn is fuming like the baths of Bath. Her fifth husband does not like to be reminded of his predecessors. “The man asked how you came by your skill *with cloth, woman,*” snaps he.

The fat Cologner chortles. It is a belly laugh indeed. “Never mind, Dame. You can tell us a bed-time tale if you like. I’ll not object.”

She smiles. She picks up her spindle, and settles the distaff tight between tight thighs. Jankyn has railed against her carting this equipment and requisite wool along with her. She declared it a far more pliable travelling companion than he. She plucks loose some carded wool. She begins to spin her yarn.

“My Pa, God rest him, ne was no ordinary serf.”

Jankyn snorts.

Alisoun ignores the customary denigration of her lineage. Jankyn, of course, was no peasant puppy. He was whelped by the lordly gutters of Bristol-town.

“Watt of Hawkesbury were a villein with a vision. Say sooth, my Pa was serf-errant on a full noble quest. He’d wandered up Winchcombe-way, droving flocks across the Cotswolds in his wild-oat days and had dealings with Cistercians, them shave-panned celibates that been obsessed by sheep. Oh, wool, wool, and more wool, that’s all they know, them woolly white monks – yea, and the coin they clink once it been sold. And my Pa, he took sick of their disease. By God, he got it hente in his head that there been a heavenly hierarchy among sheep, just as bitwix men, and that, though he been a serf, yet he could have full lordly fleece. So he winnowed out his beasts with the best wool, year upon year, and we sold or ate the rest. That’s what he was about, sires, once he’d wedded my Ma. Breeding sheep and breeding brats.” She grinned. “I trowe he made better shift at the sheep end of affairs, though. What’d he get on my Ma but a runt-girl and one beshrewed boy? God woot, if Ma were a ewe he’d ‘ve culled her too after the first three year. Rest her soul, but she buried more babes than ever she nursed. Oh, she could breed, my

Ma, but she ne been built for the birthing of hem. Doubtless, they got squeezed like a sausage in the going out and ... well, lat say it been a holy miracle that I'm gadding and gabbing today."

The Quaestor produces his goat's bleat. Alys eyes him. Long Tom and the Knyght ducked inside soon after the cog achieved open sea yesterday, looking wind-wild and chill. Tom took a goodly time to return to normal hue but soon regained his humour, such as it is. Now he elbows a pinch-mouthed pilgrim beside him.

"There you go," says he. "You've got a miracle of procreation aboard this very ship. No need to trot to Aachen after all. Just offer up to the good Dame's noble shrine."

The pilgrim stiffens and fixes his eye-beams anywhere but on the Wife's bosom.

"Yea, the most pured and precious wool. That's what my Pa were after," continues Alys. "And that's what he got, by God. Certain, then he craved a full precious price too. Cotswold fleece is near the finest already, I ne need tellen you. My Pa just had to acquirin a clothier who'd lick lips upon what he wolde purvey."

She eyes the Venetian. He nods back at her ever so slightly and a smile flickers. He hopes he is about to hear what he is after. But she is not so easily bent. Not anymore.

"Course, I grew up spinning." She is demonstrating now, effortlessly and endlessly, her fingers turning floss into filament. "That been no subtlety. Show me a girl-child on the Wolds who ne can spin. Difference was, I was villainous undersized. Elf-swapped, brother Dickon clept me. Plain puny, I say – fingers and legs and all. My pins nolde nat keep up with the sheep on the Wolds, so Dick-boy taken that job. He ne minded it neither, your Pa," she directs at Cecily. "He communes with a sheep a sight better than with womankind, that one. By God, it been a miracle he ever married, let alone begat, not whan he had a long-lashed ewe to snuggle up to."

Cecily makes no sound. Her head is bent over her eternal embroidery, her fingers dip and prick. It is a feat of endurance that she is able to continue in this heaving, dim, and cramp-elbowed box.

“So there’s me hente at home and helping Ma, and when I’m nat slicing nor hoeing or gleaning, I’m a-twirling a spindle. Elvish fingers ne been such a disadvantage there, by God.”

She pauses to wiggle the articles in question, dainty mouse-paw digits if she do admire them herself.

“Spinning, sweet sires. I was spinning before I could toddle, not that you’d sew a beggar’s shroud of mine early stuff, I trowe. But ere I was eight or nine, I han more maistry over it than my Ma. Ply as thin and fine as spider-thread, I make no boast. I had the eye, I had the fingers, so Pa yaf me charge of sorting the clip too – and that been no easy praktik, I tell true. Most merchants buy the fleece hurly-burly in a sack: dags, stains, and skin and all – but nat from my Pa. Not for his lordly sheep. He was for mounting the angelic ladder to sheepy perfection. Yea, Pa was a-clambering for kingly coin. He’d got himself some noble fleece, and he thought if he sorted the stuff full subtly before he sold it, then a clothier’d cough up even more. So there’s me at summer shearing, perched on a pail so I might survey the sorting trestle, when up clops Master Wilkin of Bath to savour of Hawkesbury’s latest clip.”

Alys doesn’t look at her Parson. She doesn’t put him in the tale, even though he was there. A yarn well-spun needn’t incorporate all the original burrs nor even the finest fleece. It just needs to hang together, homogeneous-wise.

“Well, old Wilkin’s eyen fair pop out of his head when he lights on me, midget Alys, a-sorting his wool. *What dostow, friend Watt?* sputters old Willy, Master Clothier and closest thing to a ram I’ve ever spied on two legs. Hair cloud-grey and curling like the lamb’s all over his skull – and a fair pelt on his chin too, and I’ll speak of more privvy parts anon. Pink cheeks and round belly. By God, the verray image of a plump sheep’s babe, all save in years. Master Wilkin, burgher of Bath and prospering cloth-merchant. Here was the verray wight my Pa desiren to tout his wool to and here was I, a prick in his side, a spike in his wheel. *Woltow let a red-headed dwarf sort my wool?* Master Wilkin bleats at Pa.”

Oh, her Parson’s face.

Alisoun shrugs. “Well, he ne quod as such precisely, but he moote as well. Some things ne need be spoke to be said loud and clear. Natheless, I’d passed

eleven summers by then, sires all, and though I were a midget in most regards, there gan to be exceptions. You know what I mean.”

She takes a breath to clarify. It fills her chest most fulsomely, and her lip twitches at the respondent expressions.

“Oh, I’d had practik enough on plough-boys and pedlars, and the odd monk or minstrel. Hawkesbury ne been a silty pond entire. Strangers’d roule by and, native or strange, him that had harness ‘neath his hose noticed me. Something about my height, I hold. A maid small enough to toss about like a babe? Why, it swell a man’s heart, or somedeel lower down. That been my premise, say wastow will. Oh, dread not, I was a full virtuous maiden, *then* least-wise, but I wiste how to talk to a man. And, by God, I wiste well what he like to rest his weary eyes upon ...”

The skittering of gazes away from her abundance is almost audible above the wail of wind and wave. Ah, but man is a weak-willed creature. No wonder they don’t let women in the pulpit. The gazes would never clamber above her collarbone.

“So I smiled full sweet at this Wilkin, this clothier of Bath – for my Pa’s sake, mind you. I showed forth what I could do – with wool, mark you well. And the man was impressed. I gat fairy fingers, you see, and a passing good eye for fleece withal. Add a Pa who’ll flay a buttock bare if I miss a stain, and sheep-Wilkin had naught to bewail about. Then Pa, puffing up like the cockerel, betakes to show him my spinning. I plumped myself down, sires, set the distaff bitwix my legs, right as you see me now, and Master Wilkin stands over me, taking it all in. And *he* ne chiden nor grouched. Oh, no indeed.”

“That’s not –” Sir John begins.

“And it worked,” she says on. “Worshipful Master Wilkin offered coin. He mad purchase of my Pa’s wool and he swore oath he’d be back for more. And he did, and next time he rouled on back, he yaf his proposal too.”

And there she has them. Them of her audience who know where the tale is headed are busy cringing against pitchy planks. Them that don’t have forgot all queries about her current destination, veiled reasons for her journey, the route to be trod. They yearn only for the yarn to spin on.

All except the Venetian.

“Does your *padre* still strive for perfection in his fleece? Do I see its evidence before me?” the Italian asks. Black eyes linger on the cloth upon her body. Quite a quantity of cloth it is too, not in height but breadth, and all of it scarlet, lest one count the pale linen beneath.

What can she do but laugh?

“Heaven blessee for a flatterer, Sir Cloth Merchant. Slimy as your Venice swamps, you been. Think I’m young enow for my Pa to be treading earth yet? Well doubtless, were he still on life he’d be breeding still. Sheep-babes, not two-legged lambs, that is. Even my Ma has her limits, though she ne beshrews the odd roll in the hay. But his flock liveth on and brother Dick, for all his faults, he woot how to care for a sheep. No, the winter of forty-eight did for Pa, God give him mercy. It did for me too, I trowe, though it took another path.”

There is intaken breath. The contents of the cabin shrinks as if a lazar has clapped into the room. *Forty-eight*. They know what that means.

She plucks scarlet cloth up from a lap like melting butter. She holds it for inspection. “But this? Certain, Sir Italian, it been of my father’s flock. Broadcloth from the Wolds. My Pa been naught but bones but his clip liveth on, and everydeel of it cometh to me, thanks and no thanks to Watt of Hawkesbury. Good, nis it nat?”

“But the *proposal*, Dame. You mentioned a proposal,” chirps the Spicer.

She looks with sapient eye at this slight, grey man. The fellow sports a silk tunic beneath his doublet, as impractical for travel as anything Jankyn might fish from his saddlebag. It is clear the Spicer has spent too much time in the heated and hedonistic east.

“Oh, old Wilkin had a proposal, by God. Yea, he proposed to my Pa the very next time he clopped the seventeen mile from Bath. *Oh, sweet Watt*, cries he, a-sinking down on one knee. *Oh, sweet Watt, pledge me your clip so long as you and your heir may live, and I’ll pledge you my heart!* cries he.”

“For pity’s sake, Alisoun,” murmurs the Parson.

She ignores him. Let him hang on a cross of his own making. After all, *she* did – of his own making.

“Well, my Pa was aghast and agrieved. *Wastow say, Wilkin? My precious, parfit clip?* he cries. *Beshrew thy heart, Wilkin me old gossip. What could possibly*

requite for the loss of my wondrous wool? Well, the Clothier hastens to clarify. Offer me and mine heir first refusal on every year's clip, says he. I give oath the price'll be good. That's all I ask, sweet Watt. Well, my Pa is still pickled in the pan as to what could balance so great and grinting a concession. He demand an answer, and: Your little girl, quod Wilkin, with a lick of his sheepy lips. Your little, little girl."

She sees her audience squirm. The men among them are probably squirming to adjust their hose. *A twelve-years' girl, think they. And a midget at that. Sweet God in Heaven and the horny Devil below.* It is near indecent – and what man among them cannot imagine it?

"Well, out of doubt, my Pa agreed. How moote he not? What sweet bobance! What bounty! An apprenticeship for a girl, and a serf-brat withal, and toss into the bargain that Wilkin'd pay the manumission and waive the usual master's fees. Well, he should've took heed, my Pa. He should've wondered why a wealthy clothier'd dish out so much dough for a puny bit of girl-flesh. But Pa was sheep-proud. He bethought his fine flock worth every trouble Wilkin bent himself to. The only wonder was Pa conceived *I* was worth his pretty clip."

"An apprentice?"

The contents of the cabin are crestfallen.

"You were bound in mastery to the clothier of Bath?" says the Venetian.

"When did they make this accord?" asks another, more perspicacious.

"Forty-eight," says she.

Ah. The cabin settles. They sense the story is not over – no, not by half.

"Wilkin had a son," she says. "God woot, he had two, but the second one ne counts." She grins before adding, "Least, not yet. I'd ne laid eyen on this Son Number One, only the second of the tweye. Number One was off a-learning his craft from sundry maisters, bouncing on a boat across the waters like to us now and doubtless assaying stews and strumpets from Bristol to Bruges. If a man ne wieldeth his weapon it gets full rusty, I woot to my sorrow. Number Two Son? Well, the midget Alys quite liked him, fool that she was. Number Two was gentil and godly and he told the midget stories. So when Pa told me I was to be bounden to Wilkin of Bath – and right jolif he was about it too, clambering up God's ladder, no less, his serf girl to be a free woman – why, it yaf me delight. I was *delightened*, dostow

hear? So what if old Wilkin liked to eye my paps? He ne been the only one by a long bow, and besides, I'd got Number Two to guard me should his Pa get over-friendly. Set to be a priest, was Number Two. High morals and chastity and such-like."

She winks and is rewarded by grins and guffaws – from most, at least. They've all encountered priests who've found the strait and narrow rather too narrow. The earnest brace bound for Aachen look at their laps.

"No, what I cared for was cloth, and that han't changed one hank. Took after my Pa, I trowe. And Wilkin of Bath, he was fullfilled to overflowing of clothy skill. It been no doubt, if he doon lust after my Pa's wool. By God, he knew good stuff when he saw it, and he set out to get his lambkin's hooves upon it. Likewise he saw me, sires. He saw my thread and my sweet way with wool. I wene he saw a couple of things else, too. And he was fair lickerous to teachen me – yea, almost as lickerous as I was to learn."

She stops her spinning and holds up her thread.

"See, gentils? I could spin in my sleep by then, and it ne been enough for me. No, nat by a lumbering league. Hastow felt the lust for wool? Nat just for fine thread, but broadcloth tentered, teasled, and shore, and fair softer than any kit. And then the finishing of it, the tinting – woad blue, cinnabar, murrey and madder, gall and piss. Sweet stenches all. Lust, my lords. Yearning beyond human flesh. Desire so you can scarce control yourself. By God, I woot *you* know what I mean, Sir Venetian."

Their eyes meet. A thread of fellatious feeling links them. She knows he knows it, this breath-sucking need that leaves the heart hollow and the stomach a-swirl. His eyes grow deep, and her smile flashes in reply.

"So I was right jolif to be apprenticed to Clothier Wilkin, dostow hear? Full content with the notion of bedding 'neath the same roof-beam as Number Two, yon 'prentice priest who spun me stories. I ne mind a tale or two, though what he told were mostly heaved from the Holy Book. And Wilkin? Well, lat him bleat instructions at me both eve and morrow and, by God, I'd just lap hem up. I wolde slave by tallow-light 'til Prime so long as he taught me cloth, for no loom ne stood in Watt of Hawkesbury's cott. A loom been a full costly thing, and weaving requiren space and skill, my sires. My Ma had neither. Say sooth, I was delirious of joy. It'd ne

befall too fast that Wilkin took purveyance of this scrap of womanflesh. I had but to wait 'til harvest was good and gone."

A pause for breath. Their breath, not hers.

"Mine indenture was settled – settled, but not sealed – in the summer of forty-eight, sires. Yea, just before the shit hit the whipping post and the blood splattered all about. Or should I say: the bloody pus?"

They are squirming for different reasons now, her audience. They know of what she speaks. Some of them have had the (ill-)luck to live through it. And yet there is in that squirm a spike of pleasure still. Death and disease, other people's pus and pestilence. There is something hideous-alluring about the cataclysm of forty-eight. It was Apocalyptic. Diluvian. Sodomitic. Everyone loves a good disaster – in hindsight.

Of course, it is still with them. It descends irregularly to cull at fiendish random still. But nothing compares to forty-eight. No one was prepared then.

"Pestilence, sires. Accursed plague. Divine smiting for our manifold and scarlet sins. We heard rumour of it in Hawkesbury before it hit us, by God, but the Lord above knows we ne believed it. Avignon plague-struck and pus-y? Doubtless, they had it coming. A pope should abide in Rome, nat some Frenchy fortress. Besides, them in France did refuse their true king. Just because a Frenchman bulges with buboes ne betokens a God-fearing English-wight'll follow in fashion. And Florence? Genoa? Well, you know them Italians. You woot the way of gossip, good sires. Just 'cause some pedlar declares a rain of frogs in Castile ne betokens we'll see tadpoles a-plopping upon the Wolds. No, they ne took it serious, my Ma and Pa, not 'til Wilkin rode up in a sheepy panic from Bath with Number Two trotting fast by his heels."

"Is Hawkesbury clean?" shrills Willy-kin from the heights of his foamy steed. Well, my Pa looks down the lane, all dotted with sheep-turd, child-turd, kine-turd, and worse, and then looks back at Wilkin as if the man's a wheel short of a hay-cart. *The Pestilence, man!* Wilkin squeaks. *Is it here?* My Pa lifts shoulders. *What Pestilence?* quod he. Well, Wilkin near falls off his wobbling ambler at that. My Pa sees plain the man's not himself, and most tenderly he take an elbow and leads the bleating lamb indoors. Wilkin is evident in want of a healthful pot of ale and, God

woot, Watt ne minds one himself. So Pa leads his crony into his cott and lends him a friendly ear and, next thing you know, everydeel's cast up-so-down."

"In forty-eight, you say?" It is the mercer of Exeter who speaks.

Alys eyes him. Prosperous stomach and grey-bristled cheeks a-droop. Certain, he is old enough to remember that season of suffering, near thirty year ago though it was.

"Forty-eight," says she. "Just past All Hallows, as I wene. Sweet God above, I bethought all the fiends of Hell had shadowed Wilkin from Bath by the quake of his woolly jowls, but no – it were just the one. One fiend, that is. The grisly, grinting skeleton named Death."

"That tallies," says the trader in dyes. "It hit the south coast first. It sailed across the Channel."

"Bristol next," says the spicer.

"And Bath's but a kick and a skip from Bristol." The Wife completes the geography lesson, and then flings it overboard. "But the Pest ne needed to kick nor skip to catch old Wilkin, 'cause his family jewels been abiding in Bristol, all ready and waiting. Robert of Bath – Son Number One – he opened his arms to the bawd Pestilencia and welcomed her into his bed. And, by God above, she dighted him good and proper."

She slips a glance at John at last. His fingers grip the wooden bench. Ah, the poor man's probably feeling as grey as the waves that toss them about. He's not been to sea before, her Parson. No, not even bobbed the Bristol Channel.

"*Robert is dead. Robert is dead.* That been Wilkin's refrain, clept over and over like he was at his paternoster, and certain, he looked half dead himself too. He had scarce more years then than I gat now, but you woot how it is with the young – they bethink any wight with a grey whisker been a doddering ancient. Got a few myself now, but I ne feel so doddery, say sooth."

She ignores the jibe Jankyn feels obligatory at such a juncture and plunges back into the expurgated past.

"His son and heir all pus-y and passed-on, and what'd old Wilkin got left? Son the Second was dead set to be a eunuch priest – and dead set's no overstatement, lat me assure. Wilkin had a deal of trouble dragging his priestling fro

the steamy air of Bath. See, yon son was too young to turn priest yet. No man moote getten himself ordained 'til he turn twenty five, and Two was only twenty-one as I recall. But priests were dying like frogs in Egypt and Number Two had a craving to be a martyr. Bishop Ralph of Bath and Wells wolde waiven the rule for him, so he said. Souls were getting tossed unshriven into the plague-pit by the pile, and the bishop even yaf laymen leave to take final confession just to save a plaguey soul from Hell. Why, next thing you know it'd be women! So Number Two doth hear his holy trumpet blast. Devil take the heirless father and the child serf, the 'prentice priestling desiren his pan to be shaved so he can hover over the dying and snatch souls for God. Yea, and his own Pa's parish had just come most convenably vacant, thanks I trowe to the same bawd who carried off his brother. By God, it been plain what the Almighty requiren him to do."

The Wife pauses for breath – and balance. She has let her tongue take gallop again. Why does she do this, to him whom she loves? She rubs his guilt in his face – his holier-than-thou guilt – yea, she smears it in like cob on a wall, and all know that turd's a needful ingredient of any well-made hut.

But she cannot stop now. They will not let her. She has launched upon a tale of Plague and Martyrdom. They want the Godly Moral in the story. Failing that, they want some Sex and Death.

"That's why yon priestling were constrained to gad out to Hawkesbury, see? Soon as he got back to Bath, Number Two'd become its youngest-ever priest, but first he must maken some penance. Yea, some goodly grovelling in advance. For, sweet sires, this priestling had intent to sacrifice a ewe-lamb. For all the souls he desiren to deliver unto the Lord, first he must offeren one to the Devil."

Alys pauses, just in case he wants to make some sharp retort, some defence of his too-saintly past.

The silence that follows is all the weightier for the thump of wave and wind without.

"What with Son Two set on offering his tackle on the altar of chastity, what could his progeny-poor Pa do? The answer been plain to see, by God. Nothing like the Plague to stiffen one's rod to a purpose. Wilkin'd hente himself out of Bath to avoid the Pest envenoming its foggy streets, doubtless, but he had another end in

mind withal. Which is why he galloped to Hawkesbury of all God-forgat places. He requiren an heir more than a 'prentice now. Much, much more. And he wiste just the wight to providen him one."

The answer is indeed plain. She sees it in their faces, but she also sees it will not serve to sever the story here. The conclusion must be made explicit. Yea, the more explicit the better.

She turns necromancer. She makes ventriloquy. "*Watt my friend, circumstances change. Needs change. I have took a change of heart, quod woolly Wilkin. I was there, gentils. We were all there, everichoon, even brother Dick. The Clothier looken direct at me, and yea, a spark did light in his sad sheep's eyes. Yif me your Alisoun to wife, friend Watt, says he.*"

Her audience is expecting it, but they are sweetly shocked all the same. The merchants among them – which is to say, just about all of them – make estimate of the years between suitor and pursued.

"Over twenty years between you," says the mercer.

"Nearer thirty," says the Wife. She can count as quick as any merchant-man, and this sum was totted up a goodly time ago.

"But what did your father say?" It is Cecily who asks.

"Thy grandsire? By God, he was right glad and gay. His daughter to wed a burgher, no less! Why, it overtopped any 'prenticeship by his reckoning. Wilkin wolde pay the manumission as agreed, and Pa'd keep his woolly side of the bargain, only it ne been no master's fees he bought now. It been a bleating dowry instead. Ma made some squeak about my being *still a babe*, but Pa declaren that twelve was legal marriage tender by any man's measure, and turned to the priest-to-be to back him up. Of course, *he* said yea. That was his purpose. *That was why he was in Hawksbury and nat pestilent plaguey Bath.*"

"You could have said no. You had the right."

So speaks the Parson.

Alisoun looks not at him. "I could've said *no*, eh? Oh God woot, that priestling – that paltry, play-acting canon lawyer – read me my rights, just as his tender conscience poked him to. *No one can be constrained to wed*, said he. It ne been lawful. It been an impossible. However much it take his fancy, no Pa can batter

his child into a *yea*. It'd ne stand up in the bishop's court. *You can say no, Alys. It been up to you.*"

She gives them a look, eyebrows echoing the moon.

"Well, what thinkestow, sires? Could I say no? What dostow think the midget serfling knew better – the broadside of her Pa's palm or how to make appeal in a consistory court?"

"No true priest would join an unwilling party in wedlock," the Parson says.

"No true priest? As help me God – what was it who cast me in yon position at start? Well, he were no priestling then, but, certain as harlotry and hellfire, he lust for a cassock."

The Parson answers not.

"Oh, I bethought myself of *my rights*, you mayen be sure. I bethought of Wilkin's belly and his pate too, *yea*, that above and below. I thought me of his money, my freedom, and the increasing of my skills. It ne been all black, you see. But what dostow wene a twelve-years' maid dreams of o' nights? A hoary old ram or nice young lambkin?"

She ruffles Jankyn's curls. Her lambkin jerks away.

"So you married him," says the Venetian. "And he taught you the weaving of cloth. Fine broadcloth, *non é vero?*"

She sees he is impatient. This Venetian cares not for virgin's blood nor priests who barter souls with it. The man is not titillated. He is perhaps the only one here who is not. He desires her secrets, to be sure, but not those of her bed.

Well, lap it up, lechers all.

"I held out against my Pa, gentils. I told him Wilkin'd fair squash me betwix the sheets. I was somedeel undergrown, you woot. I was shaped for the making of cloth and not of babes. Well, Pa just eyed me up and down: *if your Ma can do it, so can you*, quod he. *She's no Goliath, neither.*" Alys shrugs. "Had a point, did my Pa. The preachers sayen that Eve did bequeath us tormentrie and travail in birth. There been no avoiding the business, lest one turn dusty nun. *Yea*, like she-ewes we must each have our ram. But I was a girl, all filled of fantasy and delice. I had supped on fairy romance, and certain, if Wilkin were a knight in shining plate, well then a witch had accursed him good and thorough. So I said *no* and Pa smote me. Well sires,

dostow think that shut me up? By Christ, I quod *no* again. Pa bellowed the banns'd be read natheless. So I screamed *NO* at him and he did smite me and Dickon did laugh. But next day Dick stint laughing, 'cause Pa gat a wild, raging fever and could ne swolwen no food but it burst back up."

There is no Pest aboard this cog – at least, not to her knowledge – but it is as if Alys has just gobbled up her own innards. There is a stiffening and a shrinking, and a silence of stilled breath.

And in that gasp of quietus, she feels the surge and sway of the boat has changed. It is choppiier, the swell smacking the craft is of less size, but now multi-directional and irregular. They are nearing the sandbanks of English France.

She springs up. Distaff is flung aside, story discarded. She has had enough of it anyway.

"*Calais!*" cries she, and dashes drunkenly out of the cabin.

They follow her, if more slowly – but not the merchants for the most part. They have seen Calais a thousand times. It is no more startling a sight for them than their parish church or the dog next door. No, those who tail her out amidships are those she wants on her heels, her companions eastwards. For Jankyn, John, and Cecily, Calais is a true novelty. Alys has seen it before, but not they. This is their first slice of foreign soil, English though it officially be. Naturally it is wondrous, this drab expanse of marsh and fort. The Knight and the Quaestor arrive at the rail too, despite having blown this route before. And the Venetian? Surely he has seen this English bite of France innumerable times previous? No, this is the first test. Minotto has followed her out in the battering wind because it is *she* whom he wishes to have in view, not the grey-green dunes.

The gunwale is too high for her. It is made for sailor-men, not runtish women. She can barely peek over the ship's edge. So she kicks off her shoes. She curls her toes about the beam below the gunwale, and mounts. Now she can see over.

"Alys, get down! It's dangerous!"

"Oh peace, John. The sea ne been so vicious as all that. We made it this far, han't we? I just desiren a view. Look!" She lifts a hand to point. "There, John. See

the walls of Calais? They kept out King Ed for fast on a year. Fine, stout walls they been, and now English too.”

“Alys!”

John grabs at her waving arm. He drags it back down to the gunwale. Alys looks down likewise, then down and more down still. The world lurches. The sea tosses below, dirty dark. The sloping strakes of the cog are slimed with spray and bumpy with barnacles. Nothing is constant. Nothing is still. Nearer at hand, the ratlines holding the sail taut attach amidships. Her two small hands grip the gunwale tight.

“Calais? Is *that* it?”

Jankyn is acerbic. He does not like to be impressed, her boy. Admittedly, all one can see of the fabled prize of forty-seven are shadow-grey walls and a steeple peaking over dunes.

“It been better once you’re in, my lief. Just you lat see.”

“Calais’s marshes protect it from assault,” the Knyght declares. “Engineers may flood them at will.”

“Well, that’s all fine and fancy, but why bother to acquire a town in a swamp in the first place?” Jankyn wants to know. He gestures at the sand-dunes and waves a hand into the wind. “Well, look at it, will you? It’s cursed cold and dreary and *French*.”

The Quaestor sighs. A pointless exercise in this wind. “You must tutor your husband in matters of economy, Dame. Does he not know that without Calais Staple his woolly pocket-money would be substantially less?”

“Alys don’t sell wool at the Staple, lack-wit. She’s a clothier, not a cursed wool merchant. I know about the Staple, and a sight better than you by the sounds of it. But our Lord King could’ve put the Staple anywhere. He didn’t need to collect his customs in a stinking swamp. Christ, it doesn’t even have a proper port!”

“Certain it does, my dove,” says the Wife. She lifts a hand and points for his benefit. “Look. We just wend down that channel. It’ll lead us siker and sound to goodly quays.”

“Alys, for the love of God!”

But her Parson cannot reach her gesturing arm to clamp it to the gunwale now. Her other companions are clustering around her: Jankyn, Knyght, Quaestor, and niece. There is none too much space here between the mast, the yard-arm, sailors busy about the mainsail, and the piled bales and baggage. Even him of Venice is closer at hand than her Parson. They must jostle together for a duney view.

Other hands grab for her instead. The cog is drawing closer to the sandbanks and the sea smacks between unstill sand and ship. Alys twists to glower at those would lay hands upon her person. Are they intent to make her safe or to bid her *adieu*? In a dye-fresh instant under a too-present wind and fugitive sun, she registers their upturned faces – Jankyn who is thrust upon this pilgrimage under threat, a brigand Knyght, a Quaestor who wears his grin like a mask, a Venetian competitor in cloth, a Parson she has been prodding without mercy, and ever-constant and contained Cecily.

Alys leans away from their reaching arms, thoughts a-swirl.

And so she does not see the larger-than-usual wave approaching.

12. Pale Coast

Lord in Your Great Mercy, save her!

I can see what is coming. I foresee what is about to occur, clearer than if You had cast it before me in vision, and I can do nothing – *nothing* – to stop it.

I lunge forward. I shove through a tangle of torsos and limbs.

The ship bucks and shudders. Alys flings up one arm – the one so ill-advisedly used to indicate Calais – and tumbles like a wind-blown rose over the gunwale.

A shriek.

Is it mine? I claw the obstructing bodies aside. I hang upon the ship's rim and scan the waves below.

"Alys! Alys, where are you?"

There is nothing. No bright bobbing head, no up-flung arm. Nothing. *Her scarlet skirts are dragging her down.*

I release the railing. Lurching and staggering upon the deck, knocking into stray bodies, I wrench my cassock up. I wrestle its wind-whipped weave. My arms are ensnared. I am momentarily blinded by a swathe of wool, but I am not wholly deafened.

"Wife! Christ Almighty, you know I can't swim!" Jankyn's voice, unaccustomedly frantic.

Neither can I. Can Alisoun?

Then something that sounds distinctly like blasphemy, Venetian-style. The tones snap to English.

"Down the sails, imbecilli! Haul to! Aiuta! You, sailor – bring a rope! Signora overboard!"

My cassock is off, pilgrim sandals scuffed aside. I am down to shirt and hose. Just before I attain the edge to throw myself over, I see Sir George. He has even less fabric on than I. He is in the very act of swinging un-hosed legs over the gunwale – but he is waylaid.

“Whoa!” The Quaestor grabs the noble by his substantial and solely-shirted shoulders. “Hold hard, good Knyght!” I do not like his chances.

“The lady is in distress,” barks the excommunicate.

“That is a point to be debated, but you needn’t throw yourself in the drink to help her. You neither, Sir Parson,” Thomas tosses at me.

“You do not know she is guilty,” snaps the Knyght.

What?

“Oh, saints have mercy. Save me from Knyghts-errant. *Look!*” Thomas jabs a thumb at the flank of the cog.

We lean and crane as one hydra-headed body, and this time we do not gaze down at the sea. We follow the Quaestor’s guiding thumb instead.

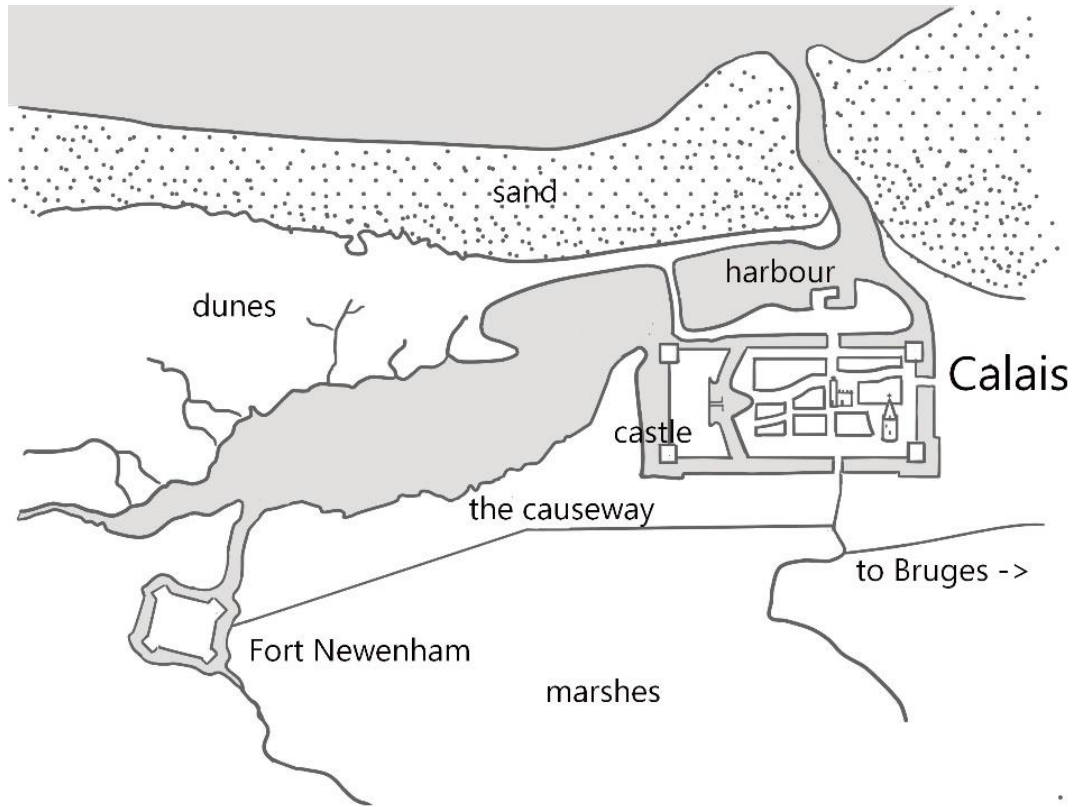
And there, caught in the ratlines that attach partway down the hull, wedged like a scarlet fish, is my mother. My daughter. My sinful Alisoun.

Her face is white, her eyes are huge, and her fingers clutch like claws. But even near-death cannot gag my Alys. She opens lips startling red against pallid skin and casts her voice like a spear aimed true.

“Well? What artow waiting for, wrecched catiffs? That I sprout wings? Fins, maybe?” She glares at us as we hang over the rail like fishermen surveying a particularly strange catch. “And justow send for a nice sailor-man to haul me up. I ne want none of you touching nary a rope.” She scrabbles her foot into a deck-drainage hole, tucks an arm more securely about the rope, and slits her eyes at us.

“One of you tried to make an end of me. I was pushed.”

13. Swamp



Here folwen some words between the Knyght and the Quaestor

A copper sun sinks beneath sand dunes. The wind hushes to a dusky whisper. And the air turns thick with life.

Midges, mostly. Fog-banks of the tiny beasts. The Knyght narrows his lids and seals his mouth and still his eyes sting with suicidal bugs. Then there are the swallows that dip and dive, and the angular flip of bats. They are feasting on minute winged demons. Christ knows, there are plenty to go around. George slaps at his neck for the hundredth time. An evil speck attacks his opposite ear. Thus the Knyght is so preoccupied in beating himself about the head that he doesn't notice the approaching figure.

"Calais is an English island in a seething French swamp, is it not Sir George?"

He so-named startles and swears.

"Christ and His angels have mercy!" the new voice continues, punctuated by slap of palm on flesh. "That old King Ed camped out in this quagmire for a year was an act of holy martyrdom. Slow death by insect bite. Lumps to beggar buboes. I ask you, is there a saint's expiry to compare?"

It is his companion from the cog, his fellow stable-snorer. A Quaestor bathed in setting sunlight. His shadow points an arrow eastwards, rippling over marsh thistles and reeds. He has approached from the north, direct from the Newenham causeway it seems.

"What are you doing here?"

The words emerge harsher than he intended. Perhaps it is in defence of his own doings.

"The Bawd is bawling for you."

The Quaestor has reached his side. The Knyght continues his squelch towards Calais. The town gates close with sun-down, and he has no wish to spend a night in this swamp. Tom matches him now, stride for stride, insect slap for slap.

"Why?"

“Oh, she has had me hunting everywhere, Sir Knyght. Yea, I have made the complete circuit of Calais. I have traversed the docks and the herring fishery. I have poked about their paltry market square and circumnavigated Calais Castle. Christ, this is a town solely peopled by soldiers and wool brokers, Sir George, and I thought it had swallowed you whole.”

George is preoccupied in watching his feet. The land about Calais seems flat from a distance, but close to, it is mole-hilled by marsh-grass, gashed by drainage ditches, and soggy with half-hidden pools. He has avoided the causeway to Fort Newenham for the sake of discretion, and now his sodden shoe-leather and bitten hide berate him for it.

“What does she want?”

His mouth is open for a mere four words, but a midge takes its chance for martyrdom. George gags and spits, but the beast is already gone – down his throat.

“Horses, Sir Knyght. Noble steeds. The Dame has spent the afternoon delivering an ear-drubbing to all Calais horse-hagglers and wishes to know whether she must also acquire a mount for you.”

The Knyght halts in his squelching towards moated Calais. He feels his companion’s eyes upon him, a question in the flex of his head, but before George can muster an answer, the insects seize upon an unmoving meal.

“Christ’s bones,” he snaps – and slaps. A half-dozen creatures are reduced to mush beneath his palm. “I need no low-born hag to buy me a mule.”

And immediately regrets his words. Not the sentiment but more its wording. A Knyght does not take his Saviour’s name in vain. Nor does he trust a too-clever pardon-peddler with his feelings concerning a Dragon. George strides on, trailing a retinue of swamp-life and Tom.

“I take that to be a no,” his companion is heard to say behind him. When the Knyght does not reply, the rearward voice continues: “If I may be so bold, Sir Knyght – how then do you propose to acquire four legs sufficient to bear you across Christendom?”

“I will find one. Why else am I out here?” the Knyght enunciates between narrowed lips, only in part not to partake of a second insect repast.

“A horse – out here?”

Sir George does not turn. He knows his companion will be scanning their surrounds, wondering what rot-footed nag George thought to find in this wet wasteland. Let him look towards Fort Newenham, if he will – to the garrison and its secure-stabled mounts.

“I will not be beholden to—” George snaps, before running out of words. “I will not be lorded over by that To—”

“To a Bawd of Bath?” the Quaestor suggests.

George pauses, turns and looks at this shadow come to haunt him in the siege-ground before Calais. Ignoring the insects that gleefully descend, he considers the man. Slender and bending as a corn-stalk, this Thomas is no fellow warrior – and yet, he may prove an ally. True, he is of low degree, but he is henchman to the Bishop of Bath and Wells, the latter verily a lord in holy orders. Besides, Thomas Quaestor has made certain intimations to Sir George before. On that first night in Glastonbury, for instance.

“Come. Let us walk, Your Lordship. I have no desire to stray into a bog at this hour, and curfew comes.” The corn-stalk takes the Knyght’s arm. It is a liberty, but the Knyght submits. They near the Bullen Gate, the over-fortified exit through the south wall of Calais. They will range within earshot of its guards all too soon.

“While I have your attention, Sir George,” the Quaestor continues, *sotto voce*. “Tell me: what do you make of the Bawd’s flight overboard?”

The Knyght slows his step. He takes in the lean, long face of his companion. There is meaning to be read in its look and its tone.

“The sea was unsettled. The woman did well to grab what she could,” the Knyght states.

“But if she’d splashed down entire ...”

The Knyght considers the Dame’s heavy red skirts, her under-sized frame, and its over-abundant padding. “She would have drowned.”

“Without doubt,” the Quaestor says. The man pauses. Some species of indecision skitters across his face. And is gone. “But *had* that happened – had that happened indeed – it occurs to me to wonder what the larger consequences might be. For you, my lord. For us both.”

The Knyght's face remains immobile. He prays that his visage, unlike his companion's, remains in dusky shadow. He says nothing.

"As I had occasion to mention before," the yellow-haired needle continues. "A certain Prior is quite insistent that I discover what sends our Dame to the Sepulchre. Odds are Dame Alisoun has the untimely death of at least one husband to her account. She has wed five, Sir George. Quite a tally, and our Prior is a full godly man. He most devoutly wishes to scour the Bawd's soul, but first he must discover what it is, precisely, that blackens it."

It occurs to the Knyght to wonder whether Prior Petrus is so assiduous over all his flock.

"Petty treason," continues the Quaestor, soft as a mosquito. "A wife is to her husband as a man is to his king. If the Bawd is treasonous, of course our goodly churchman must ensure she pays the penalty – for her soul's greater cure. There is no absolution without reparation, Sir George. I know it well. And you know as well as I the forfeiture for husband-slaying."

The Knyght does not supply the word, yet nor does he stride on with angry scorn.

"Given this penalty, my lord, it is to be considered whether the meeting of Dame Alisoun with an accident would be met with much regret by my master." Again the Quaestor pauses. "Or yours."

The Knyght *does* move at this utterance. He takes three paces before his sabatons slurp into the stinking murk and he wrenches about.

"By Christ, Quaestor, I am no assassin for hire. Observe! I cannot even afford a horse. Do I look like my scrip is weighted with blood money?"

"Shhh now, Sir George. You disturb the guards at the gate. If your scrip is so undernourished, why not take the Bawd up on her offer?"

"What offer?" he snaps.

"A horse, Sir Kynght, only a horse. The woman offers you four legs. I'm not suggesting you cuckold her husband as well. But we approach the guard-post. Let us talk of this once we are within – our Dame's accidents, that is, and not her mounting."

The Knyght finds an arm tucked through his, and his person led for inspection before the slapping, scratching guards. It is only once he is safely across the bridge and inside Calais proper that he recalls yet another circumstance.

“Where do you bed tonight, Quaestor?” he manages with some semblance of courtesy.

“What, have you need of a squire again, Sir George?” The pardon-seller grins at him with what teeters upon over-familiarity. “Why, I shall bed me wheresoever you deem fit, my lord. The Dame lodges at the Crooked Staff, hard by the Lantern Gate. I dare say it has a stable.”

14. The Pale

*if anie manner of Straunger dep^{te} the country
he must paye to the kinge
for all manner of suche goods as he carrethe w^tout the lande
the vth pennie of his goods*

Customs of the Pale

The Knyght is not here.

Alys stands in the inn-yard and looks about her. She mounts the mounting block. She stretches on tiptoe. She cranes above the horses, the humans, the heaps of baggage and trade goods. It is entirely useless. Her knyght-protector is simply not here.

Their steeds are saddled and harnessed and piled with their gear. The beasts look less than impressed with the situation. It took a deal longer than it ought, what with the inevitable misunderstandings between new nags and impatient owners. One bargain pack-beast – who'd been docile as an old ewe when they bought her – turned out to have a sharp set of teeth. It was Jankyn's backside she first exercised them upon this morning. The mare snaked her skinny neck back to clamp teeth on buttock as her husband tightened the girth securing his over-bulging bag. Jankyn's yelp and simultaneous leap backwards had set the Quaestor to bleating. Even John had smiled, but then immediately looked contrite. They have all trod rather more carefully around the mounts after that – which did not speed matters up. The assorted nags and amblers sense their caution and try what tricks they may.

Alys sympathises. She knows what it is to be ridden all unwilling.

Fellow feeling aside, it is nearly mid-morning and they are still in the Crooked Staff. Her breath comes shallow and her heart begins to skitter. They need to leave. Jerusalem calls. Calais closes in. They have been here too long. Some of those with whom they crossed the Channel have, since landing, reiterated a most sincere and pressing desire that she travel in their company. They cite her unfortunate accident aboard (in fact, overboard) ship. They declare she needs

protection. The Venetian was here only last night. Should any see her dallying, they may find it opportune to leave Calais simultaneous with her and conveniently ride beside her whether she likes it or no. And once one has journeyed a mile in company, and then stayed in the same inn or monastery overnight, why then it is harder to shake off unwanted companions than tavern fleas.

Jankyn – he of the sore backside and sorer temper – does not understand her need to travel *sans* merchants. He thinks she is being unreasoning distrustful in seeing in every trader a hidden motive.

“Why not bear the Rhineland company, at least?” he demanded their first night in Calais. “He’s harmless enough and we must pass through Cologne. The fellow knows every rut and rabbit-hole along the way *and* he’s got a couple of manservants. Wife, you need all the protection you can get.”

Meaning of course that Jankyn envisages French brigands behind every bush from here to Bruges.

“He’s a tanner, my love. He likely thinks to pick my pan on the matter of dye.”

“Cock’s bones, he don’t care about your cursed scarlet, woman. Not everyone’s as obsessed with the stuff as you.”

“What’s he bobbing to England for in the first place then, sweeting?”

“Well, certain as Hell it’s not for dye. We have to ship most of the stuff in ourselves, and Lord knows you harp on about it. The man’s a tanner, Alys. What else does he travel for but hides?”

“Then he gat no bisynesse in England, has he my love? He ne can buyen his hides direct. Our Lord King nil nat let him. Jealous of his taxes, is boy Richard. Him who wants skins must gad to Calais, just like any wight who wants wool.”

Jankyn had thrown up his hands and employed inarguable logic. “A German beer-swiller can take his pick of reasons for travel, tanner or no. Why, maybe the fellow took a pilgrimage to Glastonbury or Hailes. Maybe he was *selling* his precious leather in the West Country, not that we got any shortage of cows. Why, the fellow probably don’t know nor give a devil’s turd about the colour of your cloth. Besides, what’s he going to do – lay you on the rack and stretch you for your recipe?” He

chuckled. "Not a bad idea, come to think. You could do with a bit of stretching, my midget."

But Alys would not bend (or stretch, for that matter).

"I wol only ride with them I trust. Least, only them whose ends I've divined. Why take chance where it's nat needful?"

Jankyn had snorted. "By those lights, that ought to rule out that lank sin-sucker right away."

But he'd seen she was determined and knew better than to push his point. So he'd pushed a different point instead. He'd rolled her on her stomach on the hired and musty mattress and opened her legs instead. He saw to his needs with as much finesse as any bull on a heifer. The fact that he didn't ask her, or murmur love-talk, or even drop a kiss on her cheek in the whole procedure made him feel so much the better, she knows. Mastery.

Oh well, at least he still wants her. Perhaps it will get her with child.

And now she is restless. It is cold, lingering like lost luggage here in the inn-yard. Rain threatens. Wind whips. But, more pertinently, she is worried about what might blow in through the inn gate. A merchant on the move towards Bruges, Cologne, or worse still, Venice, just popping by to see if the helpless little Wife of Bath requires an escort after all.

They are ready. All that delays them is the Knyght.

"He's ne coming, nis he?" she says to no-one in particular.

"Who?" says the Parson.

"Of course he's coming," says Tom.

"Well, he didn't want you to buy him a horse," points out Cecily, ever reasonable. "I thought it strange. He's got precious little coin after all." Her mare stands quiet at her shoulder. What did the girl do, cast a spell upon the creature?

"It sat ill with his dignity," Jankyn declares, all gravitas, an effect somewhat marred by the necessity of keeping a weather-eye on an evil-intentioned nag. "He is a noble. You, Wife, are anything but. A serf-woman buy him a mount? Why, he may as well sell himself to the galleys and have done."

“So he’s gone?” Alys demands. “The life of a brigand calls, and be damned with damnation? To Hell with Heaven and Jerusalem go hang? God woot, next thing he’ll be robbing us on the road.”

“No, he’s coming,” says Tom.

Jankyn ignores the fellow. “Alys, what’re we going to do for a guard now?”

She eyes him, waiting for the word *Rhineland* or *Venetian* to drop from his lips. He refrains, but the words are present nevertheless.

“He’s coming, I tell you,” says the Quaestor. “Give me a moment. Let me hustle him up, good Dame.”

She looks at Long Tom. If anyone can find the fellow, it is he. It has not escaped her notice that the Quaestor has appointed himself quasi-squire to a Knyght disgraced.

“Well, get thee about it, then. Hustle!” She flaps at him like a fly. Her horse side-steps and casts her a flat-eared look.

The Quaestor hustles. He scarpers through the inn gate with the alacrity of a coney with a ferret on its tail and is off into the hubbub of Calais.

The Wife sighs. Time is a-wasting.

“Lend me your man-some hands, Jankyn. Boost me up, my popelote, and pray God this beast is better tempered than that which took a bite of your seat-bones.”

She is accordingly boosted, none too genteelly, and the others take her cue. She notes Jankyn also assists Cecily to saddle, all unprompted. Ah, there is hope for his courtesy yet. The horses take the mounting as cue to initiate jiggling and backing into their compatriots. The evil-eared packhorse lifts a back hoof at Jankyn’s sleek-and-posy bay. Her boy finds himself propelled post haste towards the inn gate, near running down a man entering from without. She thinks she recognises him. Minotto’s manservant? The Rhineland’s? Jankyn yanks on the reins with an ox-driver’s oath.

She can wait no longer.

Alys touches spur to flank and her ambler gives a startled bounce forward. *Thought I was a lightweight, by God?* Best to assert herself from the outset in any

new partnership. Keep the spurs in evidence, and one rarely needs to draw blood. And she pushes past Jankyn to lead the way into the street.

They all follow. Of course they do – they cannot help themselves. If she is surprised at one thing, it is that Sir John manages to urge his plodding mount (with much flapping of leg) up beside hers to speak urgent at her ear.

“The Quaestor, Alys! We have his mule. We cannot leave without our companion!”

“We nil nat leave him, John. He’ll catch us up.” And if he doesn’t, well, no great loss. “He gat long legs, has Long Tom – among other things – and it’ll take us a goodly while to nudge through the crowd and out the Bullen Gate.”

Sure enough, said Thomas comes a-panting up just as they approach said gate.

“Well?” she says.

But Alys does not need Tom to answer. The man droops. The fellow is quite evidently Knyghtless.

“Halt!”

The word does not emerge breathless and behind – that is, from Tom – but from in front. It is possessed of a lazy authority. Her attention is twitched from Tom.

It continues: “What purpose, gentles? What destination? Spill thy beans, show us your mercery, and pay your dues! Oh ... pilgrims.”

They have reached the guard-post. The south gate of Calais does not mark the boundary-proper of England and France, but doubtless it’s easier to patrol. It funnels them that would step from friendly territory to enemy to a manageable stream. The men who bar the Wife’s way are over-armed and under-paid officials and, she knows to her cost, them that check for dodged taxes are nothing if not thorough.

Alys reins in her horse and pats her scrip, that unmistakeable badge of pilgrimage. “That we are, good ...?”

“Sergeant,” the foremost fellow answers. He is a bear garbed in the colours of brave England. Painted lions sprawl across a barrel chest, fleur-de-lis sprinkle the mead of his belly. The fellow’s gaudy tabard merely emphasises the chain-tunic beneath. Below his kettle hat, a bramble of beard warms the greater part of a face

exposed to unkind elements. Like daylight. "Where're you headed ...?" He hesitates, notes her position at the head of their little train, takes in her rich red garb, balks at her minimal trimmings of fur and maidservants, and settles for, "... good Dame?"

"Bruges first and the Sepulchre last, worshipful sergeant." Alys smiles into blood-veined eyes and draws from the scrip her letter of license. She hands it over with fitting flourish.

... the said Dame of Bath is authorised to visit the Holy Sepulchre ...

with five companions ...

... taking with them those things without which they cannot complete the journey, but nothing else to their profit ...

... shall have passage free of tolls and taxes ...

and shall not be molested ... on pain of excommunication. Etc., etc.

Thus read the important bits, suitably Latinified. At least, that is what she is told they read. Her Parson wouldn't lie to her.

The sergeant unfolds the parchment and squints at it. Evidently the Prior's seal looks convincing enough, but the inky scribbles appear as cogent upside-down as right-way-up. Clearly, this is matter for a clerk. He beckons at a feather of a fellow peering from the guard house. The one beckoned grimaces and clutches his cloak about him with gall-stained digits.

The fluttering parchment is perused, then the clerk surveys those it refers to. Lashless eyes make calculus of companions, nags, and baggage.

"Seems in order." But the feather sounds unconvinced. He glances again at the parchment. Frowns. "Save on one point."

Brows twist below the sergeant's cap. "Well? Spit it out, boy!"

"You are one member short, Dame," says the clerk, looking direct at her.

Alys can think of any number of replies, but now is not the time. She explains in language as brief as she is able the absence of her Knyght. She does not mention those exploits on French soil that necessitate his current palmer-hood. A king's guard might easily leap to conclusions. They might be correct.

The sergeant shrugs. "Well and good, Dame. The road to Bruges is safe enough. Crawling with merchants and traders, it is. You'll not be needing a knight

for now, but you might want to find yourself a guard or two afore German lands.” He permits his clerk to scuttle back to the gatehouse and the letter to return to Alys’s scrip.

Just as Alys thinks she and hers will be waved Bruges-wards, the sergeant pauses. A thought swims across his broad cheeks. He cocks his kettled head at the horses behind.

“Hold hard, Dame. Why so many bags and barrels, pray?” He steps past her and to the sumpter beasts. “A pilgrim ought to travel light. Trust in the Lord for your daily bread. Do some suffering along the way, lest you be not palmer enough. But you, Dame, you’ve got enough baggage to warrant a caravan to Cathay. Them that travel for trade must cough up their tolls. Pilgrims pass for free, ‘cause palmers don’t bear tackle that warrants taxing. Now then, none of you reckon on muddying your precious holy pilgrimage with merchanting, do you?” The fellow whips off one glove and begins to poke at panniers and parcels.

“Hey!” Jankyn is off his rouncey in an instant. “What’re you up to?”

“And you are?”

Jankyn stands broad as he is able. “Burgher Jankyn of Bath, schooled at Oxford —”

“And mine own true husband, Sergeant,” Alisoun completes.

The sergeant eyes first husband and then Wife, his brows clambering a mountain all the while.

Alys smiles and pats her husband’s shoulder. “Jankyn my love, abroache thy baggage and show the good sergeant what’s within.” And to the official, “He’s ne ventured abroad before. I trowe he packed fresh hose for everydeel day of the week and two for holy days, the lambling.”

Jankyn scowls and lays the evidence bare, a treasury of cloth and sundries dear to her lamb’s heart. The sergeant inserts an exploratory finger and stirs it around.

“See? I am as true a pilgrim as you will find, sirrah,” declares he whose undergarments are being inspected. “Naught for sale nor sample there. Clothing, that’s all. What, would you have me walk barefoot in rags to the east?” Jankyn

buckles his bag with a purposeful yank the moment the fellow steps back. The pack-nag shows him her teeth.

The sergeant gives Jankyn's slim and colour-splashed form the once-over. Some part of the physiogamy beneath rampant facial fur twitches. "'Parently not. Well, I reckon you're a well-equipped palmer-boy and no mistake."

Alys likes not the way the fellow's eyes flick to her at that. He grins and turns his hirsute attention to the remaining pack-beasts, stamping and steaming beneath their misshapen loads.

The hog-bristle brow lights upon her barrels.

"That don't look so palmer-like, now," says he. He wanders up to them, and raps the nearer with a meaty set of knuckles. A dull thud replies that the barrel is well-filled, and with liquid. "Well? What's within?"

He looks first at her, then the rest of the party.

"Can't be wine," he says on. "English grapes make sour swill and the way you're headed you'll soon sup on sweet Rhenish gold. And them of Bruges bathe in beer. No point in carrying that neither. So?" He raps the barrel again. Harder. "What's within?"

She has had time to consider this now. No, she is not exporting Zomerset zider, Bath butterfat, nor some alchemical infusion. Despite appearances, she is not in the export business at all and her barrels contain naught but water.

What better way to conceal the truth than to tell it?

Regrettably the sergeant does not believe a dose of truth when he is served it. No, the man scents a tallage evaded. He wants of the silvery stuff.

He looks pointedly at a puddle by his feet. Then he stares up at the grey-scudding sky. "This ain't deepest Sinai, Dame. The skies piss water in Bruges same as in Bath. You don't need to carry water and you know it."

He is reaching for the bung.

"A God's mercy, lat be!"

Alys disembarks. Her skirts tangle with the saddle. Her ambler ambles, jigs, is roundly cursed. She plops down in a sample of French-English sky-piss. The sergeant's whiskers twitch again as he looks down at her – and further down, but

she forestalls any clever comment about her capacity to walk under a horse without ducking.

“Take warning, good sergeant, as you love your tender hide,” she snaps, pattering forward. “Sample what lies within and you’ll regret it!”

“You, Dame Sparrow? You offer me threat? What’ve you stowed in there – juice of the nightshade? Cockatrice blood?” And then what face is visible between cap and bristles pales. “Greek fire?”

The Wife steps up to him. Confidential.

“Worse,” says she.

The sergeant dithers between puffery and panic. He doesn’t know whether to unbung with a to-Hell-with-you flourish or to back down.

She lays a small hand on his arm. He quivers but does not withdraw. “I do warn you for your own good, sergeant dear,” she murmurs.

He bends the better to hear her. His beard near combs her hair.

“Wet thy paws with that water, sergeant love – yea, even a little finger – and thy belly will wax great, thy manly beard shed like a mule’s winter coat, and nine months later” She smiles at him full sweet. “It *is* water, worshipful sergeant. I tellen you true. But it been no ordinary drip of river or sky.” She reaches out to caress a cask. “It springs from the womb of St Win herself. It trickles in abundance by Bath. It is *woman’s* water. It granteth ... well.” She rubs her own un-great belly, and sighs. “I’m sure you wene what it granteth, dear sergeant.”

She steps back from the bear – who steps back from the barrel – and speaks loud. “These casks hold holy water, I swearen on my soul. I’ll take yon holy water to the Holy Land, and there I wol offer it on the soil that Himself trod that He may grant I go forth and multiply.”

She is speaking to all now. Jankyn has berated her for her barrels. Cecily eyes them with an expressionless expression. The Quaestor and the Knyght have whispered together. Let it be in the open.

The sergeant’s brows denote a conflict of thought. He keeps a wary distance from the barrel-nag now, but it is clear his suspicion is yet to be banished.

“Water?” he growls. “What’s wrong with phials and ampules, then? One of them lead bottles pilgrims string round their necks. Holy water or no, Dame, why’d you need so bleeding much of the stuff?”

It is a valid question. It is also one she has not rehearsed. Those who traipse abroad on pilgrimage bear as little as they are able, even of holy relics. A flask of Jordan-water. Three drops of Virgin’s milk. A smear of Catherine’s oil. She opens her mouth, but an answer does not emerge.

And the sergeant sees it does not.

“Show me this water.”

It is a command. When a man with a sword demands, one is regrettably inclined to obey.

“What?” cries Alys. “I han’t left England proper and you want me to waste my holy water?”

“A beaker-full’ll be sufficient. *If it’s as you say.*” The fellow plunks hands on hips. His sword is scabbarded not a fist’s breadth away. “Oy! You lot! Bring us an ale pot,” he yells at the guardhouse.

And it is happening. The barrel is unlashed from its unhappy transport. It is unbunged and tipped with inching care by Alys herself. She ensures no-one is near enough to jog her elbow. It quivers enough already.

And clear liquid dribbles into a wooden mug.

“There! Go on, take sup! Drink it up, and see if it ne been water,” she says, thrusting the vessel at her tormentor.

The fellow looks. He sniffs like a bear whiffing for honey but wary of bees. Alys cannot resist slopping the mug a little. Water licks its edges, and the sergeant jumps back.

The furry head swings first one way and then the other. Then, finding no apparent inspiration, turns back to her. “You drink it,” its owner demands.

“What?” Alys squeaks. “Win’s own precious water?”

The beard parts to display dubious teeth. “It’s for the good of your own innards, innit? Looks like water, but for all I know, you’re dealing in buckets of love philtre or foxy poison. *You* know what it is. *You* drink it.”

She sighs. She supposes it does not matter, not so very much. There is more. It is only a cup. Half a cup at that. She raises the beaker to her lips. It hovers there a moment.

“Go on, then. Slug it down.” The sergeant is watching her.

She slugs. She attempts not to make a face. The Lord alone knows why holy liquor must savour of old eggs and rusted iron. Her nose is at war with her will. It wants desperately to wrinkle.

She focuses within. She sees scarlet, beautiful scarlet.

“There, now.” She displays her person to the assembled soldiers. “Am I dead? Am I on Greek fire?”

“You’re not with child, neither,” mutters the sergeant, eyeing her person.

“All in good time,” coos the Wife. “I daresay even the Lord wants mine spouse to have a hand in that. He hath given us instruments to that end, nath He nat?”

She pats the sergeant on the thigh, no doubt furred like the bear beneath his leather. The fellow flinches, then stares at the damp handprint by his groin.

“Get gone, woman,” he mutters.

“So we han thy permission, sergeant?” she enquires, nice and clear.

He grunts and flaps a hastily re-gloved hand at them.

It seems she is to interpret this as assent. How like a man. Can’t go backing down before your cronies, now can you? Oh no, not if it’s to a woman.

She sees that the barrel is rebound to its mount, and that it is securely bunged. She turns to board her own steed and finds she is in possession of one item unwanted.

“Sergeant!” she calls sweet. “You forgat something.”

He turns reluctantly back, hog-bristles lowering. He has found fresh travellers to sniff for tallage and tax. No doubt he wishes her at Bruges already, profitless pain in his nether-regions that she is.

“Catch!”

She tosses the wooden beaker sergeant-wards. Dregs of miraculous water rain over him, sparkling in the fugitive sun.

They have barely crossed the moat-bridge before the Quaestor trots up to rein in his scruffy mount in the path of hers. It is a mule, mirror of that he rode from Bath.

“We must wait for Sir George,” he declares.

The Wife ambles on around him. “Yon Knyght’s suffisant big to look after himself. He wiste we were leaving. Maybe he found himself a Free Company, decided it ne been needly to traipse to the Sepulchre after all, or maybe a pilgrim party to pay for the pleasance of his fine company.”

Tom’s brow crinkles. “No. He’s coming. We must wait.”

“Wait if you leste then, Quaestor. The Prior bound me to take you with me, but that ne means I can force you along.”

“You won’t pause?”

“That I nil nat. We gat places to be, and who woot what pond slime will crawl up this road if we stand here like geese by the way?”

A thinking look nudges his anxious expression aside. “But why the hurry, Dame? The Sepulchre’s not going anywhere.”

“Time been money, Quaestor,” the Wife snaps. “And the longer I bide on this road, the more my sins sag on my soul. If I let every sluggard stint me on the way, I’ll be older than Elizabeth before she gave birth.”

And there is a Venetian to avoid. Yea, him who looks too close at my cloth and too curious at my baggage. She jerks her head eastwards and rides on. The others follow – even Tom, grudgingly.

The wind rushes over flat farmland and seawards dunes. It carries spits of rain in its teeth. It blows them eastwards, towards muddy Gravelines and then beyond, further east still. Flanders beckons. They will cross out of the Pale this day. They are about to leave England. She prays there is no further checkpoint nor customs guards. The road east continues straight, mostly, and is surprisingly little-rutted for such a well-trodden way. There are no hills for it to wind around, just flat Calais fields plucked from the marsh. Folk with their heads bent into the wind pass in the opposite direction, on foot, on nag, or trundling in ox-cart. Time drags. Wind chills.

And so it is almost with gratitude that the Wife finds the Quaestor alongside her again. He looks at her, and his mouth opens.

She saves him the bother of producing sound.

“Nope. I’m nat lingering for thy Knyght.”

The Quaestor spreads his hands. “Your pilgrimage, Dame, your choice. As such I am resigned, if a little ... apprehensive. I merely point out the advantage in retaining a guard-dog at no dent to your purse. Where will you find another man so pretty with a sword at so small a cost?”

Her mouth twitches.

“Pretty. Certain, I can see he moote appeal to some.”

“But that is not my present purpose, Dame Alys. I would look forward now, rather than back.”

She notes his swift turnabout. Her twitch twitches into a smile.

“Well?” says she.

The fellow adjusts himself on that creaking saddle again. It seems she is too direct. He must accustom his bony rear to a fresh angle. They ride on, and at last he settles upon a sentence.

“You’ve been to Jerusalem before.”

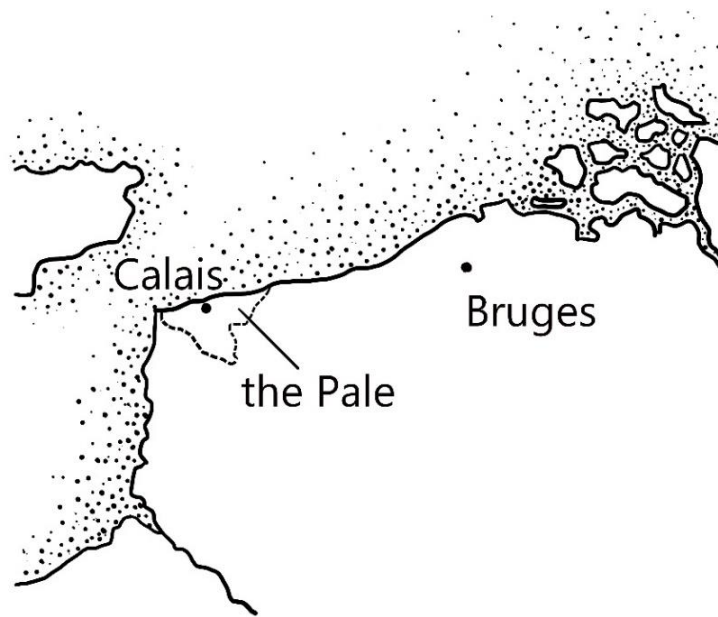
Ah. Here it comes. Whether Long Tom is as innocent as the day he was born – which is still more culpable than most – or the fellow has purpose more nefarious, it had to come. The Question. *Why, WHY, why?* In fact, she is surprised it has not arrived before.

She glances back. Her Parson rides within earshot. Lord, but he looks uncomfortable aboard a nag. He sits in his sackcloth like an ill-filled bag of corn. Strange. Put John on solid soil and her priest commands the earth with manly strides. Aboard a horse and he is a mere babe.

Further back (and out of hearing), Jankyn and Cecily plod by the packhorses. Alys’s expression softens. Her poor boy. Likely he still feels jittery about the violation of his hose. He comforts himself with their proximity.

She has taken stock of her audience. It is time to feed curious Tom.

15. Eastwards



Now shaltow understand what is bihovely and necessarie to verry parfit penitence.

And this stant on thre thynges:

contricioun of herte, confessioun of mouth, and satisfaccioun

The Parson's Tale

"You've been sniffing about me, Quaestor. You've been a-digging the dirt on this Wife. Now why wolde that be?"

She eyes him direct, but the fellow merely grins.

"Folk gossip," says he. "And your name is nosed about more than most. Call it professional curiosity. No, call it kindly foresight that I may be of service. Why, folk *pay* me for the scrubbing of their soul, and I serve them best when I wring out as much as I may. A thorough cleansing. Why remove only half the grime? Indulgences, dear Dame. Confession. The shriving of sins. I am a dealer in dirt, Dame Alys. I merely engaged upon research that I may bathe best the souls of my fellow travellers should they desire."

"A quaestor has no power to shrive." It is John. His horse has plodded closer. "Pardoners cannot pardon, they pass out the bishop's indulgence merely, and only *after* a priest has heard and shriven the payer of sin."

His tone is severe. Alys hides a smile. It is rare she sees the lion that lurks behind her lamb.

"Oh truly, Sir John, it is a false quaestor who claims he can wipe away sin. Only one consecrated has the keys to bind and loose." He of yellow hair (currently hooded with motley) pauses with portention. "In the *usual* run of things."

"State your meaning, Quaestor."

"Why, simply that Bishop Harewell granted me dispensation, sir priest," says Long Tom.

She glances at John. His virginal blue eyes have acquired a steely cast. "You *claim* to have dispensation to take confession, Thomas of Rouncivale?" says he.

"I make no claims. I deal in verities alone, worthy Parson. You will recall that, in the extremity when the Pestilence first struck, Bishop Ralph, he of Shrewsbury, made proclamation that anyone – *anyone* baptised of Christ – might take another's

dying confession that they may go shriven to the grave. In fact, I dare say you recall this rather well.”

“That was only in the absence of a priest,” says John stiffly.

“For all the priests and friars were dead or fled,” finishes Tom. “Well, Bishop Ralph, he set a precedent. Or revived one, more like. And now the current bishop likewise finds it convenient – on firm grounding from Holy Writ, may I add – to return to the example of the Apostles.”

“You speak in riddles, Quaestor. Do you assert that His Excellency, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, permits you to hear confession?”

“I do.”

“There must be proof. A writ of dispensation. The bishop’s seal. This is no light matter, Thomas. Men’s souls rest in the balance.”

“Women’s too,” the Wife inserts.

“You shall have your proof,” the Quaestor says. “Have patience, good Parson. You shall see it anon. I do not expose it to this wind and weather. Who knows what seagull might shit on it. But you don’t answer my question, Dame.”

“Ha! You been the one under inquisition, Quaestor!” But she is just goading him. It suits her well enough to send this lank hound sniffing down the wrong trail entire. Obstruct him a little, and he will be all the more eager.

“You recall my question about Jerusalem, good Dame?”

“I trowe you woot the answer to that one already. Certain, I’ve journeyed to Jerusalem before. There now, Tom-boy. Artow satisfied?”

Tom pushes some stray strands from an under-satisfied face.

“My question is more in the nature of *why*,” says he. “What compels you to the Holy Land a second tiresome time, good Dame? True, I hear your pockets are deep, but that is no reason to spend the pennies within.”

“What? Thy gossips forgot to inform thee? Go on, Tom-Tom. If they gabbed that I’m going, then certain they gave thee a reason or three. Spill it! What hastow heard?”

He shrugs spare shoulders. “That Dame Alisoun is wonderful pious, ever coughing up coin at the offertory of St Michael’s. And that she has sinned. Yea, she has sinned her way through full five husbands. Folk begin to wonder whether she

must sail to the Sepulchre for each.” The fellow watches her close. He is all smiles. Tom shrugs again, as if to shrug off observance. “But gossip is not certainty, Dame. Heaven forbid I do you an injustice. I would hear the truth direct from you.”

She grins back. Oh, she spreads her sun-beams around – on Tom, John, Cecily, and Jankyn. For they are all listening, a manifest stillness despite their forward-ambling mounts.

“Oh, I journey for my sins. Dostow doubt it, Quaestor? By God, you’ve indulged so many you can scent the stuff by now. Sniffle, sniff, sniff – what sweet iniquity dostow snuff on me, Quaestor-man? Oh, I have sinned, I’ve sinned full foul and so the Good Lord hath cursed me with default of child. No babe, no brawling brat to bequeath my coin, and it’s ne for want of trying, lat me assure. God woot, we try day and night, do we not, Jankyn my lief?” She lobs he in question a loving leer, then straightway fires back at her attacker. “But tell me true, what sins do *you* drag to the Sepulchre, Tommy-boy? For certain, yon Prior ne sent you a-palmering for thy lambkin-white soul. Here’s how the bisynesse stands: I’ll trade you – a sin for a sin. Yea, I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours. You bargain with a merchant-woman. I want none of thy cheap indulgences, I’ll take thy full costly crimes for swap instead. What’s a pardoner of sins done that he must gad all the way to the Sepulchre, eh? Certain, it been no ordinary evil to boot you from Bath. So tell it me, Tom: what does pious Petrus have over you?”

His head jerks up. The motley hood slips back. The man’s hair wisps before him in the wind. “I offend you, Dame. Forgive me,” he says stiffly. “You have accepted me into your party. We all have our sins. Why else do we travel? I am unmannerly to pry so public into yours.”

She laughs. “Meaning you’ll ne favour me with an answer, by God? Well, right as you leste.”

And she angles her head and considers the fellow, caring not that he squirms. It seems that Tom-Tom has just exposed himself. Saints above, she had thought him more subtle than that. The Prior sends this embodiment of Avarice on the most costly pilgrimage of them all and how does Tom Quaestor seek to fund his trip? Why, squeeze a much-married Dame for sin, it seems. Enough evidence of

iniquity, and he'll think to bleed her for endless pennies of indulgence. But why did the *Prior* send him? She smiles. Perhaps she has an inkling.

And now she has an inkling of something else too. An idea. Her grin grows. After all, she has begun already. To continue her tale would be to entertain, to shorten the way, and to distract them that pester her most neatly from her purpose. She can tell them what she will.

She reaches over to pat him upon a cheek strangely smooth. Certain, if the creature achieves it by shaving, she would like to borrow his blade.

"Oh, ne mind me, Tom Quaestor. You yearn to hear what senden me to the Sepulchre, you say? Well, I'll serve you a free taste. A sweet sip of sin. Yea, the first dish of a fulsome great feast to come. But hearken you well, you'll getten no more of me lest you dish up some of thine own. Have we a deal, Long Tom?"

His cheek distances itself from her palm. His expression is as hedged about as a canon lawyer's curse. He mutters some phrase that may be a *maybe*.

So she continues. She gives him no space to reflect.

"Say sooth, to tellen *all* my sins'd be a fair tale and no mistake. Or perhaps it'd be a fair-y tale. No, it been a drawling long epic and a fabliau all knit into one, and I tellen you plain: it been no listening for the frail of heart. It'll take a deal of telling too. Days in the saddle, no less. Likely more. But rest easy, Long Tom, I requiren no such geste from you."

The Quaestor's eyes narrow. The fellow sniffs a rat instead of a juicy great haunch to set his teeth to. He is offered his desire but it comes at a cost.

"There is a quantity of road before Jerusalem," he says, his look warring between caution and hunger. "I for one have no objection to hearing what put you on it, Dame, even if only a sample. For myself, though, I make no promises."

"Well, *you* mayn't object, Quaestor, but of a certainty I do!" the other blonde bursts forth. "Christ above, man, have you no idea what you ask? The woman's a jabbering pye, she's a wittering tit. She can't stick to a story to save her life. And I give you warning, Quaestor, she'll singe your very ear-hairs with the doings of her bed."

The Wife eyes her husband. No doubt he worries that his role in that bed will assist in the singeing. But Jankyn is not yet finished.

“I object, Quaestor. I object most strenuously.” (Indeed, Jankyn is most accomplished in objecting.) “I have no desire, none at all, to lay bare my ears to such violence as you invite my Wife to subject them to. Hear me when I speak with saintly Paul: *Let the woman sit in silence with all subjection.*”

Which of course is one of Jankyn’s favourite quotes. He wheels it out regular as a cart to market and changes the verb to suit the situation.

“Well, I’m ne forcing thine ears to flap, my doveling,” she retorts. “If you ne desiren to hear, well, you moote ride at a distance. Won’t take much, what with this wind and horse-racket. Ne deny a poor Quaestor his japes.”

Her husband snorts and mutters some saw about disobedient wives. Likewise, it is clear the Quaestor knows not quite what to say. He is caught between offending one companion and seeming too eager for dirt on another. *God above, but the fellow is ravening eager.*

Her other companions too look, well ... intent. Cecily and John, that is. Jankyn yanks his horse’s head about and spurs pointedly back to the sumpters, but her niece and step-son make no move to move. They will not admit an appetite for her tale, no indeed, but she reads it there nonetheless, shielded though it be behind carefully-composed miens.

“Well, Quaestor?” She breaks a silence somewhat protracted. “Dostow want it then? I make no promise to be short, but details shaltow have in full. The dirt. The blood. Yea, the whole bleeding history that steers me to the Sepulchre.”

Tom Quaestor shrugs, but Alys sees the matter plain. Such seeming insouciance does not curtain his desire. Of course he wants it. He is a dealer in iniquity by nature and profession. It is the very reason he is here. That, and whatever foul sin has prodded him on pilgrimage – prodded him by means of the Prior, that is. But she will not *pay* this sly fellow for indulgence, nor does she fancy the efficacy of his absolution. They say the sin of the shriver effects not his shriving, but why take the chance? Yet Tom will not trust her telling if she demand nothing in return. No clothier sells her merchandise for free.

So she will trade confession for confession, and thus keep the scales of sin balanced – and those she travels with entirely off-balance.

16. Heere continues the Wyves Tale

*For lordynges, sith I twelve yeer was of age,
Ythanked be God that is eterne on lyve,
Housbondes at chirche door I have had fyve.*

The Wife's Prologue

"So where was I in my telling – before I was stint by being tipped overboard? Which, by the by, I ne been so sure weren't down to you, Thomas Quaestor." Alys twists in her ambling to eye the fellow sharp. "Well? Dostow *want* to make pilgrimage, or wertow pushed? And maybe you reasoned a little push on my posterior'd let you paddle home to merry England and get back to pardoning instead of pilgriming."

The yellow-hair looks horrified – but is it truth or trickery? Is it because his purpose is revealed or that he is reviled?

Words follow splutteringly: "Good Dame, you fell. No-one pushed you, least of all me."

"Oh, I woot well enow when I been pushed, Tom. Dostow think I mistake the purpose of hands on my person?"

The Quaestor-man's eyes are in danger of dropping out of his head entire. "The Bishop sends me to the Sepulchre for my sins, good Dame," he protests. "I desire most devoutly to be cleansed. I do not muddy my soul's cure with murder."

"You think you are threatened, Aunt?" Cecily leans towards her, expression concentrated. Even in this wind, her hair is neat. Contained.

Alisoun shrugs. "This been my pilgrimage, yet it been hung about by companions not of my choosing and events not of my weaving. Perhaps we been well rid of our Knyght and, certain, I desiren no more over-friendly Venetians ..."

"I will watch over you, dear daughter."

Her John is quite in earnest. His jaw – clean-shaven as befits a priest – is firm, and the wind has whipped colour into his cheek. She recalls his de-cassocked state when she was hauled back on ship, his willingness to dive into the deep. For her. So too she recalls his willingness to sacrifice her on the altar of his father's bed.

“Oh wiltow, Sir John? Over thy *daughter*, by God?”

“My daughter-in-spirit. As chaplain to this party, as thy parish priest, I must guide your soul as a father his child. This thou knowest—”

“But I was saying of sin,” she rides over him. “Yea, the verray stuff which senden me to the Sepulchre. I was telling of the babe-hood of all my woe in marriage. I’d passed but twelve year on life, my pignseys, and my dear Pa – him who hoped to wed me off to one randy old clothier ram – had just acquirin the Plague. Now there’s a lightning bolt from the Almighty if ever there been.”

It is as if at that moment Sir John’s horse has reached the end of its oats. The sag-necked creature droops and slows to a crawl. Within the space of a few hoofbeats, her Parson’s mount is keeping company with lagging Jankyn and the packhorses. Cecily prods her mare forward so she is close by her Aunt again. Thus the party is rearranged and those agog for a story have their ears primed.

Her Parson knows what is coming. He prefers to hearken to horses fart and Jankyn carp – which amounts to much the same thing.

“Hastow witnessed the capers of Madam Pestilencia, my pigeons? Course you have. Them that fall for her don’t all follow the same route, though. Some die in a day, but most take a deal longer. A week, maybe, to cough and puke and sweat and bleed, each to his own. Well, my Pa were the first I’d seen at close hand and I took a while to twig. But nat Dickon, by God. One peek at the bubble on my poor Pa’s neck and brother Dick been up and gone. I heard him slinging his stuff together, well before dawn. I bethought he was just herding the sheep afield a few days. Seek out fresh grass. God woot there was little enough about Hawkesbury that season. It ne stint raining the first part of the year and the grass ne wolde grow for water.”

“Well, that’s what he *did* do, isn’t it?” says Cecily.

“What? Your Pa the kindly shepherd scuttled to greener grass for the good of all? And with all we owned?”

“He came back.”

Alys snorts. “Yea, thy Pa came back, but nat in a handful of days. Nor weeks neither. *Months*. It were months before we laid eye on Dickon again, girl. We

thought he had burst the mother of all buboes and cast up his ghost on the Wolds. We thought our fine flock were scattered far and wide and their shepherd's bones picked clean by crows, we did. And by *we*, I mean us womenfolk. Ma and me. Pa were in no state to worry. He ne lingered long enough. Couldn't keep down his ale, couldn't keep down his potage, and before the week was out he'd lost a-hold of his life too."

Alys pinches the skin at her throat.

"It was the bubo that did for him," she murmurs. "Fair choked him to death, it did. Right here on the neck. A lumping great pus-y ball that just grew and grew and fair sucked the soul out of him. I wanted to knife it. I was all set to shove a nice sharp blade in it – let the cursed stuff out – but Ma'd ne hear none of it."

Her voice sank lower.

"I loved him, I did. My Pa. Yea, him who bartered me off to a fat clothier. But everyone maken mistakes, God woot. I could've changed his mind had he lived. After all, according to yon theologian –" She jerks a thumb at the Parson, now riding at the very rear. "– no-one can constrain you to wed 'gainst your will. Not even my Pa."

She is silent a moment. She sees the Quaestor shift yet again in his bargain saddle. Is the leather pinching his skinny balls or does the man grow impatient?

"He died," she murmurs. "And a fair crop of our neighbours too. And did we getten a glimpse of Dickon at the burying? Not likely. He's full wrecched about anything beyond ordinary – sickness, maiming, *shortness*, even colour. You name it, my lieve brother's leery of it. Behold how he was with the Pest. I wene he perched on the loneliest hill in the Wolds and abode there 'til the dying had died down."

"Did you ask him?" asks Cecily.

Alys eyes the girl. She doesn't seem to have taken umbrage, but you can never tell with Cecily. She's too almighty contained, unbreached heifer that she is.

Alys smiles. Containment is overrated.

"Ne got the chance. By the time dear Dick'd done resurrecting, I been in Bath. Ne espied him much after that neither, praise God, and when we do come eye-to-eye (or mine eye to his woolly chest, more like), we speak on what concerns us now, nat the stuff of years past. Wool been all our discourse, my dear.

He must offer his wool to me first, even now – just as old Pa set on parchment before the Pest had him.”

Thomas squirms again. God in Heaven, but the leather must be chafing him. The Wife is tickled by a thought. With all this abrading, might the Quaestor’s man-parts be severed entire?

“But your *sin*, good Dame,” says he in dire danger of eunuch-hood. “We hear of your sibling’s sins, but not a cat’s whisker of yours.”

“Oh, we’ll come on my sins eftsoon, dread it not. You lust after mine iniquity, Quaestor. Well, never claim I nil nat cater to lust, once in a while. But first, a little more of others’ dirt.”

The Quaestor sighs. It is a gesture full dramatic. He waves his hand wearily that she continue.

“Pa died. We sunk him in the earth and we let drip some tears. Then we set about nat joining him before the winter was out. We ne had no desire for Skeleton Death, Ma and I, but He were surely wooing us.”

She glances at her niece.

“See, Dickon’d took the sheep, every last one of them. The corn – not being quick to swim – had drowned in the strips before ever it could set grain. So we’ve a winter of bugger-all corn, no wrecched meat (for it had trotted off), and Dame Pestilencia huffing her foul breath up and down our lane. Then throw in the death dues – old Barto the Reeve ne been backward in coming forward – and, in case we ne been pressed enough, what wenestow old Barto throws at us next?”

No-one answers. They want her to do the telling, not them.

“Well Bart ambles up on his donkey and gives us notice. *A widow and her girl child*, says he. *Time to shuffle on. You got no need of a fine roomy cott, two feeble females like you. Your husband’s a-mouldering, his son-n-heir’s gone – likely mouldering too – and your girl’ll marry ere long. Time to bitake your arses out*, declares our charitable Reeve. *But where will we live?* cries Ma. *Oh, you can abide in Mother Meg’s down the way*, says Bart. Yea, it been all of one little room and no window and, God knows, namoore than a sty. *She’s dwelt snug in the churchyard these past weeks*, says he. *Why, if you can rustle up the coin, then Meg’s hut is*

yours. Your Watt was flush with silver, I hear tell. Reckon you can pay the dues and the rent alright. Come to think of it, I want the lot in advance."

All smile is blown from her face. Alys is back in the grim days – the damp dark days of a winter set adrift amidst mourning, hollow hunger, and horror. The days when they wondered if the world was about to end. If the Plague didn't kill them, then famine would. Their little coin was swallowed by death dues – for an heir not there. There was no fabled silver. What there had been had either padded the manorial funds – obligatory cut of a non-existent harvest – or was spent on supplies. Payment for the wool-clip might be delayed a year or more. Wilkin owed them for this year's, and another merchant the last.

But of course the Reeve believed none of it. He thought it all bluff.

"We told him we ne had it. He just wiggled his eyebrows and spake: *No rent, no roof*. But he said he'd give us a bit of time – 'til Plough Monday, namoore than a week, the niggard gnof. We moote bide in our cott 'til then. Reckon he thought we had to set spade to soil and unearth a pot of the glinting stuff. He ne wanted to boot us out 'til we'd dug it up, by God."

She twists in the saddle to give Cess another look, but the wind catches her hat. Alys shoves it back down and angles it against the gale. It is a goodly size – near as broad as her absent knight's shield – and certain, she needs it. A day in even this wambling sun will turn her cheeks as scarlet as her skirt. Besides, it is a sail to propel a Wife ever eastwards.

"What we needed, and that anon, was Dickon. Him and his woolly friends. Show the Reeve we had a man to take governance of us – whatever cursed use that might prove to be – and the herd to convert to coin if needful, and we'd keep the cott and our strips. Course we ne knew if Dickon be living or dead. Even if he were still drawing breath, he could've lost the sheep, or he might be midway to Scottish-land – or Sodom for all we knew. Still, he were our only hope, far as I could spy. So I told Ma I was off to seek the ugly wight, him and his bleaters."

She looks around at her listeners – a Quaestor to one side and maid on the other. Their horses move with hers, so close their tail-hairs tangle in the westerly gusts. They hearken to her tale with seeming dispassion, but she is not fooled. Their bodies angle to catch her words from the wind.

“Babes, the both of you,” she declares. “You weren’t there, them dawning days of forty-nine. You ne maundered upon roads that had no living soul along them. You ne saw beasts a-wandering wild and untended, kine, pigs, mongrels, and yea, sheep. Pigs’ll bite a babe clean out of its cradle, I say sooth. That week I rouled abroad a-seeking brother Dick I were in fear and quaking of my life. I bore a stick full longer than myself for the beating off of hounds and men. Just as well I met none of the latter – but nor did I meet with wrecched Dickon.”

“So whan my week was up, I crawled back home – but I ne crawled with empty hands, Christ forbid. All them sheep and kine wandering without shepherd, by God, it were a piteous shame. So I rescued some. Five scruffy skeletons my Pa’d have thrown out of his flock soon as look at them. I drove them back home. Why, five sheep can keep body and soul together for a winter or pay the rent on a hovel a good while. I ne found Dickon, and I was half-starved and froze withal, but I’d stumbled on a solution for the while.”

Alys draws deep breath. The air is flavoured with damp manure. It is a taste to recall that day of driving five sheep home – and all the empty-headed hunger and sad triumph of it.

“And then I got back and found my solution were worth namoore than a turd. Wilkin was there with my Ma – and the wrecched Reeve. And bitwix the three of hem they’d knit up an arrangement that suited them full well – and every last scrap of their pretty plan hung on twelve-year-old me.”

She looks at Cecily. “I trowe you can guess their intent.”

The maid’s expression remains a careful blank.

“The worst of it was, I nolde not refuse. It was wed Wilkin all willing or be roofless and starve. Five scruffy sheep weren’t changing the Reeve’s mind, not whan he had a clothier offering good coin to hold the cott ‘til we were siker Dickon were dead. So I look at old Wilkin o’ Bath. I see the lust in his little eyes – oh, I was the verray embodiment of lust, doubtless, draggled from a week on the Wolds. He looked at me and saw sweet nights bitwix the sheets, the making of an heir, and a ‘prentice with magic finger-wands all in one. Oh, and if Dickon ever turned up again, why he’d have the finest wool in the West withal. I was worth the handful of coins he tossed to the Reeve, yea, them and tenfold more.”

A squeal of indignant horse, and Jankyn spurs up, his mount but marginally in control.

“Gabbing time’s up,” he snaps. “We’re near out of the Pale. See, the guardhouse lies ahead.”

“Nis it nat wonderful how a tale makes time flap along?” She peers ahead. “Oh hush, my clerkling. We gat space for a little more yet.”

Upon which she dives back in, never waiting for Jankyn to make himself scarce.

“Well, Wilkin demanden we wed straightaway. By Christ, the quicker he got to ploughing his new field, the sooner he’d reap a crop.”

Cecily is looking affronted.

“What about the banns?”

“What, and dally more days? And where might we finden a priest, what with him of Hawkesbury dead and dug and his chaplain scampered? No, nieceling, there been no three banns on three holy days. No priest making mutter, no veiling of the hand, no dawdling under church door, and God woot there been no blessing of the marriage bower. I only gat a wedding ring all wetted with holy water for the priest-son in Bath had dunked it all ready.”

“But you’ve had five husbands *at church door*, Aunt. You told me. I recall it clear.”

Alys shrugs. “The fancy stuff came later, once we got to Bath. Church door and all. But the real wedding befell in my Pa’s cott that same day.” She jerks her head. “Sir John’d tell you, if he were ne acting like I been elf-swapped – the only office needly for marriage is that woman and man say three words bitwix themselves – *I take thee*. That’s suffisant, but just to firm up the bargain, Wilkin stuck his ring on my finger withal. Proof of ownership, by God. Well, the wrecched thing would fall off so soon as I wiped my arse, so loose it was on me. So much for the owning.”

For Alys cannot be owned – at least, not for long.

“And *now* cometh the sin, Sir Quaestor,” she announces. “The stuff you’ve been slaving for, man. Well? Artow ripe and ready for it?”

She sees the fellow blink, then look away to conceal his blinking.

“God above, Alys!” Jankyn declares. “Consummation’s not a sin. It’s a cursed sacrament, you stupid hind.”

“Marriage is the sacrament, not what may or may not follow abed,” corrects their straw-haired expert in iniquity. “Nevertheless, concourse between a husband and wife is lawful and good, *so long as* its end be procreation and not pleasure.”

“Aunt, if you plan to tell us of your doings in the bedchamber—”

“Artow abashed, my Cecily, and you so pured and unpoked? Consider it learning, girl. I nolde not want you so ill-taught as I.”

No further protests. Her listeners wear shoulders stiff, grimaces scarring cheeks and brow. They are bracing themselves, but they do not run away – no, not like her Parson. Alys smiles. They *want* to know. They would never admit it, but husband, niece, and Quaestor are agog for bedroom detail.

“So we were wed,” says she. “We’d clept the words, now we moote do the deed. Oh, I had a notion what was coming. I ne been blind nor deaf. I’d seen the rams at it on their ewe-wives. I’d heard my Ma and Pa a-creaking of an evening. I’d happened upon shepherds and their shepherdesses playing at sheep on the Wolds. Doubtless you’ve seen that and more, eh niece? I was but twelve. You’ve had beyond twice that to look about you.”

Cecily does not reply. Her head is averted. Her ears are not.

“My Ma gave up her bed for the occasion. Good of her, eh? There been no Pa to share it with, God woot, and there was no way my little nest’d encompass a Wilkin within it. You’ll recall the bedchamber lies above, Cess. A full snug and cosy loft. Of a usual I slept below with Dickon – when the wrecched thing was home. Reckon you slept there too, niece, as a youngling. Well, my Ma led me up the ladder. She undressed me tender and tucked me to bed. And when I quaked bitwix the covers, she hente me by the shoulders and made me quake some more. Then she spake a thing most prophetic: *Blood betokeneth gold, quod she. Yea, though all your bed be full of verray blood, it will do you good.* And with that comfort, she clambered back down and waved old Wilkin up.”

She shrugs, as if remembrance of the scene affects her not at all. “He’d brought some wine with him from Bath, had Wilkin. He’d downed a good part of it aforehand and he ne been too steady as he lumped himself up that ladder, full

sooth. Well, I'd sucked a draught of the red stuff too, in toast of my joining. First wine I'd ever tasted and it ne been the last, I tell you true. It yaf me a drop of courage, but it were needly to be near senseless to greet him who owned me now without a whimper."

"What, Wife?" Jankyn says. "Never tell me you were frightened. I won't believe it. Why, I reckon Wilkin was quivering, not you."

"Dostow nat recall how it is to be twelve, husband?" She speaks softly but weighs her words with meaning for him alone. "Dostow ne recall how it been when another's body's seems a mystery deep as the Holy Book itself? And when your own is the property of another?"

Eyes of sky widen and Jankyn recoils – before he recollects himself, and the presence of others. By God, it is well to remember how it is when we are young. How the world is so fearsome when we have so little power.

"So Wilkin plunks himself down on the edge of our bed and begins to shuffle off shoes and peel hose. He even makes a play at some small talk, which were as bees a-buzzing about the honeypot for all I comprehended hem –"

"Oh Christ, spare us the details, Wife. Next you'll give us the precise measure of his nether-purse."

"Certain, and that'd have you full fretted, my dove," she retorts. "But right as you leste. To the thrust of the matter, by God."

"Aunt!"

"That description alone constitutes a sin, Dame," the Quaestor says with sardonic brow. "Especially when the sayer takes over-much pleasure in the saying. But, sweet St Stephen, don't let it stop you. Never fear. Say on. I'll do a bargain rate on a pardon, I will. Just for you."

"You can purvey your precious pardons to your arse, Quaestor," she snaps. She must press on. The end is in sight. *Blood betokenth gold*. "And then Wilkin downs his hose and unpacks his sely instrument and my jaw fair comes ajar."

Jankyn snorts. "I'll bet it did. Well hung, was he?"

"It was ne in no wonderment, my loveling. I had no taste for a man's harness then. Why, I had no tackle to comparen it to – not like now. Oh no, it been in pure and holy terror."

Alys glances most casually forward – again. Surely they are nearly arrived? (They are already past Oye, the eastern-most fort of the Pale. She has been told there is but one river left to cross.) And she smiles at what she sights. A heavenly hovel! There indeed, a hut not an arrow-shot distant crouching squat upon the flat road. Something that might with generosity might be called a river curls beyond. A pennon of fleur-de-lis and three lions gules (yea, another word for red) snaps most incongruous from the hut’s reedy thatch. This noble station is the border post. Her wind-blown ride through Pale England nears its end. Soon they will step into Flanders and the journey will truly begin.

Her Parson must consider himself safe, for he has urged his slow-poke level with his companions at long last.

“Aunt, your tale is best ended here,” Cecily says, a note of incongruent urgency in her voice.

“What? And not hear how the Wife of Bath began her career?” says Jankyn. “Alisoun – afraid? Can you imagine it, maiden?”

“Afraid of what?” asks John.

Alys turns to him. She ignores the nearing guard post and shines full attention on her priest. “Why, of the marital bed and of thy father in it, dear John.”

And he has the look of a leveret, startle-eyed and still.

“Aunt, we are nearly there,” Cecily presses.

Alys observes her niece. Now this is interesting. Is the wench so skittish all of a sudden?

“Believe or disbelieve as you leste – at end it ne mattered one whit to mine espoused,” she says with all calmness. “The man needed a fresh crop of heirs, and mine office been to provide them. The last remaining flesh-of-his-flesh was Hell bent on eunuch-hood and wol wed himself to Holy Church. Wilkin was in need of sprogs, and he wiste full well he were no spring lamb.”

“Alys,” the Parson whispers.

She turns on him.

“What, my son? *My sweet and sely son-by-marriage*. You woot why your sire wedded me. You yaf him leave. God above, you could have stint it had you cared

one goat. So ne come the bashful virgin with me, sir priest. Lap it up, for it been of your own design.”

John straightens. His features grey as if some part of him turns to stone. A little piece of her twists. She thought she was past blaming him. She has beaten him over his poor tonsured head long and hard enough for it. They have been friends these past years – yea, more than friends. She’d thought she’d forgiven him, but apparently it is not so.

No, it is this storytelling that does it, this dredging of muck from the deep past. It stirs up old ills, old sins too. But that is the verray point, nis it nat? She must weave a fabric of old, cold sins to cover the new.

And they arrive.

“Declare yourself!” a guard barks in accents of barbarous Welsh.

Alys reins in.

“You see before you one sinful Wife of Bath and them that travel with her – to wit, one husband, one maidservant, one chaplain, and one Quaestor,” declares the last-mentioned.

The use of their tongues seems to have escaped the others – herself included.

“What merchandise?”

Alys’s lungs turn to lead.

“Oh no, friend guard,” Tom witters on. “Observe my scrip. We are pilgrims merely. Discover your letter of license, Dame Alys. Show it forth! See?” The Quaestor cranes to read her episcopal pass, reaching forth a finger. She could kiss it. “*Ad Sanctum Sepulchrum. Hierusalem.* Take a look for yourself, honoured sir.”

She very much doubts the soldier can read, but she surrenders the parchment as prompted. She cannot read it either – beyond cognising her own name – but her Parson has sounded it out for her, Latin into English.

The guard looks not at the squiggles but the blotch of wax below. He grunts. He gestures at the packhorses.

“Over much baggage for a simple pilgrimage, I reckon.”

Oh sweet Heaven above, not again. Please God, no more banging on barrels and spilling their precious substance upon profane soil. The Welshman approaches the packhorse in question. It shifts from hoof to hoof beneath its barrel-load. The guard's face shapes a query.

And just when Alys is girding her loins to do battle with border guards a second time in one day, her unlikely knight-errant charges to her rescue.

"*Vanitas!*" The Quaestor inserts himself-plus-mule between the guard and her packhorse. "Oh, I tell them, good fellow. It is full deadly sin. This is *pilgrimage*, I say, not some posy pleasure-jaupt. But you know women." He pulls a disdainful cheek at Alys. Then he jerks a thumb at Jankyn. "Never mention young fops with over-much money at their disposal. Christ save 'em, they think they can't journey to Jerusalem in absence of a king's wardrobe. Recall the lilies of the field, good Dame! Do they toil? Do they spin? Oh, search 'em if you will, my friend – the baggage, mind you, not their bodies. We bear no illicit goods eastwards, kindly sir." He chuckles – no, it is a goat's gurgle. "Only illicit Wives."

The guard is neatly distracted. He sees a different course behoves him now.

"You travel ill-protected for one who wears her wealth so plain, Dame Pilgrim." The Welshman eyes her menfolk. She observes them through his view – one golden-haired youth, slight and decorative, one cleric in pilgrim's drab, and last and definitely least, one lank and motley episcopal leech. Indeed, she would sooner give Cecily a sword.

"It's your business right enough, Dame, but I'd get myself a guard sharpish if I were you, or find company to travel alongside that does." He grins. "Not all soldiers are as honest as we." The fellow pauses. He eyes her baggage. He eyes her scrip. Yea, it is clear that such fine honesty – not to mention discretion in the matter of baggage – deserves reward. By God, honesty is near a holy miracle when it manifests in a Welshman.

The Wife rustles in her pouch. She extracts some coin and bestows it upon the miraculous man of Wales.

"For you and your companions, soldier," she says. "For thy concern and –" she winks, "– thy full gentle courtesy."

“God’s blessings, good Wife, and it’s free you are to go,” says he with a grin. He caresses her horse’s rump as if it were her own. “But don’t you be forgetting what I said. You’re in foreign parts now. There’s no telling who you can trust. Them that smile at your face’ll slip a misericorde ‘tween your ribs soon as your pretty back’s turned.”

True enough, she reflects as she nudges her ambler down to the stream and the waiting barge. The fellow has no conception how true he speaks. But what guard will guard her against her companions? And who will guard her against a guard?

Alys sighs. She slips off her horse and commences negotiation for passage across the puny stream, but her heart is not in the haggle. She had been so sure of Sir George – not of his candour, but at least of his motives. She had been certain he would cling to her skirts like cleavers all the way to the Sepulchre. Because Georgie-boy wants his inheritance and his soul back (and probably in that order). Is she losing her sway with menfolk? A shiver trickles through. The wind is cold but the thought is colder.

And now she’ll have to acquire another guard – and worse, pay for the thug’s services too.

They remount and amble away from pale Calais and into Flanders – or is it France? (The Count of Flanders, she knows, makes obediensce to Charles of France.) Two decades before, it had seemed certain all would be England.

“So where did thy fine friend roule off to, Tom Pardoner? Didstow give him affright, maybe yaf him reason to seek another stable?”

The Quaestor grunts. At least it is not a bleat. “You left him at Calais, recall? I urged that we wait, but you would not have it.”

“Ha! Thy Knyght was absent a-purpose. He wiste full well we were leaving, and he could have caught up full easy did he have the intent.”

“Without a horse? How, Dame? Must he stretch his arms and fly? He’s not equipped with feathers.”

There is no replying to that. Besides, Tom’s tone is turned sour as crabapples. His mule begins to lag. Alys finds herself plodding Bruges-wards with only a Parson by her side.

The wind wraps them in chill silence. The trees too – scrubby, stunted things with barely a leaf-bud between them – bend eastwards, be-litened only on their dawn-facing limbs. The land is flat and bare.

Eventually: “You will have to confess before you kneel at the Sepulchre, Alys.”

“What – that tale ne been confession enow?”

Of course she knows that it is not. First there must be contrition, then shriving, and only then penance ... or indulgence.

“I cannot shrive you, Alys. The Prior has declared it unmeet.”

“I take his point. Best you worry about your own shriving,” she retorts.

Silence.

“Alys, I have begged your forgiveness. I cannot undo what was done.”

“Certain, and doubtless you’d do the same again, wertow in the same place!”

Sir John considers this. His forget-me-not eyes are trained upon the nape of his nag.

“Was it so wrong, Alys? To hazard my life to succour the dying?”

“The bishop clept any man might do it! *Any* man, nat just one consecrated. You ne needed a haircut to be a holy martyr to the Plague if that were your delice!”

“But a priest is far to be preferred. What would you want in your hour of death, Alys? A lewd layman or one sworn to God?”

She looks at him. “I’d ne choose a priest who sold another to sin.” A pause. “*You* set me on this course, John.”

His gaze meets hers, abashed but unwavering.

“And I will guide you safely off it, God willing.”

Her eyes spark flame. At least, she assumes they do, for Sir John recoils as if he feels the verray lick of Hell.

“And when has thy holy guidance done me any service? Well, Sir John? Well? Dostow want to know what I pictured when thy Pa laboured a-grunting upon me? When he opened my legs and I closed my eyen, what dostow think I saw? Tell it me!”

John’s eyes close likewise. His knuckles are bone upon the reins.

She doesn't care. Not now.

"It was you. You dighted me that night in Hawkesbury, John. You, and nat
your Pa."

17. St Winnoc

*My theme is alwey oon and evere was:
Radix malorum est cupiditas.*

The Pardoner's Prologue

My lords, I am peeved. I am wretched and wroth. My lids are heavy from a restless night, the wind blows continuous chill from the west, and I must spin the Bawd of Bath a tale of sin to loosen her tongue. But the worst of it – or perhaps the best – is that my fellow conspirator is absent.

He is gone, and permanently it seems.

Yesterday after we passed the Pale, I sought reprieve of my story. I needed time and so I pleaded weariness, the bellowing wind, and anxiety over our lost companion. Trust me well, they were no falsehoods, but they were not the core of the matter.

So I cried off my confession of sin. I skulked by the packhorses and twisted to look behind me so constantly in that crack-leathered saddle that my mule began to look askance. It began to favour tufts of grass by the way. Once, as I twisted to peer into the flat distance, it wandered so far off the road as to take its pleasure of a peasant's winter corn.

But no Knyght appeared behind us on the road – at least, none that I had a yearning to see.

It was a cold, bare stable I slept in at the Abbey of St Winnoc. A rat perched upon my head sometime before Lauds and I awoke with a happy heart. No doubt it was sniffing for scraps or scraping for fleas, but I dreamt the rat's leathery tail were Sir George's finger. Alas for myself and the rat, it was not. The beast went flying, courtesy of my palm, and I lay sleepless until Prime listening to the nags shuffle and shit.

But at least it gave me leisure to ponder my tale. I considered my history and each candidate stain on my soul with care. I am a fine preacher, O my listeners. I admit it, yea, though I endanger my soul of pride. But even the most gifted of

orators must deliberate their delivery. My art must seem artlessness, and my iniquity beyond doubt. This Bawd of Bath is not so wool-headed as the Prior likes to believe. In the night-time company of beasts, I determined to serve her up a dainty dish of sin, yea, and a confection of culpability alongside such as she cannot resist.

But that does not mean I need manufacture a good mood. Sir George is gone, and I am undeceived. I desired him as a collaborator on this quest. I envisioned us elbow to noble elbow in sweet conspiracy. His company would shorten the way and lengthen both our hopes. Now it seems the shiny fellow has concluded himself in more imminent need of silver than of salvation. Jerusalem's not going anywhere, and his palmerhood'll be a deal more comfortable with a little coin to smooth the way. Truly, stables are not his style. He's likely ridden south to join a Free Company. Or maybe he'll find himself a lordly pilgrim who'll pay for the privilege of his presence. It's what I would do if I were him, but fool that I am I desired George to stay.

Worse than a fool.

Now we plod through flat and windy Flanders, through peasant-populated fields, and the leader of our puny party performing a start and a hunched shoulder at every jingling company that overtakes us from behind.

As for me, my heart makes a leap each time a well-appointed party passes – only to sink the lower when it disgorges unto us no Knyght.

But my reprieve is up. Our dwarfish leader directs her hatted and wimpled visage at me.

“Well, Quaestor? You owe me a sin. I been a passing shrewd merchant-woman, God woot. I hunt down my debtors, I do. And that been you this fine morning.”

Fine morning. It is as grey as ever and almost as windy. I have wrapped rags about my palms to stop them freezing solid. My boots are stuffed with straw. I give her a speaking look. She is revoltingly cheerful today.

“Well, Tom of Rouncivale?” she goes on. “You nil nat plead tiredness and the wind is quiet enough, though doubtless it'll build if you lat your telling too long. And as for that Knyght, well he been no great loss. He was pretty enow to behold, I'll

grant, but doubtless we'll hire us a likely fellow at Bruges. They breed hem broad and tall in these parts, Quaestor. We'll not want for choice."

"A God's name, give us a story, you holy sinner." Of course Jankyn must open his trap. "This drab land'll set me snoring if I don't get diversion. It's so cursed neat! Strip after strip after strip with never a weed, and oh, then a village, and yes, more strips after that and not a cursed hill in sight. Give me a tale of sin, Quaestor, or I fall asleep."

I roll my eyes. It is an effective ploy, I know. Any still pool shows me my eyeballs are but scantily surrounded by flesh at the best of times. Let them circumnavigate, and they seem like to leap from their lids entire.

Jankyn withdraws, but not far enough. I keep my unruly eyeballs angled towards him – mostly. It is not so hard. He is a handsome piece, it is true. Near feminine in his curls and graceful form. A pity he wears a look of a habitual discontent. It mars his rose-bud mouth. In short, he appeals not in the least to me. I leave him to the arms of his redoubtable Wife. Besides, I doubt she would suffer to play the cuckold.

I sigh. I lift up my shoulders beneath my motley cloak.

"The origins of my sin has its root in mine own origins. As do your own, Dame. As for all of us, to speak truth. Adam and Eva, cavorting in the Garden – let them take their blame. For trust it well, lords, my sin is like Eve's. I took what was forbidden me and thus blighted my soul. But, sweet St Stephen, I had good cause!"

"Oh, undoubtedly," says Jankyn.

It seems the boy cannot be hearing another's voice for any length of time without inserting his own. I begin to have a sympathy for his Wife. Just a little.

"I plucked the forbidden fruit, it is true, but I repeat – my cause was good. That the fruit fell from my hand – was plucked in turn – I shall admit was wholly my error. *Radix malorum est cupiditas.*"

"No preaching about roots now, Quaestor, evil or no," warns our noble-breasted leader. *She knows Latin?* Surely not. She has just gleaned a word or three. "You'll singen no alms out of me. It's a tale I'm after, not a pulpity sermon. I desiren account of thy sin, Tom of Rouncivale. Produce me a sin to balance the scales with mine!"

The Parson makes a muffled noise. I glance back at him. His head is dun-hooded and angled down. One would think he studied his carthorse's mane. Nevertheless, yon pious pilgrim rides within earshot. The man is as hungry for my sins as any, for all he will not show it. Cecily too is lingering by. The packhorses plod at the rear, each roped a tail's swish behind its brother. They need no minding or goading – unless their minder find it politic to do so.

I shrug. "A good tale needs framing, does it not? One does not need to be preacher to shape it to a moral."

Jankyn snorts. "A moral from you, Quaestor? Spare us."

"Judge not that thou shalt not be judged," say I. "I am asked for a tale of sin, good youth. Why speak of sin if not to learn from it?"

"Namooore!" says the Wife. "You make more puff than this wind, Quaestor. Dish up thy sin!"

I acquiesce. I square my shoulders and call forth my sermon tones. Not that I preach – Heaven and Holy Church forbid – but hooves clop and wind wuthers and there is a subtlety in what I wish to say. I must tread a fine line. Christ forbid my audience misunderstand.

18. Heere bigynneth the Quaestor's Tale

*Thanne shewe I forth my long cristal stones,
Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones.
Relikes been they, as knowen everyoon.*

The Pardoner's Prologue

"Lordings, I was born in – or about – London in the twenty-eighth year of our late king's reign. Of parentage I can tell you nothing. My mother brought me as a shrieking babe to the hospice –"

"To Rouncivale?"

I nod at the youth. "The same. The conventual hospice of St Mary Rouncivale of Charing, hard by London. Like our mother house in Navarre, it succours the sick and needy. My dam was both. She died without providing the Brothers any indication of my fathering. I was an orphan babe utterly without connections. What might the Austins do but raise me as their own?"

Jankyn grins. "You were raised by monks?"

"Canons," I correct. "Not monks, good youth, but priests. The distinction is vital. They were men who may move in the world. But as to your question, trust me well, I was slave to all and son to none. Mine were the loving buffets, the diet of pauper potage, the joy of digging graves for them that did not survive the hospice care. Oh, I had a full holy upbringing. I can sing the psalter sweet and high, I can scribe and I recall some Latin yet."

I see the boy-husband bridle, and hasten to amend. "Only a little Latin, mind you. Never so much as you, good Jankyn. I hear you learned at Oxford, no less."

The youth preens. "*Verum. Vermis est.*"

I swallow my smile as a blackbird sucks worms. I speak on – and as I do, the past returns. Rouncivale by the river, the wide-flowing Thames, strong and clean before London shits in its waters. The turnips and leeks I weeded beside its stream. The Heaven-soaring church, steep-roofed and jewelled with arching glass. The

earth-bound infirmary, replete with the pleas of the prostrate and dying. Holy house and hospice in one.

“I was a useful scrap,” I continue. “They could have shook me out at seven to labour for some tanner or fishmonger, but no, they took pity, the Austins. I was retained within Rouncivale and given my keep, such as it was. And in return, I laboured and I prayed.”

I do not mention the chief subject of those prayers. Perhaps they should have been for my mother’s soul, she who was sunk in the paupers’ graveyard. But she had abandoned me, a nameless bastard, to the not-monks of St Mary’s. I was more inclined to pray for her damnation. No, my supplication was for security. Some place or person of my own. For a long time, I thought that lay in entry to Rouncivale itself. Picture me, my lords – a tonsured ascetic. But Austin-hood is not so easy for an unconnected boy to achieve. For its first step, I required a priest to take me as an acolyte.

Which leads me neatly to my next leap toward damnation.

“As I increased in learning and height, O my audience, so one Nicholas de Rouncivale took note of me. This Brother Nicholas, he was a most worthy priest. He could preach so sweet of Heaven and so foul of Hell that no eye would stay dry and no purse full. Lordings, I was in awe – I felt full worshipful love and respect. Here was one I could learn from. Here was a man overflowing of accomplishment and charity. Yea, great charity indeed, for Brother Nick showed a kindness for this skinny orphan twig quite beyond the usual loving blows. Oh, I learned a deal from him, trust me well.”

The contents and expression of his charity, I leave to your own fancying. I was a boy. He fed me scraps of meat and attention. I was desirous to become an acolyte. I would do near anything to that end.

I patter on before any think to enquire.

“Our Prior, ever a man to note another’s talents, raised Brother Nick to Proctor that he may traverse the land and see that Rouncivale’s many holdings be punctual with their dues.”

I nod in our Parson’s direction. I cannot discern his expression below his shadowing hood. “Charity cometh not free, eh Sir John? Hospitals and parishes both

must raise funds that they may care for the naked and needy. Roncesvalles of Spain has many benefices. We of Charing sweep those of all Britain and more together and send the demanded ducats to the mother house of Navarre. From sodden Scotland to the barbarous Irish, Proctor Nick must perforce travel. And for page and slave and lad-of-all-labour, whom do you think he chose?"

The Bawd of Bath's lips curl at that. "Then you been the seasoned traveller indeed, Quaestor. A mere boy, to been ridden all abouts, north to south, and ever the companion of a monkly man. Certain, the worthy wight will have moulded you to a clay of his liking. By God, I trowe you had a full pious up-rearing."

I cast the creature a narrow look, but refrain from retort.

"Indeed, Dame Alys. I have jogged from Southampton to Norwich, and taken ship from Gravesend to Corunna. I have paid my respects to Compostela and kissed the Veronica at Rome, and all before my voice achieved its manly tones."

The cockerel that is Jankyn crows. "Ha! Reckon you'll reach the Sepulchre too before your balls drop, Quaestor!"

How does the Bawd put up with him? More to the point, why must she drag him to Jerusalem that I must put up with him too? If only Sir George had not absconded, I might have one worth talking to. But it is just as well, really.

"Of course others travelled with us too," I say loftily. "A Proctor bearing tithes and rents cannot journey with only a boy for guard." Let them not think that it was just the priest and I, cheek by buttock throughout the British Isles. Let them not think that the Brother and I were ever left alone, and certainly not for the space of a night.

"And when the Proctor was not proctoring, why he most commendably spent his time in preaching. Roncesvalles of Navarre is far famed, you know. It's where Roland swung his sword against the infidel, and then died most rent and bloody. It aids pilgrims to Compostela and travellers of all kinds across the mountains. Rouncivale in Charing too has its renown. Why, even my dam had heard of it, ignorant peasant though she no doubt were. So for the holy work of these two Roncesvalles, we had license to distribute indulgences in our travels. And when the fame of our hospice and the rhetoric of my master's mouth did not loosen purses sufficiently, Brother Nicholas had resort to one thing more. A most blessed relic."

The Parson leans forward.

“A relic of which saint?”

I can see his visage better now. It declares a wary curiosity.

“Oh, yon relic never touched saintly flesh, Sir John,” I retort, and enjoy the wash of perplexity across his wholesome ploughman’s face.

On the contrary, I might have added – had I been minded to self-disclosure of the most damaging kind – the flesh it touched last was anything but beatified.

“Well then, it was no relic,” decrees Jankyn.

“Heaven forgive you, fair youth. It was a true relic indeed, and most potent in its origin. Truly, it was more venerable than any virginal thigh bone or paltry bishop’s cope, for it was a relic possessed by a Patriarch of the Old Book itself. Trust it well, lordings, this hand—” And here I loose the item in question from my rein to display it for their awe. My mount crabs slantways. I insert knee into mulish ribs. “—has clasped the Staff of Father Moses. By the Blessed Book, I swear I speak truth. Listen and be agog with wonder, my listeners: Proctor Nick was guardian of that same Staff that smote the Red Sea and divided the raging waves in twain.”

There is a suitable silence. Of course they are impressed. Folk cluster for miracles at springs sprung forth at behest of some minor, wandering hermit or traipse to Canterbury – and for what? To beg favours of a beheaded bishop? How much better to wrap your fist about the miraculous Staff of Moses!

“Well, a piece of the Staff,” I accede. Its proportions were certainly not that of a palmer’s pole, praise the Almighty. “Doubtless, like the True Cross or St Kate’s bones, the whole was divided up ages past, but, trust me well, it was of a fair length.” I hold up my hand and stretch my fingers wide. “Twice my hand-span long, and of a full noble thickness.”

Indeed, it was a fearsome stout stick. I recall it with clarity.

“Moses,” murmurs the Parson. “Whose rod became a serpent.”

“They gat his Burning Bush at Exeter too,” the Wife adds.

Jankyn produces a smirk, and appears to be about to say something enlightening. I hasten to circumvent the abduction of my tale. I proceed and, make no doubt, I proceed with care. I do not weave a lie for my worthy listeners, but neither would it do to unfold the truth entire. That is what a story does – it selects

and shapes. Whatever truth lies within a tale is moulded for purpose and trimmed of dross.

My history bears a heavier load of dross than most.

“Brother Nick bore the staff at all times, for truly it was a treasure of more worth than any silver he might proctor out of Leinster or Kent. One touch dissolved a decade in Purgatory. Indulgences, my lords. It had a near magical ability to part men from their money. Sweet St Stephen, Nick bore that staff close by his heart. It had no reliquary or other housing, this holy stick, save an embroidered wrap of Levantine silk to ward it from Brother Nick’s sweat.”

“What colour were it?” the Wife demands.

I frown. The sweat or the staff?

“Why, it were stick-coloured, good Dame, tending to gray with age.”

“I meant *the cloth*, thou Tom-fool of a cleric! Silk of the Levant, you cleft. Tell it me: what shade were it tinted of?”

I shrug. “I cannot recall. Something bright. There was gold and silver thread – it flashed full sharp in the sun. No matter, it is long lost. Some fishwife’s likely using it for her monthly rag now.”

I enjoy her indrawn breath. Just wait, O Bawd, you will gasp louder ere my tale is done.

“As I was saying, Brother Nick bore the Staff and revealed it unto the masses when he deemed it fitting. My task was to scuttle for the offerings that emerged miraculous from previous-empty purses. Trust it well, the Holy Prophet would have approved the end his Staff was put to. Just as Moses guided the wandering Israelites, so we of Rouncivale harbour the sick and homeless.”

I pause. I breathe in.

“What the Prophet would *not* approve, however, were the more privy uses Old Nick had in mind for his Staff.”

I observe without looking the stir of bodies within saddles, the edging closer of already-proximate horses. The audience senses a coming climax. Their nostrils flare to the scent of sin. The Parson even seems somewhat alarmed.

“It occurred upon a day of wind and rain. It was sweet summer upon the coast of Kent, and the rain spattered our cheeks like the spit of a thousand fiends.

The peasants huddled in their huts cursing the loss of their crops, and Proctor Nick preached to scant ears and airy pockets. Then, after a day of pardonless pardoning, we mis-stepped our way in the mire, wandered lost, and perforce must make camp in some ruined cott. Truly, my master was in a mood most profane. He cursed the skies above, he cursed the stinking peasants, he cursed the vanishing paths, and when I couldn't start a fire for pervading wetness, he cursed me for a fiend-spawned bastard too." I shrug. "These things I could accept, lordings. I was in no good mood myself, but what good does it do to stir wild waters? What I could not accept was his blame of the Staff."

I stare down at my rag-wrapped hands, tight over reins.

And speak on.

"For want of meat, my master partook of his skin of wine. And when that warmed him sufficient, he began most heatedly to cast aspersions upon the holy relic that he bore. It was the cause of our lack of revenue, said he. By Christ, if it held back the Red Sea, why could it not hold off a little rain? And so it went on. I asked him to forebear." I pause. I shake my head. "He would have none of it. Not from me."

No, it merely turned his mood against me. Since I had failed at fire, he declared he required warming by alternative means – and for the first time I did not acquiesce. I was cold, tired, and hungry, yes, but that had not been an obstacle before. It is a sin, I know it well, but he was my master, I, his would-be acolyte. It was a bond between us, a sharing of human warmth. At least in this, he needed me.

But in that moment, he was possessed by a spirit of blasphemy. The sin thus doubled its black burden. It sprouted horns. Even an orphan would-be acolyte has his limits. So in that twilit hovel, I declared *no*, and thought myself secure in Nick's unfed inebriation.

I was wrong. It lent him strength.

"My master was outraged beyond reason at my insurrection. He groped within his robes and drew out his Staff. Lordings, he brandished it bare before me. He demanded my compliance under threat of holy violence."

They know not what to think or do, my audience. They gasp full gustily. Jankyn's eyes narrow, then widen. The Parson's cheeks flush a shade his step-mother would envy. Even sedate Cecily looks me a question.

"What did your master threaten to do?" the maid enquires.

"Do?" I snort. The disgust must be vented, but disgust of whom? "Hearken, O pilgrims! When I begged him to accord the relic respect, the good Brother raised the Holy Staff and declared he would castigate me with it."

"Castigate ...?"

It is our learned Jankyn.

"That he would beat me, good youth," I explain. "Proctor Nicholas declared his intention to pummel me with the Staff with which Moses parted the Red waters."

The boy-husband looks bewildered, but his Wife laughs rich. I wince, and yet I welcome it – her understanding, I mean. I do not lie, but nor do I spell out the truth. Instead I set her a precedent, and pray that my spilling of sin will encourage her to slop forth hers.

"Your master dared profane a holy object on your flesh?" The Parson is severe.

"Upon this same sinful and all-too-human flesh," I say. "What desecration! What foul shame to use a relic upon so unhallowed a worm!"

"You mistake my meaning."

Oh, and I hope to Heaven you mistake mine, pious sir.

I bare my teeth in his direction. It is to be understood as a smile. "Fear not, good Parson. I too was aghast. I had been raised amongst canons and schooled to venerate blessed objects, and now witness what my master proposed to do to it and me!"

I allow outrage to colour my tones. Lordings, it is no ploy but emerges direct from whatever soul I still possess. To say I felt shock is mere understatement. Even now, my shanks are as rock at the remembering of it.

"Well?" presses the maid.

I shrug in evidence of unconcern. It is a movement of muscle unconnected to any deeper truth. "Caught between a stick and a hard place, maiden, what could I

do? Why, I committed the slighter sin. I made apology to my master. I attempted to pacify him.”

And resigned myself to the lesser punishment Old Nick demanded. The usual undertaking. In the dimness, I downed hose. I turned my back on him. I knelt.

And sealed both my fate and that of the Staff.

Perhaps my face shows something of remembrance, for Cecily says with too-great perspicacity, “But your master punished you nevertheless?”

I jerk my head in the affirmative. I fix my gaze on the rutted road, and I lie.

“But not, make no doubt, by means of the holy relic.”

The lie is better than truth. I will not describe desecration.

And yet it returns. The stupefaction. The sightless horror. Stephen save me, I know too well the felt difference between a shaft of wood and human flesh. The beast beneath me jolts into a trot at my thigh-muscles’ tensing. I rein the creature back – happy at the distraction, unhappy that it might be noted.

“He punished me,” I affirm. Three words to encompass abomination. “And fell into a stupor shortly after. It was then I saw my opportunity.”

What I saw was a world wrung of colour. All hazy greys. He snoring stertorously upon a dirt floor, a Staff discarded, bare of cloth wrapping, and me swaying over him. A world turned unsteady as aspic, fogged and grey.

“Did you kill him?” whispers Jankyn. “Did you beat him to death as he beat you?”

His Wife crows with laughter. “By God no, thou sweet innocent! And dostow think he’d say it if he had? Why, he stole the Staff, doubtless. He hente his grubby fist about Moses’ stick and asterte away, swift as any hare.”

The Bawd follows me closely. Depend upon one steeped in sin to sniff another.

“It was dark by then, and I ran,” I run on. Best conclude this confession forthwith. The Dame has discerned enough. “More truly, I stumbled from bush to tree. I slipped in mud and scrambled, Staff in hand, through howling night. My lords, I mentioned we were by the southern coast. Well, I near tumbled over a sea-cliff in my haste. Instead, as fate would have it, I sprawled upon a bruising rock and blinked down into the white and black sea below.” I glance at the brown Parson. I throw

him a scrap of sin. "Good priest, I admit it. Despair tempted me. I had near murdered myself unaware, and now it occurred to me as a choice. A fall from a cliff. A seeming accident. Why, when my body washed up, they could still bury me in consecrated ground. What else was left me? I was an unholy thief. I had deserted my master, and hence my home. I was entirely without succour. Without hope."

Good John shakes his brown head, but in sorrow or rebuke? As for myself, I draw deep breath for what is to come. Suck in cold Flemish air. It tastes of muck and worms, rotting leaves and mule-turd.

"I stared into the waves, O my listeners. I shivered and I wept –"

But the Bawd has no patience for my long black night. "God above, Quaestor, spit it forth! Lest you been an airy spirit in our midst, it been full clear you ne did toss yourself in."

"No, Dame," I say with a heaviness that would roof a church better than lead. "I tossed the Staff over instead."

19. Heere continues the Quaestor's Tale

Their inhalation is a stone lobbed into a pool. The ripples spread outwards, the circle widens about me.

"Cock's bones, Quastor, you cast a holy relic into the sea? You'd done better to cast yourself in. You're damned to the Devil either way." The boy burgher doesn't know whether to laugh or be shocked. Parson John, however, is not aghast. Instead, he observes me strangely. I would prefer the former.

"That been wrecched practik for a pardoner, Long Tom. Han't you a fondness for bits of wood and bone? I did hearken you had a relic or three about you in Bath."

"The Prior has them in safekeeping now," I inform the Bawd with some dryness. "As for the Staff, Dame, truly, I acted against my own interests. But you must recall my outrage." Indeed, outrage distinctly understates the matter. "I returned the Staff to the sea. It was for its greater safety."

And cleansing. As if all the waves on earth could hope to wash it clean. My voice has withered to a whisper. My companions lean in.

"How may a holy object be used thus and yet retain sanctity?"

My whisper dies into the wind. My listeners edge subtly away. I have been too revealing.

"You destroyed a holy relic."

It is the Parson who speaks, but I cannot determine his tone.

I shrug. I have raised my shoulders so frequent in the course of my telling that they cease to convey meaning. "There you have it. Such is my sin. You desired a crime, Dame. Will it suffice?" I do not pause for answer. "A sin most black and vicious. But also salvatory, I declare. I saved Moses' Staff. I took it in its pretty 'broidered wrapping and I ran, I stumbled, and I threw. I removed it far from harm."

Such was not exactly my reasoning at the time. And of course I took its wrapping as well, but not for reasons of sanctity. No, that unholy wood was still

tainted with contact too intimate. It would not touch my flesh again. I picked the thing up between finger and thumb and held it at arm's length as I ran.

Jankyn's lips move. They shape about unvoiced sounds. He mimics for a moment the landed salmon.

It urges me to speak on. I really do not need his fumbings at this juncture.

"I was a lad without money, relatives or connections. I left the Proctor south of Canterbury. Rouncivale had property there and Brother Nick was known about its streets, as was I, his shadow. So I hied myself off sharpish. I made my way west in the hope Nick would look London-wards. I lurked about hamlets and slept in byres. I begged for crusts, I laboured for food and a bed of hay, and I grew ever skinnier and rougher and wilder of lock 'til no decent peasant would have me dig his dung-heap. And winter drew on and I found myself with no meat on my bones, and entirely bereft of choice. I did the only thing left to me."

"You sold yourself, didn't you?"

"What?" I lurch in what passes for a saddle to stare at Jankyn.

"You're homeless. You've got no food – what else could you do for coin but bend over?"

"That I did not!" I snap. "What do you take me for? A quean for hire? What, you fancy a bit? Take care, Dame, your husband's inclined to stray."

Jankyn turns puce. It is a most unbecoming shade. The lad alters colour far too easily for the good of his countenance. His knuckles bunch and I nudge my mule away, but he does not let swing. That is not Jankyn's style – at least, not with men.

"Peace!"

Sir John raises a workman-like hand.

"We are companions," he declares. "We protect and aid one another on pilgrimage. Our end in this our tale-telling should be to bare our sins that we repent and make penance, *not* to sow discord."

I breathe deep. Sir Pious has granted me a gift, all unwitting.

I bestow upon him my sweetest smile. "You speak most truly, Sir John. I had not considered my tale in the light of confession, but on pilgrimage what better purpose to put it?"

The Parson frowns. "Tale-telling is not confession."

"Oh no, Sir John. The telling would have to be privy to count as such, would it not?"

Conflict scrawls itself clear across the man's honest face. Oh, it is a well-enough face in its rough-hewn way – not to my taste, I hasten to assure – but one far, far too honest.

"Nowhere is it written that it *has* to be privy, Quaestor, but certainly, privacy is to be preferred."

"Oh, privacy is always to be *preferred*, good priest. But with two confessors in our one small company, why should its members not avail themselves of a double efficacy? Speak our sin to two confessors simultaneous? You and I, Sir John," I say. "Have we not a full pious party? Or, by the time we achieve Jerusalem, doubtless it will be. Not a sin left unsaid between the lot of us, I daresay."

Our Parson surprises me – in his predictable way. His eyes flash a shade of kingfisher. Jaw turns to stone in a manner Sir George himself might envy. In short, the blaze of constrained passion renders a wholesome mien almost sensual.

"Confession stands on more than simple blurting out of sin," growls our holy hound. "Whatever dispensation Bishop Harewell has granted you – and you have yet to reveal the purported parchment – true shrift requireth—"

"Oh, I know this one," I interrupt cheerfully. "*Perfect confession stant on three things: contrition of heart, confession of mouth, and satisfaction.* See, sir priest? I know my theology. I had a holy upraising, recall? Oh, I know my tale this day is no confession, fear not." I pause as long as I dare in face of his knife-jawed ire. "But it *could* be. It is confession of mouth, is it not? All it lacks to scour my soul is a sprinkle of satisfaction and a splash of contrition."

The Wife snorts. "And there, Long Tom, th'art caught and dried. You been fair salted and preserved for you gat as much contrition as a fox in a hen-berne. And satisfaction? God above, I trowe poor Nick'll ne get none."

I glare at her. "I do not repent my crime, Dame, at least not its first instance. I stole the Staff to keep it from defilement."

"You said it, Quaestor," says Jankyn. "You damn yourself. You don't repent, you say. Your words, loud and clear. You can confess all you like, but you've got no contrition of heart." He glances at Sir John as if for approval.

The Parson gives a cautious nod. This is an unnatural alliance, lordings. I must break up such sweet accord.

“The second instance of my sin, however, I do sincerely repent,” I say. “Spill blood in a church, defile it by dighting, and it may be reconsecrated. Why not a holy relic?” True, it would require brutally blunt disclosure on the precise manner of its defilement. There would be consequences for my master – if I were believed – and it would likely have turned life in Rouncivale intolerable. Such news will out.

But it would have scoured my soul of a fearful stain. Perhaps not removed the taint entire, but at least performed a lightening. I twist and turn under my burden of sin – defilement, theft, and destruction of a venerable relic. The Patriarch frowns mightily upon me. I wander in the desert, O my listeners. The Evil One whispers in my ear, and Christ knows, I am no Christ.

“I should have returned the relic to the canons,” I say. “I should have confessed all, whatever the consequence. Confession, my lords, it is full healthful cleansing. Like the first scrub after winter, it leaves you free of dirt – light as a dandelion puff, most saintly fragrant and clean.”

“Yea, clean of silver.”

“You may not take one penny into Purgatory, good Jankyn.”

“But what was there to confess if you returned the Staff straight to Rouncivale?” A little crease decorates Cecily’s brow. “You say you saved it from defilement. Surely it did not require reconsecration for mere theft?”

This is the problem with telling half-truths. One tends to forget which precise fraction was proffered. St Stephen be praised I have not the complexion for reddening.

“*Had* my master carried out his threat, maiden. Recall, I feared greatly that he would do so,” I amend. I do not speak the words swiftly. They must not appear to be jabbered in haste.

And continue smoothly to my conclusion.

“As I was saying, winter neared. I was friendless and homeless. I did the only thing left to me – I crawled back to Rouncivale. I threw myself on the mercy of the Austins. I even welcomed the prospect of punishment for the loss of the Staff. Penance, of a kind. But lordings, imagine my startlement at what I found.”

I half-expect a clever comment from the boy burgher, but it seems that, for all his clerkdom, he has no rhetoric left.

“Proctor Nick was returned long since. He had acquired himself a younger foundling to assist him in his duties, one more malleable and less prone to revolt perhaps. This did not startle me overmuch. No, what surprised me was the questionless welcome I received. Oh, not from Nick – he ignored me like a stain on a shithouse floor – but from the canons overall. I was not precisely the Prodigal returned, but there were no lashes, no bread-and-water for me. My master, it seems, had merely reported me lost. We had been separated on a wild night. He declared himself worried I had met a foul end. Masses had been said for my soul.”

Much good they did it.

“What, han’t your monkish master spilled on the mischance to the Staff? By God, you’d think even hem stiff-nosed canons’d snuff the absence of that much holiness.”

The mischance, she calls it. God knows, there was very little of chance about the affair – and she knows it too. I twist in the saddle to eye the Bawd direct. The ceaseless breath of winter whips my hair about my face.

“He had not, Dame. He hadn’t even lost it.”

Does her expression express befuddlement? Errant locks obscure my view. I dare not ungrip my rein to push them aside. My mule, I declare, is a beast possessed.

“Oh God above, speak it short and plain, thou lank sinner! You tossed it. You told it us. What, did thy canon fish it fro the waves? Did it fly miraculous to his fist?”

“He acquired a counterfeit.” Truly, those Parsonly words should sink straight to the bottom of the sea.

I shrug – for the last time today, I swear.

“Trust it well, it were a relic plucked from some peasant’s woodpile. And the poor gnof never suspected he might burn the Patriarch’s most holy stick.”

Even a Bawd must take some time to chew over that gristle, but of course it is she who breaks the wuthering silence.

“You told hem? The Austins, I mean. That they han a scrap of kindling for holy relic?”

I shake my head.

“So, Quaestor, by thine own telling, you been a thief and a full ungrateful foundling. You filched Moses’ bit of twig – yea, for its own protection, quod you – and then yon relic met its watery end. And to triple thy crime, you lat them make reverence to earthly wood.”

My throat is raw. My endurance has boiled dry. I do not shrug.

“Such is my account of sin, good Dame. Judge it as you wish, but know it was a formative lesson. I have cultivated its fruits ever since. Why else am I turned Quaestor? I returned to Rouncivale and, unworthy and unwealthy as I was to become canon, I undertook to salve the sin I saw about me – yea, and which dwelt in my own heart – in the best way I knew. Thus I was led to Quaestorhood. And I have laboured with such diligence since that the Bishop of Bath and Wells saw fit to extend me special dispensation.”

“So you claim,” says the Parson.

“Hastow the parchment to prove it, Tom Quaestor?” speaks the Wife.

I indicate with an elbow my bulging scrip, a bump beneath my cloak. “Need you ask it, Dame Alys? It rests by my heart. No rain nor rats shall gnaw at this calf-skin.”

Nor priests neither, for that matter. Pray the Lord this pious Parson does not demand to view it instantaneous. Behold my horror, O lordings – I see the notion flicker in his eyes. A little frown wafts across that broad brow, and I observe the heart-stilling spectacle of a slowly opening jaw–

Before I am succoured by a Knyght sans shining armour.

Or doubly damned.

20. Flanders

*He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.
But, for to tellen yow of his array,
His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.*

The General Prologue

The Knyght is riding, and he feels as light as a leaf blown in this gusting west wind.

His quarry is in sight.

His new companions canter beside and behind him. It is as if they are as eager in the chase as he, but he knows it cannot be so.

Her scarlet is a flaring beacon.

Last night he dreamed of that same crimson cloak – or was it a nightmare? Or truth indeed? He could easily conceive she is a fiend sent to taunt him. He had slipped in and out of sleep so continuously on the damp marsh-tufts that visions and shadowed reality merged. He had been awaiting his chance, unmoored in the greyness from all he once thought was solid.

The beast he rides, at least, is no grey. He glances down as he touches heels to flank – one last burst of speed and he will be upon them. His new means of transport has a coat like polished walnut. He has seen a good many grey coursers. This, thankfully, is not one of them. To bestride a horse of shadows is to risk Lady Fortune's ire. He has vexed her quite enough already.

He outpaces his new companions with ease.

And he feels as light as an autumn leaf in the gale.

For that which bears him eastward is no carthorse to make him beholden to a dastardly Dame. Nor, more's the pity, is it a destrier such as the one he thought he'd bought in Bristol. This beast is no warhorse – or at least, no sturdy bearer of a fully-armoured man such as a knight ought to ride. No, when he gives this steed its head, it springs forward like the greyhound and the Knyght feels his lips begin to curve.

Until he recalls. This hound-horse is a courser – fleet of foot and Arab of ancestry. It could not bear the weight of a man in iron long, certainly not for the distance between Calais and Bruges.

And thus the lightness – as if there is no ground beneath his courser’s feet.

He has left his harness behind.

A Knyght is no knight without a horse – true, but what is he who rides a horse without armour?

His last burst of speed has carried him to his quarry. How puny the little party looks after that which has accompanied him today. A churchman, a boy-burgher, two feeble womenfolk, and, what – a dealer in forgiveness? The Knyght is surprised by an improbable urge to protect. Thankfully, such inconvenient chivalry dissipates almost as soon as it arrives.

For his erstwhile companions have seen him.

The Quaestor turns mid-sentence and, although sound ceases, his mouth fails to close. Do his lips lift? To what end? But the Knyght has no time to ponder a Quaestor’s visage. The Dame has taken stock not only of him but of those who accompany him.

“By the Almighty Lord and all His saints, look what the Venetian dragged in,” she declares, reining to face them.

“God give you good day, *signora*,” replies Giovanni Balducci Minotto. He and his man-servants draw level and slow likewise. The Italian performs a neat bow from atop his palfrey. “We missed your leaving from Calais, *cara signora*, but it is our good fortune to find you again. I trust we may ride with you until Bruges?”

The Dragon’s lips compress. No, they disappear. Even the Knyght, no seasoned judge of character, can tell a burst of fire is imminent.

She swivels on him instead.

“And where wertow when we set forth two days past?” she flames at George. “We waited for you tedious long. Yea, full dragging long. God woot, we near lost thy friend Quaestor here in the search – and such a loss that wolde have been.” Then she eyes him up and down in that disconcerting way of hers, and one plucked eyebrow lifts. “But, by sweet Christ above, what happened to thy iron-

mongery, Sir Knyght? Th'art as peeled as a prawn –" She snorts. "– and about as fearsome too."

The Knyght looks down and is shocked anew. He barely recognises himself. In place of chain mail and plate, he wears but a linen aketon. It is the garment he once wore beneath his mail. Its quilted wadding soaks up the impact of blows upon outer iron. By itself, the padding will repulse a glancing sword or a half-hearted arrow, but little more. Over its undyed white, his black jupon hangs stark. For headgear, he has but his arming cap left. It is the upper equivalent of the aketon – padded linen to be worn under steel. He has stuffed it in his scrip. It makes him feel like a coifed and confined nun. His legs are bare of greaves, cuisses, and poleyn. Black hose still bears the print of their buckles, but the sweet-moulded steel is gone. He is a Knyght unharnessed, practically in a state of undress.

They are all doing it now – eyeing him over and drawing their own conclusions.

"I was not vanquished." His voice is harsh.

It is the obvious assumption. Why else would a knight part with his iron than if he is obliged to offer it up after defeat in battle?

"Oh, Lord love thee, Sir Knyght. I ne dreamt such a thing. You? Vanquished? A God's name, what a thought." She does not coo. The Dragon of Bath has not finished with her fire as yet. "So wertow set on by brigands, then? Or didstow lose thy precious plate a-rattling dice?"

The Knyght no longer feels protective.

"My horse," he snaps. He jerks his chin at the fine-arching neck before him. "It could not bear the weight."

As any fool could see, he might have added. But a knight, however underclad and underhorsed, is yet courteous to a lady. Even if she is not a lady.

"Why not get yourself one that could, then?" says the boy-husband.

The Knyght turns an expressionless look upon Jankyn. *Because the destriers were too closely watched, infant. A warhorse comes not cheap. Because none in Calais would lend me – a penniless excommunicate – money. Because I lingered for a day around the barracks by Newenham awaiting my chance and it never came and had I loitered any longer I would be seized. Because I may as well bestride an ox*

as acquire myself another carthorse, and if I am to pledge my word as Knyght and leave my very harness as surety I may as well steal something worthy.

No. Not steal. It is a loan merely.

“With what currency?” the Knyght condenses.

“What?” says Jankyn.

“You paid for your horse with your armour, Sir Knyght?” Cecily says. Is there slight ironic emphasis on his title?

He does not reply. *Payment* is not quite the bargain he struck – if one can be said to bargain with a man laid out cold on a stable floor.

He shrugs into the silence. The feat is a lot easier accomplished in the absence of armour. Why his shoulders practically leap to his ears. He needs his harness to stifle such childish over-action. And when he speaks, his voice is not belled into portentousness by an iron helm.

“I would rejoin your party, Dame.”

“Oh wouldstow, by God?” she chirps, robin-head on one side. “And wolde that be but you, Sir Knyght, or the burr or five you’ve picked up on the road as well?”

“Madam, I ask only for myself,” he says stiffly.

The Dragon looks from him to the Venetian and then back. And just when he thinks she will treat him to another withering mouthful, she chuckles.

“Why certain, my Knyghtling! Needstow ask? Doubtless, you can come back to the fold, my stray lamb. You were ne meant to leave it in the first place. I promised the Prior you’d be of our party and you, poor lamb, are full needly of our help to gat you to the Sepulchre to soothe thy murderous sins. Why, scarce a night on French soil and you’ve lost the best part of your iron-ware already. What’d befall if we left you to your own devices a week I ne can contemplate.” She nudges closer to pat him on the forearm. “God only woot what you’d sell next, so just you linger and guard us chivalrous-like and we’ll watch over you likewise.” She lowers her voice. It is a muted twitter directed only at him now. “I just ne been so keen on the turds that cling to thy pretty mount’s hooves, if you take my meaning.”

Sir George leans back. His courser prances a few steps in reverse.

“I overtook the good merchant only a few hours ago, Dame. It were courtesy to greet him, and when he proposed I bear him company” – *or, more precisely, remarked in an undertone that a lone swordsman unmarked by device galloping along the high road suggested to any but the most refined eye nothing better than a brigand* – “what might one of gentle breeding do but acquiesce?”

In truth, he had been so shocked by the metaphorical mirror held up to him that he had near reigned his flighty steed back onto its rump, and had thenceforth been content to pace at the Italian’s side and answer the delicately-phrased questions concerning the companions he sought to rejoin with ready grace.

“A God’s name, ne preach to me of courtesy, Sir Knyght. Lat it be as you leste. I can play the fine lady if I must.” She executes a miniature bow in the Venetian’s direction. “Oh, lieve Sir Italian Cloth-Merchant, pray riden with our lowly party so far as the City of Bruges, but only if it pleaseth thee.”

The merchant Minotto smiles.

“How may I refuse so gracious a request?” he murmurs, but his tone does not mock. The Knyght discerns yet more evidence of the man’s gentle – if not quite noble – breeding, and it is balm to his peeled soul among these upstart peasants. “You may even find me of some little use upon the way, *Signora* – if you will permit.”

“Ha! Lat see when the time comes, Sir Merchant. *If* it comes. We been, what, seven mile from Bruges, and tell me – what’s likely to crop up in that space, I ask? Besides, I han my fine ward-corse Knyght back again, do I no?”

She casts him an over-bright smile in which he discerns more than a little speculation.

George merely nods, and provides no accompanying expression. The woman has no reason to doubt his means of acquiring a horse. Even if she did, who is she to take the pulpit? Her means of acquiring – and ridding herself – of husbands is more suspect by far.

His thoughts are interrupted by the approach of yet another homewards-bound Flemish carter. Their party must edge aside to permit passage of his bouncing dray, unballasted by produce and liable to splatter them in mud – or

substances of still more lowly estate. The Knyght's steed throws up its head at the stolid, stumbling oxen.

The Dame eyes the cart and then twists around to scan the sky. The Knyght follows her gaze. A cloud or two glows to the west.

"A God's name, why do we dawdle?" the she-Dragon cries. "The rooks flock to roost, the bats abandon Bruges anon. If we dally any longer the gates'll slam for the night."

And thus, as knights obedient to their liege's command, the party is spurred to action. They advance upon Bruges. Except she who leads them is no liege lord, and none here truly qualifies as knight – not without harness and stripped of honour. Sir George of Nowhere in Particular is to all appearances a mercenary now. A brigand in black and white, riding a stolen horse, and in the employ of those who wish a Dragon hamstrung or, failing that, slain.

21. Bruges

*Thus prove I that Flemmynges is but a flemed man
And Flaunders, of Flemmynges, the same name began.
And therefore ye Flemmynges that Flemmynges ben named,
To compare with Englisshmen ye aught to be ashamed.*

The Brut, or The Chronicle of England

“God give me patience, wiltow let thy japes be! Christ above, I’d a sooner shove a turd in thy teeth as unbung yon barrel. *No, thou wrecched catiff! Take thy shrewed paws off!*”

Perhaps it is just as well that the Flemings at the gate have but a rudimentary grasp of English. But they do understand the ‘no’ part. In fact, she’d bet that the gist of her current argument would be understood in deepest Ethiope or the Isles of the Dog-Headed Men. Some language is beyond words.

The guards of the Count of Flanders’ chief emporium and inexhaustible purse that is the city of Bruges moveth not.

Except to grunt and approach yet again to her barrels.

Why does every wight from Bath to Bruges – and probably hence to the Holy City itself – suspect she stows some stuff of wondrous value upon her sumpter?

Well, maybe she does – but it’s not of the sort these brutes’d recognise. They have found her wool, spun and unspun, and now they swivel their swinish eyes upon her barrels. English broadcloth may not be brought into Bruges. It is too good – especially Alys’s. Who’d buy Flemish flimsy when her scarlet is on show? Doubtless they think she has stuffed her barrels full of ells.

The sun glows amber upon the west wall of Bruges. A windmill twists lazily in the evening breeze. The gate-guards have been interrogating, taxing, and otherwise harrassing travellers all day. The poor things are tired. They lick their Flemish lips for a draft of Bruges beer. The gates are about to close.

The Wife has yet to gain admittance.

And a Venetian looks on with interest from within the embrace of Bruges.

She produces her scrip. She fishes forth her episcopal epistle, her letter of license, yet again. She waves it before the guardsmen like a puny flag.

“Look’ee, good guards! Train thy eyeballs here! See? I been a palmer, not some villeinish wife to market. God Himself woot it ne been thy business nor thy master’s what I bear with me to Jerusalem.”

Of course, she realises this is not the way. One does not pass a guard post by berating it. But she too is tired. She is not yet accustomed to these long sore days in the saddle. It is bad enough on a woman’s privy parts, however does a man endure it? Add to that: nose nipped by wind, food peculiar and too far between, and bowels untrustworthy. She just wants a warm inn and a half-decent meal.

The foremost guard shrugs. He turns his tabarded back to her, mutters something to his fellows, and *begins to close the gate*.

“Oh God, woman, you’ve done it again. Now where’ll we sleep?”

Alys ignores her Jankyn. She spurs her drooping mare forwards.

“Sweet sirs, I am abrupt. Pray overlook a Wife’s hasty words. Doubtless there been some arrangement we can arrive at ...” She tries to coo. Unfortunately it is at too great a contrast to her earlier manner.

The guard pays her no heed.

And yet ...

... the gate does not close.

Its cause cannot be attributed to her eloquence. No, with the ease of what is clearly long practice, the bane of her afternoon, that pain in her already painful posterior, the Venetian has slipped some coins into the guard’s miraculously open palm and murmured words in what seems remarkably like Flemish to the uncouth fellow.

The gate grates open, sufficient for the passage of one Wife and her train. They pass through on the strength of a jerk of the guard’s arm. Her barrels remain unbreached.

And oh, for the sake of Christ’s poor unused coillons, she’s stuck with him still. The one gainful result of being locked out of Bruges would be enforced separation from a Venetian, and now she must needs be grateful to the knave. In fact, yea, he knows of an inn, a passing respectable one too. ‘The Crone’, it is called.

Now there's an ill-omened name if ever she's heard one. *Just this way, O Dame.*
Follow me, O just-manipulated Manipuloress of Bath, and entwine thy way ever
deeper with mine.

Next he'll be asking her what's in her barrels.

22. Chapel of Holy Blood

Dulcis sanguinis, dulcissimus liquor
[Sweet blood, sweetest liquid]

Processional for the Holy Blood

Lord, I pray You, succour Thy daughter. I am helpless. The same horror that swept over me on the ship now threatens to unman me. A surgeon has seen her and Cecily tends her now. All is in Your hands. Father, I pray You, make her whole.

You saw it all, sweet Lord. Reveal the truth. Guide me as I stumble in the dark. Illuminate my dim and partial understanding with Your Divine Light.

This is how I saw it, and in as much detail as I can recall.

We left the Inn of the Crone this morning after a mug of bitter beer and a hunk of bread, Thy daughter Alisoun, Jankyn, Thomas of Rouncivale, Sir George, and I. (The maid Cecily was left to play guard-dog to our baggage, but even more so, I suspect, unto a pair of barrels.) Alisoun was urgent to leave before he who kindly secured us this lodging last night discovered our purpose. We would not have found accommodation in this city bursting with visitors had it not been for the Venetian Minotto. The merchant even paid the Knyght's lodging in thanks for his escort and dined with him too.

Thus we exited the safe harbour of the inn yard – a stir of restless horses, departing travellers, servants, skulking dogs, and underfoot hens – to enter again the tossing sea that is Bruges.

It is not precisely Sodom or Gomorrah, Heavenly Father, but I know now how Lot felt venturing onto their streets. I do not mean that Bruges is raddled with unmanly sin – at least, not in any evident way. No, the fiend who stirs these waves is Mammon. The cobbled streets bubble with folk pressing this way and that – merchants and men-at-arms, bawds and beggars, friars, fishwives and, above all, weavers. For this is a city built on cloth. The folk who flock to it as gulls to old fish do

not come foremost for the Shrine of the Holy Blood – or even St Donatian’s bones – they come to worship Mammon and to fish in this sea for silver. For Bruges *groots*.

The Vrijdagmarkt was the first – and the worst.

“God’s mouldering bones, Alisoun, what is this madness?”

It was Jankyn who spoke blasphemy and, for once, I believe he spoke (in gist) for us all.

“The Friday market, my sweeting.” Alisoun paused in her swimming through hawkers and hagglers to beam upon her husband. “Full wonderful, nis it not? Such a hum and bustle of people. I dare swearen you’ve ne seen the like, eh my love?”

She’d likely have continued in her eulogy, but the eddying crowd threatened to sweep her away – or under.

“The Friday market, woman?” bellowed Jankyn at her retreating back. “You brought us here on the busiest day of the cursed week, Alys? No wonder we couldn’t find an inn for love nor money, and we’ll likely get our purses lifted, our arses gro—”

But Alys was swimming on.

We emerged safe but battered on the other side of the Vrijdagmarkt and took shelter beneath the nearest shop-front. It was a clothier’s, of course. Thomas was clutching his scrip as if it contained the Holy Grail. Alisoun smoothed her scarlet skirts and looked about with a light in her eye, while her husband patted his person to ensure his various gewgaws remained in place. Only Sir George appeared unperturbed. No doubt upon the battle-field that was the Vrijdagmarkt he felt entirely at home.

“Well? What do we dally for?” demanded Jankyn at last.

“Bide a moment, lovely,” said our leader without turning. Alisoun was already poking about amongst lengths of cloth and samples of dye, a merchant attendant at her elbow.

She began firing questions at him. *Whence didstow get this grain? Blood of St John or beetles of Spain? Corinth, you say? Ha! Likely story. Them of Venice got Corinth all tied up. And what a-God’s-name mordant didstow dunk this one in? See, the colour been all bleared and blotched! And this? Cut with madder or blood of ox?*

By God, I thought it so. The price? Christ's sweet pain, do I look like King Mida to you, my fine Fleming fleecer? And this? Oh, Heaven have mercy, lat us be off!

And so we found ourselves back on the Steenstraat amidst them pushing into and from the Vrijdagmarkt and plunged after our intrepid leader, she who forged forth, the Knyght her shadow and her grim protection.

But not for long.

When I think back, Lord, I realise now that anyone could have attacked her in that cattle-run of a street, Knyght notwithstanding. Even in this populous city, she drew the eye – of mere child-height and swathed all in red.

But she was not – nor was any attempt made, that I saw.

It wasn't for lack of opportunity. My mother declared she set a course for St Basil and the Shrine of the Holy Blood, but she seemed in no hurry to arrive.

The route to the Shrine is lined with the unholy life-blood of Bruges – clothiers' shops. The closer one gets to the Burg wherein the Chapel resides, the more costly become the stuffs displayed. Thus is even the holiest site of this unholy city rendered a slave to silver. Lord, I fear for Alisoun's soul in such a place. I know what temptation this Babylon of cloth represents to Thy daughter. The place even stinks of Hell – not of sulphur but of stale piss and rotting woad. (Alys assures me that urine is an essential component of the arcane rites of dyeing.)

Of course Alys could not help but stray into further shop-fronts as we progressed – no, as we shoved and elbowed – along the Steenstraat towards the Chapel of St Basil. Like a small scarlet bee, she buzzed in and out of haberdashers' and merceries with us, her harassed companions, floundering in her wake. Looking back, Lord, I see now that Sir George was more cognisant of possible danger than any of us, for like the Knyght Protector he had sworn himself to be, he hovered as Your daughter's shadow. Truly, it could not have been for any interest in the multitudinous dye-stuffs Alys felt compelled to examine.

Lord, I pray you, guide Thy daughter. Pilgrimage is not a sightseeing jaunt, and most certainly it should not be blended with commerce. Were things as they ought, Thy daughter Alisoun would cross Christendom on sandaled feet with the sole support of a palmer's staff and bearing little more than a scrip to ease her way.

She would see such a mercenary metropolis as this, Bruges, as opportunity only to beg alms and prostrate herself before the Holy Blood.

But things are not as they ought.

I managed to seize her elbow as she exited one trestle-mountained shop.

“Alisoun. You said we were to visit the Shrine of the Holy Blood.”

She looked up at me, her face alight.

“Oh, certain, Sir John. We been on our way there now. This is the Steenstraat-Street, and I been assured that should I just continue to that villainous great tower there – yea, him a-leaning to the left, can they ne build straight in these parts? – that the Chapel will be fast at hand.”

“But –”

“Oh, take patience, Sir John. There been no rush and hurry,” said she with the seethe of that human sea about us.

Then she leaned toward me. The Knyght remained at her other elbow – the one I did not possess – but something about him seemed to sharpen.

“A deal of Bath cloth comes here, you woot. Certain, I moote slip it by Ostend, else these bully Brugers’d ne permit it sale.” She spoke in somewhat quieter a yell. “My cloth, Sir John. The stuff my ladies swink to spin and weave all year and been thumped to a sheepy pulp in my mill. I’m a-caring for my flock, sweet Parson. Just like you. I wol discover what prices and qualities these Low Country low-lifes dish out. What if they’re doubling my price, by God? What if my ladies are getting short-changed? I pay them what I can, but I dare swear they’d not say no to a few more Bruges groots their way.”

“Praise be to God and all His saints for such selflessness exertion,” said the Quaestor, materialised in time to catch the last of Alys’s speech. One hand gripped his scrip still. The poor man’s eyes looked fit to bulge out of their sockets.

Lord, I endeavour to feel a fitting care for that sinner’s soul – You alone know what labour it costs me – but for once I felt a charity completely unforced. He looked as harried as I felt – and perhaps I even entered a little upon his scepticism.

Alys prodded the cleric in the ribs. “Enough of that, thou Siphoner of Sins. Oh certain, I’ll admit I ne nolde mind a few extra groot myself. Pilgrimage’s a pricey business, ‘specially when the burden of cost ne been so evenly divided.”

“Oh, and my Wife will not be content till she has dragged us through every clothier’s establishment in Bruges. One would think she might glean a fair sense of the cost and quality from a select –”

“We go into them that are needful to be gone into.” Alys plunked hands on hips and glowered first at Jankyn and then the rest of us. “And I ne recall insisting any of you come sniffing after me like stray whelps, whining and yapping and a-biting at my heels. Had it doon you more pleasance, you could’ve stuck tight in The Crone, but no, you all moote pleyn and grouch after me.”

Which shut us up effectively enough, and Alys ploughed on triumphant. Sir George remained, silent and solid, by her side, while the rest of us lingered at a greater distance, griping and attempting not to be trodden upon.

Sweet Father, guide Alys to Thy strait and narrow path. To be a true palmer, to truly atone for her sins, she must embrace the privations of the journey, physical *and* spiritual. They are vital to pilgrimage. Sufferings scour the soul previous to the approach to Thy Sepulchre. They prepare it, they strip it bare. We ought to beg hospitality from hospices and monasteries, sleep on church floors rather than recline in costly inns such as this ‘Crone’. True, it is impracticable to walk, given my daughter’s shortness of leg and desire to return to Bath before the year is out, but need we also bear with us a train of packhorses worthy of a London mercer? What is worse, she must act the mercer too.

I have tried to reason with her, Heavenly Father, but she will not hearken to me.

And so, Lord forgive me, I neglected to watch my daughter as I ought. Bruges aroused my ire. The crowds of Mammon-worshippers did not sweeten my temper and I blamed my daughter-mother for dragging me through them. It was likely only by Sir George’s constant care that ensured Alys achieved the Chapel of St Basil whole and unharmed.

For it was at the Chapel that, as well You know, Lord, it occurred.

St Basil’s Chapel (where lies the relic of the Holy Blood) is a squat two-storey construction tucked into the corner of the Burg Square. The chapel is small and old.

It huddles beside that monument to mercantile magnificence, the *Stadhuis* – the City Hall, a monster of worldly vanity as yet being built. Yet beside it, the chapel was unmistakeable – not for its splendour or size, but for the mass of people attempting to squeeze simultaneously through its portal. My relief at having at last reached the place shrivelled.

“You want us to go in *there*, Alys?” hissed Jankyn.

I looked at him. The youth had seemed subdued on his passage along the Steenstraat. Even now he did not brag and bluster as is his wont. He finds himself a little fish flung into a veritable ocean in comparison to the pond that is Bath. Forgive me, Lord, if I felt somewhat unsympathetically that such experience would only benefit the boy. Myself, I was a mere tadpole.

“This been the Chapel of the Holy Blood, nis it nat?” Alys directed the query at those previous to us before the door.

She had to repeat the question a half dozen times before someone cognised her West Country English. Eventually a middle-aged burgher grunted that this was indeed the case.

“See, my loveling? You behold before us the verray purpose of our palmering across Bruges. The bright Blood of Him who died for us lies within.”

“Bright?” Jankyn snorted. “Prepare for disappointment, woman. It’ll be long dried to dust by now.”

I heard the Quaestor suck in a breath. To the man’s credit, he appeared genuinely taken aback at this blasphemy. As for Alys, it seemed the serpent itself made a progress across her face. A wriggle and writhe of expression that bespoke ten emotions in one. I do not blame her. All know the Holy Saviour’s blood is eternal. Perdurable.

“It’s a cursed rabbit-hole,” tried Jankyn again, jerking his head at the portal. “We’ll never fit!”

“Artow so broad, my husband? Or perhaps you been too sinful to kneel before Our Saviour’s blood? Surely nat. But as you leste. Them that ne desiren to enter need nat.” And she looked round at the rest of us, then fixed her eyes upon Jankyn again. “But ne forget there been indulgences to be had – if you offer up, God woot. Go on, grope in thy scrip, my sweeting. Chink a coin and bow a knee.”

The lad muttered something about it being more pressing by far that Alys do some offering. The Quaestor leaned closer at that – must the man ever be on the sniff for sin? – and Jankyn desisted forthwith.

“Indulgences are worth nothing if you are not shriven and penitent first,” I reminded them. “There are those who imply that all that is needful is to pass lucre to a pardoner or a priest. It is foul untruth. Sin cannot be swapped for silver.”

The Quaestor pulled a face but did not contest me. And so we advanced – not so much in orderly line as like sheep to the shambles. It was as well that Alisoun was shadowed by the Knyght, else she ran the risk of being crushed underfoot – but one does not crush a knight, even one without armour.

“Why are there so many people, Alys?” I asked somewhat plaintively as we squeezed, shoulder to shoulder, up a womb-like passage of airless stone steps.

“What? Dostow nat know, Sir John? And you a man of God, too.” She smiled up at me impishly. Her face shone in the dim stairwell.

I forebore to answer.

“It been Holy Friday, John,” said she. “And, God woot, *every* Friday been holy in Bruges.”

I must have looked sceptical, for my daughter saw that a lesson was needed.

“It were on a Friday that Lord Jhesu gat pinned to the Cross,” she said as we inched up one hard-won step at a time. “That same Friday as the soldier did stick a pole in Our Saviour’s poor dear side, and Blissed Joe of Arimathea took cloth and soaked up the blood that did splatter out.”

“So?” muttered Jankyn from just behind. He close enough to breathe upon his Wife’s neck – if he bent a little – and beside him the Knyght breathed down mine.

“So that same blood been enshrined *here*, in Bruges, in yon chapel above.”

“Well, what of it?”

My neck played host to Jankyn’s spittle.

“So it been only upon a Friday that them parsimonious priests bear forth the Cloth for veneration, my lief. Any other day of the week availeth not, lest it be in Lent. But there been more ...”

And this last was directed at me.

“Wights from ferforth and wide flock here for Friday noon to beholden a miracle.”

“What miracle? Tight-fisted Flemings parting with coins?”

She ignored Jankyn. She leaned closer to me.

“The miracle of the liquefaction, Sir John. Friday at noon Christ’s own dear Blood turneth from dry clots to ruby liquid and runs free for us sinners’ sakes once again.”

We’d achieved the top of the stairs – just. A blocky semi-circular arch in the old Roman style ushered us in. I breathed a little more deeply. It was air heavy with candle-smoke, stale sweat and fresh desire.

The desire for a miracle. Liquifaction. Healing of hurts. A dissolving into You.

As if the narrow, dark stair were a reverse passage from world to womb, we emerged to find ourselves unborn. We, seekers after You – who are Mother, Father, Alpha and Omega – shuffled into a cramped, heavy-boned chapel, craving for our sacred umbilical. Desiring to be re-attached. This is why I love churches, O Lord. They are spaces apart from this fallen world. Echoes of Heaven – or they should be.

I glanced at Alys, affecting concern but in truth eager to see a similar craving upon her features. She was on tiptoe, craning to see between shoulders higher than her head, and yes, desire was scrawled across her face. Desire for the Blood. It should have pleased me, but ... well, I found that it did not.

It was nearing noon. The sun was invisible and the huge belfry that had guided our way was as yet silent, but the mood of those within the chapel was time-keeper enough. There was an urgency in the shuffling, a godly pushing and creeping forward. A mass of humanity solidifying towards a holy core. I understood Alys’s dawdling through the streets of Bruges now – she had been delaying arrival until the time of Thy Son’s death. And the cloth along Steenstraat? Ah, I see it now. The cloth was a mere blind to her purpose. Why my daughter must dissemble and distract, I do not know, but it is undeniably her way. She has not always been thus. But today at least it was for a worthy end. I too wished to behold Your Son’s blood and witness the miracle of the liquefaction.

Forgive me, Lord, perhaps I desired too strenuously, too selfishly. My wish was granted, but not in the manner of my desiring.

We pressed forward – as did everyone else – and the walls of flesh closed in. Mortal flesh longing for transcendence. An elbow jabbed my ribs. Some matron’s bosom embraced my arm. I recoiled. A gravelly voice behind me invoked *Gott*. I stuttered sideways, mumbling apology, and somebody’s clog descended upon my sandal. And that was all it took. My flailing begat an eddy in the crowd. Alisoun, urgent to get to the front, made use of her size. She ducked under armpits and nudged around hips and, in the heartbeat it took to steady myself, had vanished from my sight.

Jammed shoulder to shoulder on all sides, I could advance no further. Even now, the priestly procession was emerging from the sanctuary – a glittering snake of chapel functionaries in their resplendent best. The foremost held aloft a cloth-of-gold cushion. Upon it rested a reliquary. All faces turned thither.

The noon bells began to clang.

An albed and chasubled priest set aside the cushion and took up the reliquary in reverent fingers. I tiptoed and strained and saw up-raised a crystal tube, stoppered at one end with wax and innumerable windings of gold wire, perhaps half a foot long. He lifted the precious thing on high. The flame of a hundred candles flickered off rock-crystal and gold. All eyes fixed upon the object of our adoration – or so I must assume, for my own eyes were fixed upon the exquisite object held within: a yellowish scrunch of cloth, brown-splotched.

A scrap of old rag, and infinitely more precious than its elaborate casing.

A convulsive movement to my right. It was the Quaestor. His lids were wide and blinked not, and on his face was writ naked hunger. I twisted back. *The Blood. I must witness the Blood.* The priest held the reliquary high. The bells of Bruges sang out in tongues of brass. The multitude crumpled to their knees in one outward expanding ripple. My legs too buckled in obedience.

And that was when it happened.

A single scream.

Then, “*The Blood ...*”

“*Nee, BLOED!*”

The murmur of the chapel swelled to a babble.

“What is it?”

“See? There. Blood. Real blood.”

But I could no longer see the reliquary, for people were rising all about me. No longer unified in humble adoration, the massed flesh about me swarmed and tossed, and need rose like fury in my throat. It was Friday, noon. The moment of liquefaction was at hand and *I could not see it*.

Forgive me, Lord. In a moment of pure selfishness, of blazing desire that would not be gain-said, I employed my shoulders, height, and priestly garb and forged a path through the crowd. Those immediately before the altar were still upon their knees. My view was clear – but the relic was not. No priestly hand upraised. No crystal reliquary. *Where was the Blood?*

“Sir John!”

Ire. I was seeking the Divine and Jankyn chose that moment to demand my attention.

“A God’s name, come quickly, Sir John! Christ above – move! You want to save her soul? Well, do it now! She ... oh sweet Christ, I think she needs the Last Rites.”

That feeling, O Lord. Never do I wish to experience it again. It is like a bucket of ice-water poured down one’s gullet, like a blow square upon the nose. *Alys*.

I strode over the bodies like Jesus upon the water, hearing not their squeaks of protest. The Knyght was kneeling. He was bending over a pool of red. In it lay Alys. She who is my daughter and mother lay prone upon the cold stone floor, scarlet skirts in a welter about her.

I might never have noticed the hilt of the dagger that protruded from her torso were it not for the spill of darker red about it.

So much for the relic. The only drops of blood I saw in the Chapel that day issued from Alisoun of Bath.

23. Steenstraat

Lordings, I am in pain.

We beat our way back down the Steenstraat, one Parson, Knyght, Quaestor, Bawd, and Husband, and for once I am in the lead. I employ elbows, boot, and tongue to clear our path. I curse Bruges, its patron saints, and all Brugites in our way. I wax inventive on their paternity and copulatory preference. I even blaspheme the Blood. Perhaps it is as well that most upon the seething streets understand only my tone and not my terms, but trust me, gentils – I do not care. The Knyght steps in my wake. I cannot see his face, nor he mine. Again, it is just as well.

Sir George bears in his arms a bloody burden. I labour under one of my own. I diffuse mine upon the streets of Bruges. Sir George may merely drip.

Understand me. Mine is pure suffering espiritual. There is a gaping great lack in my soul.

For I have it not.

St Stephen above, I came so cursed close! For one shining moment, the relic lay an arm's reach from my grasp. It rested, momentarily forgotten in the jabber and flurry about the fallen Bawd, serene on its cloth-of-gold cushion. True, the cushion was in turn balanced upon the processional priest's hand, but the fellow's attention was most firmly fixed elsewhere.

Doubtless, it was quite the scene upon which to fix. One Dame of Bath, puddled upon the Chapel floor. Those about her squeaking and gasping and waving their hands. Her three knights errant making a fuss entirely magnificent. A babel of advice and imprecations, and the relic-priest craning to make sense of the whole. But I saw it not – except as reflected in the priest's face. And upon a surface of spotless crystal.

Sweet Heaven and all its saints, I see it still. It is a thing to haunt my dreams: a crystal phial wound with gold. A thing of beauty and worth, no doubt, but that contained within is beyond price. It is the very Blood that bought the sins of Man.

It should have bought mine too.

My lords, I admit I know not what I intended. To kick priestly legs from under him? (I demonstrate now on the calf of a portly merchant too slow to shift out of my way. The man falls not. I observe my boot-print on his duckling-yellow hose and elbow on.) Or to simply grab the relic and run?

As it turned out, neither would have served. The priest moved a little – perhaps he scented my approaching purpose – and as he did so, the candle-flame revealed a golden snake, a thin and evil beast coiled about the holy one's neck.

And I had no choice but slump back. To retreat, unwhole, unhealed.

I could only obtain the relic if I first severed the priest's head from his body. The bloody phial was affixed, chain-wise, about his throat.

24. The Crone

*For hadde myn housbonde pissed on a wall,
Or doon a thyng that sholde han cost his life,*

...
*... to my niece, which that I loved weel,
I wolde han toold his conseil every deel.*

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

"For the millionth time, Sir John, I ne got no notion who stuck that pin in me."

It is not precisely the truth, but that's the joy of the double negative – neither has she precisely lied. She didn't see the hand, nor the arm attached, nor the person at its end. But she has an idea or two.

"Likely it were an accident," she went on, and then at her Parson's outraged expression, continued yet further. "It were only a little knife, the sort any wight'd bear in his belt."

John shakes his head. "But why then take it *out* of his belt, and in a chapel too?"

Cecily wavers in her sewing – the darning of a dagger-sized rent in a crimson corsete. "A thief?" she suggests.

John shakes again. "It was no cut-purse. They punctured her person and left her wallet whole."

"So? It were a fumble-fingered filcher," snaps the punctured one. "What, dostow proponen someone were *paid* to poke me? A mercenary murderer, by God? What in Heaven have I done to warrant a prick to the heart, and me a stranger in Bruges too?"

"You said someone pushed you on the boat," her Parson says.

"Oh, likely I was mistook then too." Alys waves a careless hand, and then grabs at her side and sucks in a squeak.

Cecily favours her with a reproving stare, her needle a-hover.

"Do try to stay still, Aunt, or you'll start bleeding again."

“I’m bleeding already, more’s the pity,” answers Alisoun. “Oh no, not *there*, thou silly linnet. Not after that nice surgeon-man bound me up so well. Such precious strong arms the wight had too. But you can seek out my monthly linens, Cess, and I’ll likely require a hand to put hem on as well.”

“But only this morning you said Well, you wanted no food and your stomach was ...”

Yea, and Cess had flapped and fussed and seemed disproportionate concerned and insisted that she take an extra-strong draught of her herby brewing. Alys had downed the vile stuff just to make the maid feel better.

“Well, I clept too soon, didn’t I? Stands to reason. We ne been palmering two weeks, and here’s me crowing I’m with babe already. Well, God woot I han’t accumulated enough holiness as yet, so he maketh my womb bare yet again.” She grins at Cess, although it is more of a grimace. “Oh, dread it not, I’ll get Jankyn onto the bisynesse just as soon as I stop dripping gore. I’ll gat a bump in this belly ere I gad back to Bath.”

Which topic effectively stuffs a garter in John’s mouth. He opens it once or twice, as if desirous to return to his theme that *someone stuck a knife in her*, and *specifically her*. But Cess is already rooting around in the bags, and John is looking more one-footed by the heartbeat.

Alisoun shrugs – carefully – from her semi-recumbent position, propped amongst the best pillows ‘The Crone’ can offer. He has a point, has her attentive priest, but it takes more than a chance-aimed misericorde to puncture her heart. Besides, what does he want her to do about it? She thinks it not a serious attempt – or perhaps no attempt at all. After all, a Knyght slices people for a living, and a roaming Quaestor no doubt knows how to defend the silver he pardons out of people. If either of them were behind the hilt, likely she’d be laid out, cold upon stone instead. And Jankyn? Well, he might puff and bluster, but she knows her boy. He never wants her dead. He loves his Alys, show it strangely though he might. Besides, they were all out of reach when the blade pierced her skin. She had been in the verray act of kneeling before the Blood, and Well, the wound is not deep and she could do with a rest and a touch of cossetting. A bit of blood let is supposed to be good for one’s health.

Indeed it is a mystery, but one Alisoun finds herself oddly unaffected by. Death has whispered in her ear, and she has told him to get to the devil – or something to that effect. There is triumph to be savoured in its wake, a sweet sip of life tasted anew.

And she needed a break from this tedious saddle-work. God knows, but her buttocks are as tight as a usurer's fist. She can barely bend to tie on her shoes. Indeed, she has had to enlist Cecily to help her dress every dawn since Glastonbury. Yea, she will take her ease in The Crone a little longer, dine on Bruges mussels and wash them back with Rhenish, and certain, that merchant-man Minotto will press on to his watery home without her. It is worth the day or so's delay to rid herself of his too-persevering presence. Jig about in the saddle before that and the surgeon assures her she will leak like a sieve.

Cecily has stood, a bundle of linens in hand and the belt with which to secure them, loincloth-like. Yet still – against all clerical instinct – John remains near.

“Oh, get you gone, thou dithering priest. I am most vigilant guarded, dread it nat. Likely that been why nothing worse came about in the Chapel.”

She chuckles, recalling her boy, her Knyght and her Quaestor in the aftermath of the event. Why, the whole thing had been better than a play – Jankyn flying into husbandly rage at the surrounding gapers, and then the Knyght clasping her to his manly chest all through the streets of Bruges, with the Quaestor parting the waters before them with a loud and most fluently foul tongue. *Of course* the none of them pricked her.

“Cess here will soon fuss me better, John dear. Go finden St Donatian's bones or make acquaintance of the Beguines, Sir Parson. I am cared for well enow. God knows, my niece mother-hens me with less clucking than you. Go paternoster for my soul, if you leste.”

She shoos him doorwards with a motion of one hand, but then pauses, struck by a stray thought.

“Oh, dostow wish to aid in my recovery, Sir John?”

He nods, a flare of hope in his so-sincere eyes.

“Well then,” she declares. “If you lay eye upon that fiendish Venetian, you tell him that it been surgeon’s orders he ne bother me again – on likelihood of mine immediate expiration!” She gives a dark look. “Or his.”

Now there is only Cecily left, and Alys can give way to weakness. The pillows soak her up. The elation ebbs, leaving a shakiness to her innards. Nor can she settle to sleep. The Wife of Bath takes not her ease in sun-lit hours. Besides, even if she were so inclined, she cannot – for her niece, more usually a creature of silence, begins now to make conversation.

She is not very good at it.

“I thought I’d lost you, Aunt. When they brought you in ...”

“What? Shende me so soon in our pilgrimage? The Lord ne wishes to meet me so immediate, nieceling, if He hath any want to meet me at all. So ne carp to me of knives and near-misses. I gat better things to bend my mind to.”

“The thing is ... well, it made me consider, Aunt.”

“Well – what then? Spew it forth, girl. Spit it on the floorboards. Vomit the thing up.”

“Your story. The one you were telling aboard ship and after Calais. It was interrupted.”

“Aha! So now we have it. You ne desiren me to die for I’ve left a story untold. Sweet saints above, that’s balm to my heart, that is.” Alisoun lets forth a crow of mirth, only to grip her side.

“Have a care, mother!”

Alisoun eyes the hovering maid.

“You miscalled me, chit. You got plenty of mother back on the Wolds, a-waiting hand and foot upon my un-sainted brother. Besides, there been barely more’n ten years bitwix you an me.” Closer to fifteen, actually, but she’d prefer not to count. “So ne goon a-making me feel old before my time.”

But she softens nevertheless. *Mother*. Now there’s a faint dream, or was it a nightmare? She is happy to take this particular instance as sign of Cecily’s affection. She supposes she has been mother to the wench in her way.

Cecily has ducked her head. "I'm sorry, Aunt. I did not mean Well, I know you have had a child."

"What? What wight toldstow that? Oh, take no kep. Your Pa or my gab-mouthed Ma, doubtless. God rest her soul."

Cecily does not raise her head.

"Oh, doon no diligence, girl. I lost it, certain, but I have hopes of another." She grins at Cecily's bent head. "The trick's in getting Jankyn to attend to his duty, eh? God woot, but there was a time when yon was so assiduous about his task that I were afeared the yeast'd rise out of season, but no, the Good Lord watched over me."

She thinks she sees a flush creeping over Cecily's pale cheeks.

"Ha!" She laughs again, but more cautiously this time. "I forgat you lack in experience, niece of mine. It ne been healthy, I wene – lack of experience. Han't you heard of the green-sickness? You need to lat loose some of them humours you got bunged up, girl. It'd doon you no end of delice."

"Aunt, please."

"Call it motherly advice if you leste."

There are blotches of colour on Cecily's cheeks when she looks up. "Aunt, can we speak of something else? Continue instead with your tale, I pray you."

Alisoun arches her brows now. "Well now, to continue the tale'd be to talk of mine first marriage, nolde it nat? And I trust you know what duty been laid on a wife once she is of one flesh with him she weds?"

The blotches seems to shift upon her niece's face. "I would hear of your first marriage and and of the bearing of your child," she murmurs. "I need not hear of that act you name duty."

"Oh wouldstow, by God? Getting clucky for a chick of your own, artow nieceling? Well, if you wolde have me pain myself in the telling, be sure and prepared for a little yourself."

Alys gives Cecily a meaningful look. Cecily returns it steadily enough.

Alisoun shrugs. "Well then, ne say I ne did warn you. And fetch me my spinning, and you can darn Jankyn's murrey hose withal. You been in for some heavy listening, I tell you true. Now where did I let off ...?"

“You had just described the night of your wedding when we approached the guard-post, Aunt.”

“Ah.” Alys grins. “Well then, I been up to mine first tournament bitwix the sheets, say sooth?”

Cecily has fetched the requisites. She is about to settle on the stool by Alys’s bed, but now stops short.

The Wife chuckles. “Oh, abide, thou bashful hind. I’ll spare thy tender ears – for now. Besides, there ne been much to tell of that first night. The interesting stuff came after – yea, the full curious and villainous stuff. On my wedding night old curly-top just wedged himself bitwix my thighs and –”

“Aunt!”

Alys sighs most windy. The expended breath ill-accords with her grin.

“Oh, you’re greener than a cabbage-worm, niece o’ mine. God woot, I’d been wed fifteen years by your age, girl. Fifteen years and two husbands, maugree the odd adventure betwixt and between. Time to get yourself a bit of experience, nieceling, long past time. There been things full needly to know if you been inclined to some engendering. I han’t ever seen you so much as blush at a lad, lat alone keep company with him. You wolde hear about the babe I lost? Well, pain for pain, girl. You can hear of the making of it. It’ll do you good.”

Alisoun sees the girl grasp Jankyn’s hose a touch over-firm. It occurs to Alys to wonder at the girl’s determination to hear the tale.

“Just tell the story, Aunt.”

“Certain and full sooth. But you’ll fetch me a mug of Rhenish first, if you leste. Rhineland wine, by God, and ne that hog-piss Bruges beer. All this gabbing gives me a contrarious itchy throat, and you got a duty to tend to my health, nieceling mine, nat maken me croak like the Flemish frog.”

Ever obedient, Cecily lays her sewing aside, although Alys detects a touch of pique. She grins broader. There is pleasure in a story left hanging, especially when she is the one hanging it.

Cecily is barely back within the door, mug in hand, when the girl gives forth. It appears that Thomas of Rouncivale is sloping about the upper level of The Crone, looking as shifty as you like.

“He is prowling on purpose to overhear your tale, Aunt!”

Alys shrugs. “Abroache the door and lat him in, then. I’m imparting no secrets. Come to consider it, Long Tom’d benefit from a lesson or two in sheet-work himself. He been no celibate shave-pan, and I’m struck with the notion that yon twig is a little tangled over the use of his tackle.”

Cecily’s eyes flash. “Too late, Aunt. I told him to make himself scarce.”

Alys grins. “Certain you did, Cess love. Now, where was I?”

“Your babe, Aunt.”

“Ha! There you goon a-playing the virgin again. No, I was up to the *making* of it. Oh, dread it not, I was up to the making of much bisynesse else besides, and of a deal greater importance too, given what villainy did follow.”

25. Heere continues the Wyves Tale

*bis creatur went owt of hir mende & was wondyrlye vexid & labowryd wyth spyritys
half yer viij wekys & odde days.
And in pis tyme sche sey, as hir thowt, develys opyn hir mowthys al inflaumyd wyth
brennyng*

The Book of Margery Kempe

Alisoun considers a moment.

Cecily observes her with untinted expression. Around them, The Crone sinks into dusk. Her niece will soon require a second candle to prick and poke Jankyn's hose by. Alys has discarded her spinning. Even winding wool pricks her side with pain.

"In all, I weren't too wrecched married to Wilkin," says the Wife at last, then quickly amends. "Oh, God knows, I got full twitchy toward evening. But by daylight, Wilkin was ever the doting dotard. He tended me like I were some brood mare, I tellen you true. No hard swinking, more potage than I could puke, and all the learning in the bisynesse as I could crave." She grins. "They chid him behind his back, did the gossips. They clept him hoary old January a-wearing himself out on little May. They ne stint their tongues around me, you see. Not the Bathy dames, by God. I ne been one of them, and, send hem sorrow, but they let me know it. I was new meat. One of their drab daughters might've had Wilkin, but no – he moote take some villeinish runt from the Wolds as his plough field."

Some scent of the time comes back to her. That first year.

She had had no friend in Bath save the priest that sold her. Wilkin, he was not a friend. He was Master Clothier to his quasi-apprentice by day and, whensoever he set eyes upon her, a progenitor of laden looks. Assessments that crawled up and down, returning forever to belly and breasts. Still, he was a good master for the most part. She learned. His journeyman had vanished with the plague – run off or rotting, Wilkin knew not which. He had but two pimply apprentices. Add to that, a sprinkling of labourers, ignorant for the most part about

wool, but full capable of heaving heavy bales around. Wilkin was forever carping about what ignorant gnofs they were. Good labour was hideous hard to find after the Death, quod he. Nevertheless, Wilkin would not have his precious brood mare strain herself with oxen's effort. He did use her for the finer work, though, which was sweet as a bragget to Alisoun. So she learned weaving. Nothing over-nice – no twill-weave nor brocade, just a plain and serviceable two-shaft tabby. What was the point of fancy when the fabric would shortly be buffeted to a pulp beneath the loving hammers of a fulling mill? She plied the shuttle until her arms ached, and then she plied some more. She shadowed Wilkin to the mill and the tentering fields to observe the pounding and stretching of their cloth. There she eyed the cloth for holes, for Samson at the mill had the same problems as Wilkin – scant labour and half-trained at that. You couldn't trust them to stretch sack-cloth, let alone prime broadcloth.

“Then I gat with child,” says Alison.

A bald statement for a simple truth. Certain, she hadn't liked the thought of Wilkin's seed taking root in her belly. An alien growing and spreading. But at least it had one major benefit.

“The Lord and all His sweet-singing angels be praised, Wilkin stint his nightly rutting,” Alys says, good and loud. “But it ne been because he ne desiren me, by God. I could read that plain in his licker's eyes. No, he been a-feared his bouncings would disfigure the babe. Besides, any priest'll tell you: poke without intent to procreate, and all Venus's work turneth to sin. Wilkin ne been about to begrime his future son-and-heir, you mayen be sure.”

She assays a smile, and her cheeks pull uncomfortable tight. “The old holour were probably glad of a respite. He'd kept it up for ungodly months on end, and *up* were quite a feat for a ram of his vintage. Much more wearing away at his sely instrument and it'd be worn quite to a stump.”

She grins at her niece but does not really see her. Better to grin at such thoughts, yea, bare your teeth at them, than to admit them entrance.

More than time to trot along.

“When?” says Cecily.

“When?” Alys barks a laugh. “What, how long before a man’s tool been blunted for evermore? How would I know, girl? It han’t happened yet, not under me.”

“No, Aunt. When did you become pregnant?”

“Ha.” The Wife waves a hand. “I disrecall. It been of no matter.”

A muscle shifts in Cecily’s cheek.

“When, Aunt?”

“Stibborn, artow? Well, that been all to the good. You take after your Aunt, God bless. As for the *when*, like I say – I disrecall. Somedeel toward the end of the first year, it was. But it been no matter for I lost it.”

A silence.

“I tellen no lie, girl: I lost it in a bloody puddle of blood, and things just slid right on downhill thereon.”

“But you had another.”

“Oh, Heaven han mercy, dostow think I cared much that I’d lost it? Yon spawn of a rutting old ram? Oh, I admit to some cheek-water at first. Call it weakness of body, if you will. Certain, I’d lost a goodly bucket of blood and gone pale as a winding sheet withal.”

Cecily too is looking a little pale. Still, that is not unusual. Like her Aunt in skin as well as stubbornness, she is. Milk pale. One blink of the sun, and lo, there arrives a freckle.

“No, it was Wilkin’s reaction so soon as I were churched and cleansed that been the root of my tribulation. He set to with a mission, eftsoon as he could. I’d proved I could set a babe baking, so now he moote sow a seed to stay in me.” She takes a breath. “And the more manikins he sowed, the more siker it was that one’d take root. So he reasoned, I reckon. Not much else to explain it, why he did couch his lance both dawn and dusk, and sometimes at bright noon, even when the old licker were clearly out of spit. Had to take his hand to himself, oftime. Or mine.”

Alisoun raises her eyes to the beamed ceiling. Cobwebs dangle dust and mouse-turds. Yea, it’s been a while since anyone swept up there.

“Well, all this swinking, Cess, and I was getting full bruised, within and without. Wilkin gave me no peace. It ne been just of an evening he did do his duty

now, but whensoever the fellow felt his chances were fair. So what repair had I but to run to the church?"

"What?" Cecily's voice is low. "You sought sanctuary?"

"Oh, no. Least, not of a permanent nature. Just a bit of temporary respite. He nolde not poke me in church, pray God."

"Aunt!"

Alys crows. "Sweet saints above, what vice! What right vicious villainy! Dighting done on virgin ground. By God, I reckon they'd have to reconsecrate it, scrub the verray stones with holy liquor." Then she grins. "John'd know. I'll enquire it of him."

Cecily's brow lifts. Alys detects the ghost of a smile.

"No, thou pigeon, I sought sanctuary in Sir John." Alys pulls a face. "Yea, the self-same priest as lymed me in his Pa's bed, right as a bird on a branch."

"Not exactly, Aunt."

"Good as. If the selfish celibate ne had lusted after a heavenly crown for the saving of souls, then he'd have been Wilkin's son-and-heir. Christ above, I could've married him instead. No, confession been holy sacrament and duty, Cess. Parson John moote bend his ear to whatsoever grubby doings his parishioners require to be shrived of – in return for a coin or two, certain, or perhaps a plucked hen." She raises her voice a little. "Quaestors be dighted. Why sink lucre in their purse when I had a parish priest at hand?"

Cecily twists about to stare at the door, then back at her Aunt.

"Is he out there?" the girl murmurs.

"Like as not." Alisoun shrugs. "If ever a man were hungry for sin, it were that one."

Cecily stands. "Well, he can remove his hide to some place more fitting. The stews might suit, after what he tried in Exeter." She flings open the door.

There is no-one there.

She steps outside. She looks to left and right.

Alys chuckles.

Cecily turns on her with narrowed eyes.

“As I was saying,” Alys says. “I sought refuge in Sir John. By God, I fair gnawed the poor lad’s ear to rags. Dostow woot he wanted to hear how his Pa nolde not let me alone by day or by moonlight, him who was a whiter-an-chaste priestling? Oh, I confessed. I poured forth all my tribulation. I’ve ne been so shriven in my life. But what wight else could I turn to? Ma had flown back to roost in Hawkesbury. Her precious boy-chick had flapped home with ne no apology, trundling with him twice the flock he did asterte with and one female sheep-herder withal. Seems he swept up all the shepherdless sheep bitwix Bath and Gloucester, them that wandered when their keepers mouldered with Plague. Like the Good Shepherd himself, he’d gathered up strays to his bosom, save that Jhesu ne did no thing for coin. Dickon, though, he made profit from pestilence and, by Christ, enriched himself no end.”

“I know your brother’s history, Aunt. I asked for your tale, not his.”

“Oh, keep your kirtle on, girl. The man’s my blood, head of mine family once Pa was stuck underground. He should’ve looked after us, not hid as an owl in the hills and give me no choice but to been Wilkin’s chamber-of-Venus and harness mare.”

“He couldn’t protect you if he died of the Pest.”

Alys snorts, none too graceful. “As I was saying,” she continues. “Or maybe I weren’t. Wilkin was poking me like he could purvey an heir on the spot, and I was a-limping off to St Michael’s across the lane everich-other day to spill my sorry cheer into my dear Parson’s ear. And what comfort dostow suppose Sir John gave me? Some harlotry about how temporal suffering been but fleeting sorrow and I moote pray to the Lord for strength. By God, he wolde have preferred me to confide in any fleasome friar or mat-haired hermit I might care to select. Even to old Lucifer rather than in his sweet sely self. But he knew his office – and he knew his guilt – and so he dug holes in his palms that he might hear his spiteous step-Ma pleyn of his Pa’s over-active instrument with some seeming of godly fortitude.”

She grins. It is a stretching of the lips only peripherally associated with pleasure.

“God knows, it were plain that one of us would crack. Wilkin, for all that bouncing about, John, for carnal beseigement, or me, I reckon fair in two.” Alys pauses for effect. “At end, it was me.”

“What do you mean?” Cecily demands, right on cue.

“I got with child, and hallelujah to that, say I. One loaf in the oven, well-kneaded and rising nicely. And just when I wene the world might settle back down to normal, what does Wilkin goon and do?”

Cecily does nothing but raise a weary brow. Alys sees her glance towards the half-shuttered window. Cecily sees that she sees. The light is dimming, the vesper bells have rung. Their menfolk are likely to be back soon. *Hurry up with your tale*, Cecily’s brow declares.

“He says I moote do naught to disturb the small Wilkin. By his avisement, that meant I abide at home, sealed up tight in Broad Street, yea, and sit like a hen on eggs. I may doon no thing more taxing than spinning, that been his decree. God above, I was half crazed before the first week crawled by, I say you sooth. No weaving. (Looms been vicious great things, quod he – why he had a ‘prentice fair squash himself once.) No riding abroad – all that jolting might bump the bun loose. Best to stay in the house for fear of foul air. Certain, for who knew when Madam Pest wolde wander back?”

Alys draws breath as if she is drowning.

“I ne got sick. No morning messes for me. Save for the ceasing of my courses there been scant to notice, so why shut me up, for Christ’s sake? I pleaded with Wilkin, but he were adamant. Yea, he were as hard as verray flint on that score. He wol have his heir, and he wol have him whole, so for nine wrecched months I sat a-twisting endless thread.”

Alys scrubs a hand across her brow.

“And those were the longest grinting months of my life. I should’ve took warning. Time’s like wool, I wene. Springy. Stretch it out and it waxes full long. It’ll stretch right thin and be fulfilled of a whole quantity of nothing. But loosen thy grip, and it shrinketh right back. Like fulling and tentering too. Cloth-just-fulled been dense and tight as time squeezed tight, when before it was so airy you might spy

fair through it. Well, with all that stretched time, I should've known I was heading for the fulling mill."

Cecily frowns at her.

"What do you mean, Aunt?"

"Time squeezed tight. Squeezed so cursed tight, I mayn't tease the warp from the weft even now."

Cecily's jaw is outlined so sharp Alys fancies she can use it to shear teased cloth.

"You are being opaque, Aunt."

"Ha. Opaque, there's a word for it. Or try obstrepeous, obscurious, and – at end – fair-nigh oblivious. (Praise be to Sir John that he doth speak weighty words at me.) No, to clep it short and plain: I had the babe. Now *that* was a squeezing, you mayen be sure. God in Heaven, I yelled 'til my throat was gravel and dust. Well, you've beheld women in childbirth, han't you niece? Or heard them, least. Well, they ne got nothing on me for setting the very cruck-beams to quaking. Bellowed, I did. Cursed and screamed at Wilkin for a caitiff and a gnof. Not that he heard. The old ram'd scuttled down to the alehouse soon as the midwife arrived, or so she carped. By the time he stuck his head through the door, I was down to raspy whimpers and clean out of curses.

How are they? mine husband did quaver.

She's too narrow, snaps yon midwife. Why'd you have to wed a runtish child, Wilkin o' Bath?"

"She didn't speak so," Cecily says. "Not in front of you."

Alys shrugs, just one shoulder this time. The opposite side to that perforated with the unholy knife.

"She spake some such thing. Oh, ne ask me for a recitation. I was too busy dying.

Shall I fetch the priest? Wilkin whispers, as if I ne could guess his meaning.

Give it until morning, says yon midwife. No need to pull the priest out of bed yet.

And just to prove I ne been shente yet, I let bawl another bellow. No, I lie. Reckon it were more of a croak."

“But you survived, Aunt. And the babe too.”

Has she dreamt the words? To be sure, the latter part of the birthing is about as clear as a drunkard’s dream.

“Wostow mean, the babe survived?” snaps Alys, jerking upright. Of course, a clutch at her side immediately follows. “Sweet Heaven above, you’re meant to be nursing, not needling me, girl.”

“It survived the birthing.”

“Oh. Maybe. Survive, die, I ne recall. It makes no kep. Whatsoever it did, it was long gone by the time I came to.”

“What do you mean?” Cecily’s voice is soft. “You never saw your child? You never asked to hold it?”

“What? Clasp a mouldering corpse? Oh, to cuddle maggots and worms! Listen girl, I ne recall how long I lay abed afterwards. Days? Weeks? Wrecched months, for all I woot. It was *gone* by the time I came to, I tell you. Gone!”

Cecily looks a little pale about the gills. Her mouth opens and closes like a landed fish. Finally: “I don’t understand.”

“Then look!” Alys tosses back the coverture. Her smock is runkled about her waist to give access to the bandaging beneath. Now she twitches it up to her neck. “There! What dostow see?”

The Wife does not look down. She knows full well what lies beneath. Pale, pale skin. Acres of it. Leagues. Stretch-marks creeping silvery fingers up her belly, barren stream-beds upon a landscape of flesh. Spreading hips, thighs, and paps and a nipping, dipping waist between. That’s what men see. She makes damnable sure that’s what they see. She is merchant-clothier enough to pinch in a waist and display the shop-frontage to advantage. But without the squeezing, concealing cloth ...

She sees what Cecily sees.

Flesh flows in an avalanche from her waist to puddle onto the bed. No-one has hips like Alys. It is her shortness that accentuates them. She looks like she ought to be the superlative breeder of babes – yea, three at a time at very least. And as for feeding them, why she has udders enough for two pairs of twins. The only risk a babe’d run is to be suffocated beneath bounteous bags of milk.

Cecily blinks.

“Well?” demands Alys.

“What do you want me to see, Aunt?”

“That I’m a God-bedamned midget, that’s what!”

“Your mother was not much taller. She bore children.”

“And I have hopes to do so likewise. But rest thine eyen upon these a while.” She jabs at a silvery stretch-mark. It is a river-bed. The belly beneath shudders. “Dostow observe, nieceling? I was but a babe myself back then. Cursed if I know why Wilkin chose *me* of all the breeding stock he might’ve selected from. By God, it been plain he were no shepherd. Least Dickon had the sense to pick a wife of convenable age and size.” She nods at Cecily. “See? Your Ma pops hem out yet. How many sibs didstow have at last count?”

“You are aunt to six,” murmurs Cecily.

“Six still on life,” adds the Wife, letting her smock shimmy back down and noting Cecily’s shoulders ease. “And a deal more beneath the sod. No wonder he goon sent you to me. Too many mouths even for a serf of means, by God.”

“You diverge, Aunt.”

“Dostow desiren a story or just a plain telling? Oh, as you leste, thou impatient hind. So here’s what they did tellen me after-hand, when them fiendish incubi stint gyrating about the roof-beams for my displeasure and mine innards ceased singeing with all the fires of Hell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, that been my remembrance of it, certain. Gibbering fiends and flames of scarlet. Night and day turned one and the same, and me making yell in the middle of it.”

Cecily looks not just perplexed now, but decidedly doubtful. Alys feels a curl of that old flamey ire spring up inside.

“Childbed fever, they clept it,” she snaps. “You’ve heard of that, hastow not? God above, being rent in twain is nearer the truth of it. Tits turned hard as clay, a-bursting with milk gone bad. I could’ve used the babe at that point, I tell you true. And that were only the beginning.”

“Alright, Aunt. I understand. You were ill.”

“That’s what they spake after the piece too, but I tell you no lie. Tormented by the fiends of carnal lust, I was. Shades of Wilkin’s wrecched lust! Them incubi reft my babe away and then they swung from the roof, a-taunting me with dangling man-bits so long they employed hem as whips. Lashed by lusting fiends, doubt it nat, and all to remind me what was a-waiting just as soon as my poor pleyning hole were healed enow for Wilkin to poke it afresh.”

“Aunt!”

It is a scandalised whisper, and one to which Alys thinks she hears an echo in the corridor.

“Pick thine own truth.” Alys shrugs, one-shouldered. She would like to shrug both, just to shake those sticky-clawed beasts right off. “Either way, Wilkin’s man-parts were at the base of it. Fifteen I was, and I stayed near a whole summer abed, fending off fiends and Wilkin’s raging instrument withal.”

“He didn’t try to ...? Not while you were sick and unchurched?”

Alys is tempted, just for a moment, to confirm the maid’s fears. To roll her in revulsion at Wilkin’s expense.

But no, Cess has asked for a tale, not a complete fabrication.

She chuckles and pats Cecily’s arm. The girl flinches – minutely, but a flinch it is.

“Oh no. Rest you easy, niece. But when yon incubi started to shuffle off, when Sir John sent hem about their bisynesse, I conceived of the notion that Wilkin’d want me to conceive again. What with me something recovered, Wilkin’d be at it like the smithy at his anvil, just liken before. By God, the thought been sufficient for me to shriek for a friendly fiend anew.”

A pause. Alys understands that she has served up a somewhat indigestible repast. Cess must have some moments to masticate upon it.

“So you pretended to be ill,” Cecily says at length. Her voice is a pond – flat, and no sighting what is at base. “But what about the babe?”

“Dostow doubt me, girl? Oh, I were full frail. I were in dolour and heaviness. I need nat deceive no one, least not at outset. And as for the babe, they only told me of it long after. I was all burning and rent to begin with, and then I been off a-

dancing with fiends, and sequential to that, I tossed in some sondry ravings of mine own devising. So it was long, long afterwards that I did finden out.”

Which was only in some part the truth.

She had been told later, true – weeks, even months later. But she’d known from the start, from the very moment she’d stirred to wakefulness. The child was gone. Alys was empty. Worse than empty – she was a lodestone seeking its iron, endlessly reaching but never finding. When she’d shrieked out, it had been for her.

For it had been a she-babe, and not Wilkin’s craved-for heir.

One of the incubi had whispered Wilkin’d snatched the squalling bundle only to expose it. Another wailed that the child had been smothered. Or given away. Sold to a brothel. Buried unchristened, on unconsecrated ground, or bones tossed down a badger’s sett.

It was enough to send a Wife quite wood.

“Well? What did you find out, Aunt?”

Alys blinks, returns to the lime-washed, cobweb-beamed chamber in The Crone, Maagdenstraat, Bruges.

“The babe died.” There it is. But three words are never enough for Alys, and for once they appear to be insufficient for Cecily too. So Alys supplies more.

“They said they put it out to wet-nurse since I looked set to beat the puny thing to the grave. But it requiren more than a little splitting in two to stick me beneath the sod. More than a scant knife tickling my ribs too.” She touches her side. Winces. Then a thought spreads across her mind like pooling blood. “It was that wrecched Venetian!”

“The wet-nurse?”

“No, thou silly chit. Me! Yon marsh-man stuck a pin in me.”

“It is impossible, Aunt. We would have seen him.”

“Oh, doubtless he ne did it himself. He nolde nat want his hands begrimed, that one. No, he’d get some skiving street-scum to do it for him, by God.”

“But why, Aunt? Minotto found us rooms in Bruges when it looked as if we’d sleep on the street. If he wanted your blood, there are simpler ways to go about it.”

Alys has an answer to that. "I'm competition. Yon merchant deals in scarlet. He been of Venice. All them in that southren swamp swagger about in robes of beetle blood. It been their colour, they do claim."

"But Minotto wears black," remarks Cecily.

"That's because he's hiding what he's up to," Alys declares, but she is not so sure. The black of the Venetian's robes is something else entire. It is so deep-dark it would sponge up the sun itself. She has never seen such black before. In a cloth-world of charcoals and silt-browns, it is an achievement. He wears it like she wears her scarlet. It is his secret and his display.

Not that she cares for night-black. She is monogamous, at least in colour-marriage. The Venetian, she suspects, embraces polygamy.

"Aunt, you delude yourself. You have made scarlet your own, it is true, and I honour you for it. No-one else dyes red like you."

"Not *red*, loveling. Scarlet. True grain." Nevertheless, Alisoun preens.

Cecily continues in the same tone. "But that doesn't mean everyone you meet is also obsessed. The Venetian simply takes the same direction we do. We go to Venice, do we not? It is sense for travellers to travel together. It is safety. Besides, we have barely seen him in Bruges beyond that first night."

"Hmph." Alys is not convinced, but she also sees that Cecily will unlikely be convinced of her Wifely conviction.

But it seems Cecily still dwells on another conundrum.

"Are you sure the babe died, Aunt?"

"What? Oh, for the sweet Lord's sake, certain I'm sure! Not that I was siker of anything but them incubi with their whips for months at end, you woot. No, what I'm siker and certain of, chit, is that, soon as I crawled from my bed and was looking to start weaving again, Wilkin doth declare: *It been time to start breeding again, Wife. Second babe's ne as hard as the first now th'art stretched up a bit. Lat us breed a boy!* And he carts me right back to bed and starts his engendering again without more ado."

"In broad daylight?"

"Oh, and that been only the beginning, my innocent. And you wene I'm obsessed? By God, Husband Number One, he were 'sessed good and proper.

Reckon the Good Lord did whisper in his ear that his days were numbered. What did old Wilkin do but gird his loins and, Jhesu, did he go into battle!”

“Did you become pregnant again, Aunt?”

She sees Cecily is eager to skip the gory details and move straight to the conclusion. Alys smiles. Will she spare her? Well, perhaps for today. Her throat is scratchy, despite its Rhenish watering. So too, she hears footsteps on the stairs without.

“I did not, but it were ne for lack of some dedicated trying.” Which produces a sigh from Cecily but the Wife gabs on regardless. “He offered up to shrines all and sondry. He had me gulp so much of St Win’s holy water that she yaf me the squirts. I was trotted off to hallows further afield, too. Hailes, for one.”

Cecily is producing one of her level looks. It is levelled at her Aunt.

“If you had not lost that first heir, you would not have needed to go to such trouble. You would not have needed to marry again. *Four* times. You would not be making pilgrimage at this moment.”

“Christ’s mercy, it ne been my fault I were fair split in two and that which split me ne survived the experience. Besides, I told it you: it lacked man-parts.”

Cecily reaches out a cool hand. She strokes some stray hair back from her patient’s heated brow.

“I was only thinking of your well-being, dear Aunt. How all this – your injury, your concern, the expense you are put to – might be unnecessary, if only ...”

“If only what? If only that girl-child had resurrected from the grave like old Lazarus with his coillons cut off? You misrecall, Wilkin *wanted* those man-bits. A girl ne been suffisant for him. He lust for a boy-babe for his clothiering.”

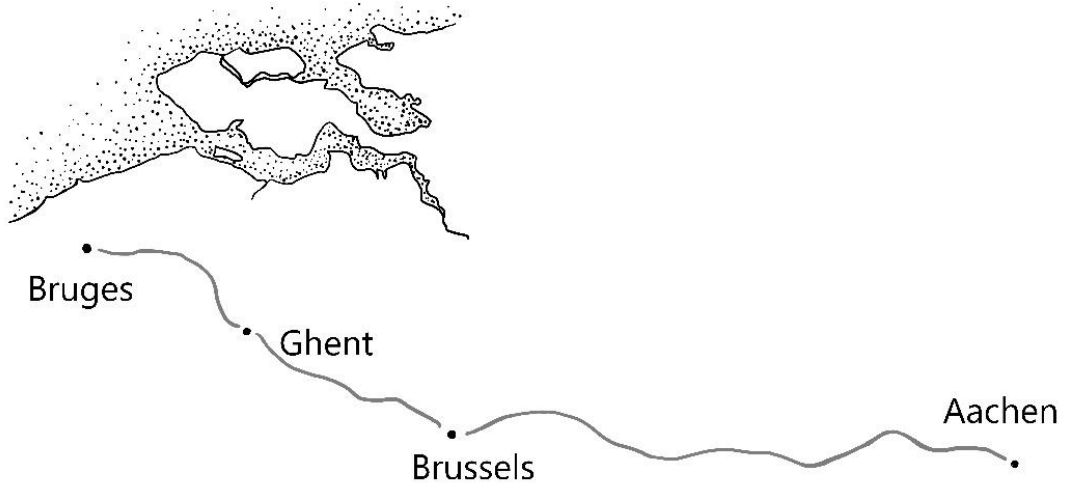
“And now you want a replacement.” Cecily’s tone is flat. She leans closer to her Aunt and her voice dips low. Surely she is not still in fear of the over-large lugs of one Quaestor? “But is Jerusalem the answer? Think, Aunt. This is the second attempt on your life, and we have barely left England. All pilgrims are targets, it is true, but you seem doubly so.”

Alys blinks. Surely not. It was just a little bloodletting, a warning at most.

Cecily stows Jankyn’s hose. She stands and brushes stray threads off her ever-dull skirt.

“I shall see if the others are returned,” says the girl, and moves to the door. Hand on the bolt, she looks back. “But consider one thing, Aunt. To bear a child it is necessary to remain breathing. This journey is becoming inimical to that goal.”

26. Aachen



Heavenly Father, guide me. I am gnawed by doubts. I am a bone torn between two dogs. I know not which way verity lies.

My daughter has told me two tales, and only one can be the truth.

It happened at the Quaestor's urging.

Thomas of Rouncivale waylaid me at the entrance to the pilgrim hospice in Aachen. I was just come from Evensong at the Marienkirche. My head was full of antiphons and ethereal psalmody, and I had hoped to float soft as duck down to our communal sleeping quarters, pray a little to You, and then sink into sweet repose before others returned to seed my sleep with unquiet dreams.

Our hospice of the Alexians served but meagre Lenten fare, and so my companions were dining at an alehouse close by.

Or so I thought.

The man laid a pale hand on my cassock-sleeve, a spider's grasp from which, Father forgive me, I could not help but shrink. (The Prior has divulged the nature of the sin which drives this creature to Jerusalem. My superior assured me that Thomas craves freedom from his foul vice, yet still I recoil.)

The Quaestor spoke to me of confession – most specifically of Alisoun's confession. He referred yet again to his ecclesiastical dispensation to shrive. He is concerned that my daughter makes this holy journey in a state of sin. He wishes that this be remedied.

I demanded to see the document. I must see the bishop's seal.

Instead Thomas laid his hand upon the tawdry badge of the Veronica which he wears so proud and swore this upon the miraculous veil: he and his dispensation have been parted. It was plucked from his pocket in Bruges. Some Flemish thief groped for gold but now finds himself sore disappointed in calfskin. The evidence of his permission to confess is gone, swore he, but the permission remains.

What could I do, O Lord? Do I doubt a man's sacred oath? My superior has commanded not only that I accompany this man on pilgrimage, but that I offer

assistance where I may. The Prior of Bath deems him trustworthy. It seems I must too.

“You wish to speak to her *now*?” I asked again.

The fellow nodded. His hair glimmered a lank halo in the half-light. Was it a sign, O Lord?

Still I hesitate. What if this dispensation is a lie? Is he so perfidious as to perjure himself upon this most-holy pilgrimage? The thought is not so impossible as it should seem.

Yet: even if he lies, my heart whispers, you at least may hear the truth from her lips. You can absolve her. Eventually.

Nevertheless, I resist: “She is tired, Thomas. She is not yet recovered from the knife, and she has ridden all day.” Not to mention the inevitable tussle at the gate of Aachen over her barrels, resulting in the loss of Alisoun’s temper and a further cup of liquid. “Can this not wait, Quaestor?”

Thomas gazed at me most solemn. “You strike the nail upon the verray head, Sir John. It is the wounding itself that urges me on. Consider, good Parson. Dame Alys would not be the first pilgrim to expire before reaching the Sepulchre. Knife-cuts turn pustulous, potage is poison, ships run onto rocks. Why, any of us could give up the ghost before the next sun sinks.” He glanced about him with meaning. “And here we are in Aachen, in company of some of the most holy relics outside o Rome. Here is the very time and place for the Dame to be shriven white as wool. Which is to say, tomorrow is the time and the Emperor’s own Chapel the place.”

“Ah. You wish that she be shriven tomorrow.” I stepped back in some relief. It could wait until daylight. I turned towards the arching dormitory door like the rabbit towards its hole.

“Wait!”

He acquired my arm a second time. I observed my sleeve and considered shaking him off as one might a chewsome whelp.

“You must speak for me. No, *with* me, Sir John. Tonight.” He indicated the street, the clamour emanating from the nearby tavern, which no doubt

encompassed Jankyn, Cecily, and Sir George. "While we may gain the ear of the Dame without ... addition."

He had a point. There is sound reason for desiring audience with Alisoun in the absence of her husband. So too, Cecily's presence must inevitably warp my mother's tongue. And the Knyght? Well, who knows where the Knyght's loyalties lie?

I eyed his hand. I dithered between inclination and duty.

I gave in.

"Alisoun, are you awake? Alisoun ... the Quaestor craves to speak with you."

I tried not to look at her, my wounded daughter, bundled on a straw pallet and as small as a child, coppery snakes of hair escaping her cap. I spoke in a murmur. If she were already sleeping, I would take the Quaestor by the elbow and remove him from her vicinity, protest as he may. (We arrived in Aachen only late that afternoon after five jarring days' ride from Bruges, days made doubly painful for fear Alisoun would open her wound through undue exertion.) My daughter needed her rest.

The bundle stirred.

"Sweet Jhesu, nil it nat wait 'til morning, John?" said the pillow.

"Mortality is shadow to us all, Dame. The time of our reckoning creeps like a thief in the night. We know not the hour of the day."

It was not I who spoke.

"Tom Tom? By God, you been full cheerful tonight. What flea hath crept up thy breech and bit thee where it ought not?" There was some shuffling, a squeak indicative of pain, and Alys sat up. "Speaking of which, this bedware is none too fresh. If I were ne so ragged, I'd have beat the livestock out of it first, or walloped the good brothers about the ears for a fresh set."

A hand delved within her smock to scratch and I jerked my gaze away.

"Well then, Quaestor? Have out with it. Who's dead? Who's been thieved? Ne keep a Dame in wonderment, by God."

I looked at Thomas, standing a little behind me in the gloom of the deserted-but-for-us dormitory. He looked at me with a plea in his eyes.

“The Quaestor refers not to a specific incident, Alisoun. Thomas of Rouncivale wishes to speak to you of confession.”

“A God’s name, Quaestor. I ne been on my death-bed yet, lest Aachen fleas got bigger teeth than I know. Shriving been daylight stuff.” She flapped a hand at Thomas. “So get thee hence, thou lumpen flea! Roule away and let a Dame get some sleep.”

Thomas slipped past me. He crouched down by her pallet. “Just a few breaths of your time, good Dame. Trust me well, you will sleep all the sounder. You are so frequently in company that I thought to seize the opportunity while you were alone. It seems to me that you are somewhat ... prone to misadventure, and that you might wish to avail yourself of Charlemagne’s own relics with a clean-shriven soul tomorrow, given our august locality. God alone knows what the next mishap will be.”

Alisoun was silent a moment.

“It ne been every day one gets to view the loin-cloth of Our Sweet Saviour,” she said eventually. There was acquiescence in her tone — even longing — but only for a moment. Woman, as Thou well knowst, Lord, is an ever-mutable creature. “But why artow so sure I am dire in need of confession, Quaestor Tom?” she snapped. “Thinkstow my parish priest or the pudgy Prior would’ve let me loose on the road without a good shriving, eh?”

I am that parish priest, O Lord. I know the truth of her statement, or lack thereof. Thus to stay silent was tantamount to a lie.

“You are shriven, my daughter, it is true — but only partly so,” I said heavily. “You have availed yourself of passing friars in conspicuous preference to he who ought to cleanse your soul. I suspect your confessions have been ... selective and that the satisfaction imposed over kind.”

“Oh, and that been because I han’t poured my sins into thy hungry ear of late, eh mine Parish Priest? *Thou moote trot to thy parish priest before Easter to purge thy soul—*”

“That is what Papal Statute decrees, Alys,” I managed to insert.

“—oh, for no wight shrives so parfit as you, eh? No-one pokes and prods into a bismotered soul like St John of St Michael’s. Well, last time I knelt before thee at the rood-screen and poured out all my heart and soul, I ne even *got* a shriving for my pains! Any wonder I taken myself off elsewhere, eh?”

She has a point. The matter is not so clear-cut as she presents it, not by half, but still she has a point.

And Thomas the Quaestor looked from Alys to me with a glitter beneath his lids – or perhaps it was just the reflection of wavering rush-light.

Nevertheless, her challenge must be countered.

“I have laid my concerns before my superior, Alisoun. Recall: the Prior decreed that I must not to shrive you upon this pilgrimage. Yet as chaplain upon this journey, I remain the shepherd of thy soul.” I took a deep breath. I gazed upon the Quaestor, knelt upon the stone flags as if it were he about to make confession, and with doubtful heart I did my duty. “For the health of your perdurable soul, Dame Alisoun, I urge you to make full confession. Sooner rather than later. Now, if it were possible.”

I had to look at her then. To avert my eyes would be to weaken my argument. Her countenance was quite immobile, its only movement the torchlight upon it. Her eyes held mine. O Heavenly Councillor, why then did I feel I had betrayed her?

“I *have* been shriven, John, dread it nat. Not all limitors been after a grope under cloak of confession, though I’ll admit I han encountered the odd one.”

I reddened and she saw it.

She smiled at me most sweet. “I know not what foul sins you think han gone unsung by this Wife, my dear John and Quaestor, but if it pleaseth you, I wol sketch out a doing or two. You know, spread the matter before thy great sapience to judge whether it requiren shriving or no.” Her smile became wise as she looked upon my kneeling companion. “I daresay I can guess at a matter you want aired, Long Tom. I han heard what the gossips do gab.”

She looked at me then, her head tilted to one side. There was a strange cast to her dim-lit face.

“John dear, draw up a pallet. Settle thy shanks. Thine looming about like some ghostly spirit in the gloom is casting a crick in my neck.” She pointed pointedly to the straw-stuffed mattress adjacent to hers. “Sit thee down, thou Tom-Tom and John! You’ve come a-begging for a story. Least you can do is behave like you desiren to hear it.”

I caught the Quaestor’s eye. The fellow gave a shrug and exchanged stone flags for a posterior cushioned by straw. He patted the lumpy surface beside him and, obedient as a hound, I sat. Thus we two would-be confessors sat side by side like boys at cathedral school, awaiting the teachings of our Dame.

“So, what sin dostow want, Long Tom? Not the little ones, I dare swear. Not the venial little babes. Them I’ve confessed long agoon. They been full easy to paternoster away. You desiren something large. Something wrecched and deadly, by God.”

I interrupted then in an unthought panic. I spake forth some jumble that confession is but between two, that there be no need to rehearse the sin prior to tomorrow’s shriving *between two*, that in truth she required her rest. Father forgive me, I was put in dread by her look as it dwelt upon me. I feared I knew what story she would launch upon in that dark place.

“Desist, Sir John,” she commanded. “As thou asketh, so shaltow receive. If you han’t the stomach for it, by God, you moote curl thyself up in bed, but Tom Quaestor here desiren some sin, and I will deliver it ‘til mine sweet husband comes to providen more privy entertainment instead.”

She propped herself up against the dank dormitory wall. The rush-light in its sconce flickered upon her fiery head, and she spoke precisely as I had feared.

Of the demise of her first husband.

My father.

“Five husbands, eh? That’s what they all latch on, the gossips. If marriage been necessary sin, then full five of hem ...? And however didst I rid myself of each, by God?” She parted lips at my companion and the light reflected ruddy on her teeth.

“Well? Do I say sooth, Quaestor? Dostow want a different tale, maybe? Or dostow lust to know how mine Husband-the-First met his woolly end?”

I made mute appeal yet again to the door and so missed the Quaestor’s reply. Our absent friends could return at any instant – I could only hope.

“I thought it so.” Her voice has teeth. “Well, you’ve hearkened to how I acquired him, Long Tom, and doubtless you hente up scraps of what went on in between. Yea, in Bruges, ne bluster and deny. Now hear how Wilkin and I were unwed, and bend thine judgement to whether you can confess me clean.”

I have heard this tale already in confession, O Lord, and once was already over-sufficient. Thus it was that I begged the door with my eyes to issue forth Jankyn, that I considered scuttling out into the damp to wander dark Aachen, just to put myself beyond earshot. But it was already too late. She had begun – my imagining would supply the rest, even in absence of her voice. The tale was already engraven on my memory – or so I thought.

“Dostow recall why Husband One wed me, Long Tom?”

“He wanted a child,” said he.

“Oh, nat just any child. Wilkin wanted one with coillons, by God. Tackle. One who’d sprout a beard above, yea, and nether-whiskers about a fine manly harness. Once I’d recovered suffisant from the spitting out of a girl-brat (and in case thine ears failed thee in The Crone, Quaestor, she departed this life), Wilkin had hopes I was ripe for a boy, and so he set to with a will. Just like I told Cess. Hammer and tongs, it were – least, when his fine knightly lance were aught but a droopy sapling – and, by God, if I ne feelen pity for any blacksmith’s anvil now.”

Why does she say these things, O Lord? Why must she harrow my soul? The semi-dark could not conceal my flinching. The guttering torch only stretched and writ large the expressions upon my companions’ faces – and, no doubt, mine. Was that a smile or a flame-seared grimace upon Alisoun’s lips? As for my own countenance, it more likely echoed those images in fresco of the torments of Hell.

She did not relent. "Oh dread it nat, gentils, I did my duty. Yea, though he roused me 'bout as much as a green fish. It ne been godly to take delight in the bisynesse anyway, if yon clerics are to be believed."

A glance at me. I wrenched eyes away. I cast them upon our companion instead – and was visited by blessed diversion.

I had misjudged Thomas of Rouncivale. I observed the fellow's unstill frame, the twist of his fingers upon his cloak. O Lord, I had judged him to be carnally inclined, a hare for all things lecherous, but it struck me then that the Quaestor was almost as uncomfortable as I at my daughter's tale.

Not that such consideration hindered Alys.

"And that ne been the worst of it. God woot, I were bruised and in tormentrie inside and out, but Old Wilkin ne had it in him to wear me out entire. No, it been his other oppression that did for me at end – or him, more's the point."

Alys shuffled in the straw then, as if her lower regions were rendered uncomfortable by mere remembrance. Then it seemed she had another roaming flea to attend to. The silence stretched longer and we heard steps without, a splat-splat on the street.

"Well?" said Thomas. There was an edge to his tone. "How did it happen, Dame? Your husband's end?"

O Lord, did he know that the man he named was my father too? Alys recalls it full well, but Thomas? Perhaps he deems a man ordained to have one Father only.

"He nolde nat let me at the wool," said Alys darkly. "Identical to when I waxed fat with my girl-babe, Wilkin must handle me like silvery samite or cloth of gold. He clept it'd kept me with babe once, so it'd urge the brewing up of a new one anon. God been my witness, when I was ne getting abroached (Wilkin being the tapster), all I might do is sit in the sunny garden or trundle to church. No woolly workshop for me. No weaving, no spanning, no gadding to the churny mill, nor bobbing boat across the Avon, nor clambering aboard a horse for fear I topple off. Not even cursed spinning, wouldstow believe? I ask you, what harm doth a spindle do?" She flung her hands out. "Well, it were ne just the tedium that did for me, although that were almighty."

She looked direct into my eyes.

Lord, it is Thy prerogative and Thine alone to interrogate a man's soul. Why, then, does sinful woman trespass on divine territory?

"I craved that wool," she said.

The words sunk soft and deadly within me, just as they had the first time I heard them.

"God woot, I han no pinch of desire for earthly man but, once he forbad it me, oh, did I lust after cloth-making day and night. By Christ, was I lickerous. Yea, an ache in the verray chamber of Venus, it was." She grinned. "Or maybe that were just consequence of Wilkin's prodding."

The anonymous steps had passed by on the road, yet still the Quaestor fiddled and tapped.

"Well? Did he die of excess coitus, then? An old man dighted to death? You skirt the point, good Dame. You take a side track up a circuitous mountain. Why, I could believe you hide some guilt."

Her eyes flickered in the uncertain light. Strange, many-coloured eyes they are, permitting certain shades to gain ascendance over others, depending on shadow and mood. They were amber in the rush-light then, near red.

"Something like that, Quaestor. Sweet God above, somedeel indeed. You want the looping grey guts of the matter, dostow? Well, here it been. I ne did naught all day, so I slept scant by night. So I gan to creepen out of bed and down to the workshop. I gan to take my pleasure. It taken two to work a loom a-right, you woot, so I nolde not sit down and weave. But I could sort and card. Carding doon more than fluff up the wool, say sooth, and a deal more than just shake out the dirt. It sifts the long from the short. Long wool's hairy and coarse, Long Tom. Good for worsted only. My Pa, he'd been breeding for the short stuff – the soft and matting stuff needful for best broadcloth. Dickon assayed to follow in his path. Then there were fleece-sorting. It been in the sorting that broadcloth begins – so that's what I undertook by tallow-light. First you layen the fleece on the table, sort and snip the flock out, and then you beat and card."

It was never in Alys to abbreviate a story, but Thomas Quaestor was stirring upon his pallet as if all the fleas in Aachen were dining upon his hind-parts. Our

companions must be back soon, and here Alys was talking of sorting and carding, with no whiff of sin at all.

“And that was when he found me,” she announced.

The Quaestor ceased his stirring.

“Wilkin,” said she. “My spouse and gaoler. He bumbled down the stairs one night just as I was a-snipping wool on the trestle. Suffisant big shears they were, too. Full steadfast for chopping stibborn bits of turd and stuck-on skin. Wilkin kept hem right sharp for the purpose. No tearing and shredding at wool for Weaver Wilkin, by God.”

Alys paused and looked us in the eye, first Tom and then I.

“And wenestow what happened then, eh?”

Lord, my innards cramped tight. I knew too well what happened. My sinful daughter has confessed her misdemeanours to me, her parish priest, once before. When I failed her as a ghostly confessor.

Thomas managed a shrug. It was none-so-nonchalant. It said *hurry up and tell!*

“Oh, Wilkin was mad as a stoat. He was wooder than oak. He reprieveth me and rated me without end. I would stint his heir, bellowed he. I would over-bake his egg! By Christ, it were no wonderment I were not with child already.” She took a breath. “And then, when the wight’d worked himself up into a right heat, he took it into his pan to poke me right there. By God, he’d got himself good and hard, and he’d see that I taken the point.”

I was shaking my head – as if the wind about my ears might block out further sound. I knew what was coming. It is replayed for my torture by whispering demons and, to my utter shame, has even resulted in nocturnal pollution. Even now, Lord, even now ...

“By God, I could see what was in his mind, or more-like what were making a tent of his night-shirt. Worse, I wiste it were the end of my night-jaunts. It was back to gaol with me.”

She cast me then a strange, strange look. Lord, I was too disturbed to register it complete. And then she said it.

“I saw that he wolde dight me on the trestle, so what do I do? Well, I sat myself down upon the open, gaping shears – them that were so sharp for the snipping of turd and sheepy skin – I shuffled up my smock and opened my legs like a dutiful wife.”

Thomas of Rouncivale, he who must journey to Jerusalem for his innumerable and unnatural sins, made a tiny bleat of pain. I, O Lord, let fall my jaw in disbelief.

“Betwix his nightshirt and mine and the woolly, sheepy dark, Wilkin ne noticed the shears.” Alys grinned. (Forgive her, Mighty Father, Thy daughter smiled as she spoke.) “But, O Christ in Heaven Above, did he feel hem. He’d got his sely instrument out and rammed himself at me upon the table, yea, like the woolly ram he was. Save he rammed his two thighs direct onto the open shear-points before ever he put his own sword to sheath.”

It cannot be true.

This is not what she told me before. In confession. I pray You, All-Seeing Father, I beg it of You. Why does she say this? What is the truth?

“Oh, the blood,” Alys whispered. “It fairly squirted out, I tell you true. The fleece upon the table was soaked with the scarlet stuff. It mad puddles on the floor and soused the matting all to mush.” She pauses in remembrance, shaking her bright head. “I ne bethought there’d be so much blood. I screamed for the ‘prentices, for the maid, yea, for High God Himself. I ran above for some linen to stint the gushing, but by the time I’d come a-panting back ...”

“What?” said Thomas. The word was a croak.

“Wilkin were face down on the trestle with a mouth stuffed of fresh-carded wool. Dead as a stone.”

27. Imperial Chapel

Of course, she tells him a different tale in the morning.

In the chapel of the mighty Charlemagne, all striped marble and ponderous majesty, she kneels in a corner. She confesses herself to bright-eyed Tom – she tells her tale again – and observes his shoulders droop.

“I cannot shrive you unless you tell it all, Dame. You must admit your crime.”

“What crime?” cries she. “It been an accident. Wilkin slipped, and by full miserable mischance he smooted himself upon the shears! Oh, but you can convict me of disobedience, doubtless. Yea, and of Wifely disinclination to dight. Is that in thy confession book, Quaestor-man? Lack of lust? God woot, I had no savour for woolly old ram, a-ramming himself at me, midnight, dawn, and dusk. So shrive me, Long Tom, that I mayen kneel before the holy swaddlings and lay lips most reverent unto the blisshed, bloody loin-cloth.”

And that is all he gets of her in the Imperial Chapel of Aachen.

It turns out she may not even kiss the cloth that kept Christ Jhesu decent as His poor sinews stretched and tore upon the Cross. She discovers it is only freed from its gilt and gaudy prison-shrine on every seventh year. This season is not one of the blessed.

She is bereft. She is denied access to a fabric more holy than any other. Oh, but it makes a certain sad sense: so many faithful lips, so many grasping fingers – God knows, even a holy loincloth can only stand so much.

Anyway, the Quaestor declines to shrive her. He cites deficiency of detail. He cites lack of repentance. Yea, the lanky knave looks as bottled up as a relic himself.

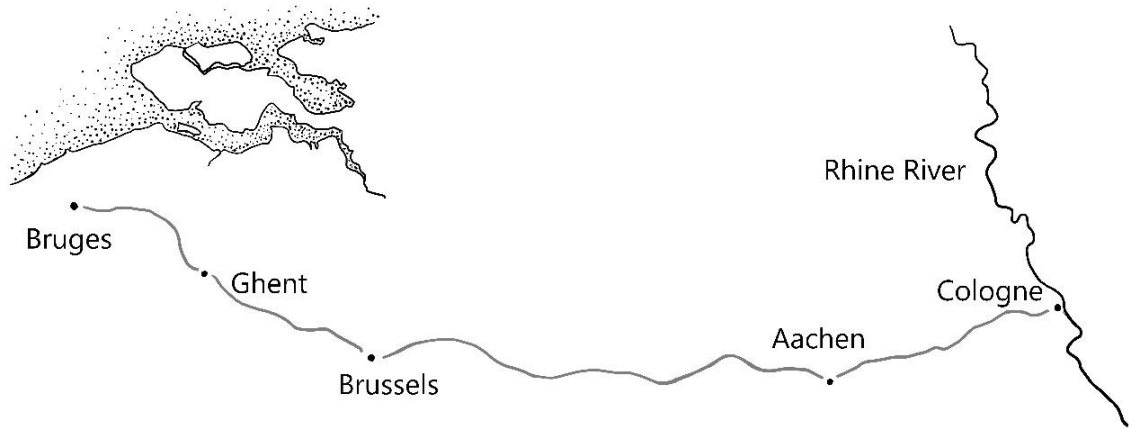
She finishes the job by telling him where he can stuff his pardons.

Then: “Shriving? Purgatory-shrinking? You gat no bulls nor bishopry dispense, else you’d han shown us long since. You moote nat pardon a pig fro porky Hell, Tom Fakester.”

Which stopped up his upper orifice as well.

It is time to move on. South. Rhine-wards. Towards Cologne.

28. Cologne



The Bawd is in a hurry.

She has us out of bed and plodding down Cologne streets dimmed by dawn grey and the tottering half-timbered edifices that hem us about. Only one in five shutters are yet open above – St Stephen be praised – else I would be dodging night-waste tossed out with the new day. We are slow-hastening towards the southern gate.

I scrub my eyes with the back of a hand. Whilst in the vicinity, I retrieve a bit of straw from my hair. Of a shade with the locks that surround it, I am alerted to its presence only by its persistent pricking of my neck. No louse bites that hard. I bedded down in an uncrowded stable last night, lordings. Alone, save for innumerable nags and a stable-lad. Sir George has no need to keep company o' nights with me, more's the pity. He seems to have happened upon some wealth. I have a suspicion a certain man of Venice has supplied him funds – but why? I, on the other hand, am more impoverished than even a sunrise since.

But only in coin.

“Artow asleep still?” shrills a voice. “Dostow nod on thy nags? Shuffle along, palmers. Certain, Jerusalem been Heaven's own city, but it ne been so eternal you can shuffle at slug's pace.”

It is the Wife, of course. She has twisted about in her saddle and looks set to give us a mouthful more yet.

“What's the hurry, good Dame?” I flap my heels against my mule to show willing, but my tone sounds a mite plaintive, even to me.

Jankyn beats her to a reply.

“My Wife's a-grinding her teeth and pulling her hair, good Quaestor, oh, and mine too, and all on account of two things. One: ignorant Eve that she is, she went seeking the Archbishop all through Cologne and found him not—”

“Well, did *you* woot His silly Worshipfulness ne abiden in his own town?” she snaps.

Jankyn looks superior and answers not.

"I ne demanden audience of his Holiness of Cologne himself, did I?" the Bawd of Bath continues. "An important wight like him, by God, he's probably off avising some precious Emperor or else. Never say I know nat my estate." Her husband snorts. "All I wanted was one of his underlings. Just one! But no, it seems that Cologne ne desiren a single sniff of its own Archbishop within its walls, so what moote I do but gad Bonn-wards and seek him there?"

Jankyn leans towards me with a conspiratorial grin. Jankyn, cosy with me? No, the fellow doesn't fancy me in the least. It is only to irritate his Wife.

"And you know why she wants him, eh? Well, it's for her saints-forsaken—"

"Tom ne desiren detail of our ins and our outs, Jankyn my dove. I besought his Worshipfulness and found he dwells in Bonn. So we gat on our horses and jig to Bonn. That is the all and sum."

The Bawd cut short her own tale? Now here's an unlikely scenario.

"Oh, but he's curious, Wife. Just look at his nose twitch."

Does my nose twitch? I know full well my eyes bulge upon occasion, but my nose make independent movement? Well, if that protuberance is twitching, then so are those of my companions. Who wouldn't want to know why they were evicted from bed (or straw) so abrupt before a cold dawn?

The Wife has paused, the better that she might argue with her lagging husband. We half-dozen travellers are bunched together now, nags nudging each other's flanks along a cobble-stoned and pot-holed way.

"It's her bloody barrels!" Jankyn ejaculates before his dearly beloved can interject. "She wants his seal upon her God-damned water."

"Makes sense, doth it not?" the Wife mutters. "Every man and his whelp from here to Exe desiren a sample. They think it's gold, they think it's myrrh, they think it's wrecched liquid frankincense, so I moote show it's sely water. And, behold, yet more precious stuff is wasted! Holy water ne growen on trees. I gat letter of license for me, and, by God, it been full needly my barrels get one too. I wolde have the man with the pointy hat scribe licence for my water and no gnof with a sword'll dare debate otherwise."

And as she mutters, she throws glances forwards. Lordings, we approach the gate, and the Bawd of Bath has learned to dislike guard-posts.

“What was your second reason, Dame?”

The Knyght speaks. They are the first words he has let cloud the chill air this morning. They cause the Wife to startle. She peers around her like a nervous robin.

“A God’s name!” Jankyn lets forth a laugh. “Settle yourself, Wife. He’s not here. I reckon you imagined him yesterday, too.”

“That I did not. That shrewed Venetian’s in Cologne. I laid eyes on him. God woot, he was a-watching me.”

“Signor Minotto?” asks the Knyght. “He too must pass through Cologne to Venice. But why would he watch you, Dame?”

This is a quantity of words from Sir George, especially so soon after sunrise.

“I ne got no notion,” she snaps, hence implying the precise opposite.

“And that is your second reason for departure?” says the Knyght-Interrogator.

In answer, the Wife jabs spurs to her ambler’s flanks, the beast leaps forward, and she achieves Cologne’s south gate in a scatter of mud.

“We been palmers!” she cries unto the sleepy guards. “We buy and sell none of thy cabbagey goods. We been Sepulchre-bound, sweet German sirs. I pray you lat us through!”

Behold, the Dame chirps English unto Rhineland geese. They gape and observe her scrip, the curl of parchment she waves, the scarlet cross upon her Parson’s dun cloak, and then the word *Sepulchre* seems to sink in. The Bawd begins to look militant. She girds her most ample loins for a fight, but I hear *peregrini* fall from German lips. They eye our approaching packhorses summarily, and seem disinclined to stir from their brazier.

The rest of us clop up.

And then I see it. The moment one leather-and-chained guard lays eyes on me. The expression on his pock-cheeked face, the elbow in his companion’s ribs. The hulking fellow steps forward and mutters something to one who can only be superior, judging by the quantity of steel. Then they both cast their beery-eyed German stares on me.

All of a sudden, it is not the Wife they are interested in.

They crowd up and about me. My mule threatens mutiny. The leader makes some grunting command. He jabs his glove first at me and then at the cobbles. The message is clear enough. The sound of my heart rattling against my ribs most likely is too.

They *know*. Some bastard told them.

It is likely the same bastard that deprived me of a quantity of coin last dusk.

It seems my actions are not precipitate enough. One thug grabs at my tunic. He tries to heave me bodily from my mule-perch. My noble steed lets forth a cross between a bray and a neigh.

“Have patience, lords!” I cry. “I come, I come.”

As I scramble down, I hear Parson John interject in Latin. Whom does he think he addresses? Stephen preserve me, it’d be as effective to remonstrate in Greek.

My scrip is dug into, my saddle-bags searched, and within the time it takes John to say *sancti peregrini anglorum*, one bewhiskered thug is holding up my skull.

My heart turns as leaden as church roofing.

Not *my* skull, lordings all, but the one I purchased at so dear a price yesterday eve down a particularly narrow and twisted Cologne *Gasse*. It belongs to one of Ursula’s virgins.

I make a grab, but no, the guard whips her away. There follows shouting, mostly in German. I hear the words *Burgermeister* and *Burggraf*. I am threatened by Cologne authorities, secular and episcopal. *I just want my virgin back*. Lords, she cost me an arm and a leg, and that was only for her skull.

Travellers are beginning to pile up behind us, eager to be gone from this hubbub of civilization. One of them, a merchant by the look of him, speaks both German and English – after a gurgling fashion. He begins a tirade of translation for my edification.

“You ... you English bone thief!”

“I didn’t steal her,” I cry. “It was an honest transaction!”

“You steal our beloved saint—”

“Merely one of her thousands, good sir.”

“—and you sneak her out of the city she died for. In a sack!”

Well, I didn't have a silken surplice handy.

Let me explain: the lady Ursula (or so her *vita* tells us) journeyed with no less than eleven thousand virginal maids from England to Rome. Upon return by way of Cologne, she and her innocents happened upon a hoard of ravaging Huns. Of course, the heathens promptly offered Ursula and her girls the benefit of their raging virility. Rather than submit to a pagan plucking of their virginal flowers, all eleven-thousand-and-one of them elected to die on the spot. Having just been martyred – and not one of them raped, mind you – a heavenly army of Ursulas then arose *in spiritu*, turned upon their murderers and saved besieged Cologne.

This is a city overflowing of holy bones.

With so many at their disposal, surely these Cologners will not miss one?

"If you're going to take my skull, I want my money back!" say I.

I may as well milk my eunuch mule.

My arm is seized. The fellow in charge seems inclined to take me in custody. I am being dragged towards the overly-secure looking construction that is the city gate. (Recall, my listeners, such towers frequently do service as gaols, in fact, even as flag-poles for severed heads.) I begin to explain my position the louder.

Upon which my Knyght-without-shining-armour swings down from his courser. He parts my captor from my arm with no little force.

"Get on your horse," he growls at me. For the guards' benefit, he snaps, "We are palmers. We have no need of your bones. Let us pass." He jerks his head at our merchant-translator. "You," he says. "Tell them."

He may be peeled of his pretty caparison, but no-one can strip Sir George of knightliness. The guards find themselves obeying him before ever they have the wit to question why. I clamber aboard my mule, my heart a-clamour.

Before the guards can change their minds, George has remounted – oh, the manly grace of a Knyght in haste – and is nudging his courser on through the arching stone exit. The Dame is not slow to follow suit.

"But my virgin ...!"

It is a cry, not just from my heart but from my purse. More importantly, it is also for show. I do not want any further searching.

I clap heels to the mule's hairy sides. The beast gives a snort and breaks into an indignant trot. And as it does so, I am most comfortingly reminded of a hard presence within my hose. With each jolt of the mule's awkward trot, it jabs unyielding against my inner thigh.

My one reprieve.

Thus I put determined distance between myself and the over-zealous guards. I even outdistance the Dame. And as I do, I send heartfelt thanks to saintly Ursula and all her missy murdered maids.

One virginal leg-bone rests within my upper hose hard by that organ which most deprives me of sleep and conscience. At the time of its placement, I had merely prayed it would be an improving influence upon its immediate vicinity.

I did not expect it would preserve my investment – and my feeble hope of Heaven.

29. Koblenz

*me thought he hadde a paire
Of legges and of feet so clene and faire,
That al myn herte I yaf unto his hold.*

The Wife's Prologue

It is three days since Cologne, two since Bonn, and Burgher Jankyn is beginning, against all inclination, to enjoy himself.

It has been a spring day most glorious. The apple trees are dusted with angelic bloom, and Jankyn knows his shanks show to fine advantage in hose as blue as the seraphic sky. He has caught not a few admiring glances by the way.

No doubt it helps that his legs are grown strong from all this thigh-work. He had been as sore as a doddering dotard the first few days from Bath, and with a temper to match. Now he is a seasoned horseman and it strikes him this act of riding a horse is oddly sexual. The endless rocking of hips, the manner in which it gives him control of a creature naturally wayward. Not that he ever rode Alys so slow, or at so long a stretch. But one cannot gallop to Jerusalem – or even to the looming walls before him. And before that, there is a bridge in the way, and at the end of that bridge – the inevitable city gate and its guards.

It is the bridge over the Moselle. It spans the winey river just before the Moselle kisses its paramour, the great Rhine. At this moist and fertile juncture springs walled and wealthy Koblenz.

He glances ahead at his Wife. Are her shoulders more square-set than usual? Does her gabbing stutter and stumble? Oh, she squeezed some archiepiscopal parchment from an archiepiscopal minion in Bonn – at most horrible expense – but that does not mean she is now at ease about her barrels. Do them of Koblenz honour the dictates of an archbishop of overweening Cologne? They shall shortly see. What startles Jankyn at this juncture, however, is the twist of tension that stirs likewise in his gut. Is it sympathy? Concern? And for the Wife who rides unWife-like over his husbandly will most continuous, who has overridden him in the entire

matter of this pilgrimage? Of course it is not. Jankyn is just concerned to have a Wife somewhat sweet-tempered this night that he may not have to suffer her carping.

The road bends westwards away from the Rhine, the wide, watery highway they have clopped beside since Cologne. The track they follow is busy with droop-headed oxen dragging boats upstream and fellow travellers of all estates proceeding by hoof or foot or wheel. Now evening draws near, they flow towards Koblenz. As does Jankyn and company.

The westering sun fills his eyes with gold. Dust kicked up by a rainless day and a multitude of travellers hangs in the windless dusk. All the world is turned to haze. Jankyn squints. He can see naught but the shape of his Wife before him. All else is indistinct.

His hips continue rocking, he considers the rocking of the night to come, and he follows in all obedience. What else can he do?

30. Heere continues the Wyves Tale

"Dame, I wolde praye yow, if youre wyl it were,"

...

*Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man,
And teche us yonge men of youre praktike.*

The Wife of Bath's Tale

"A prosperous land, is it not?"

Alys is startled. It is odd enough that the Knyght rein his fancy mount alongside hers, but for Sir George to initiate conversation? God above, the unaccustomed sunshine must have gone to his noble head. Now it is helm-less it is rendered the more vulnerable – even rather appealing, albeit in a dark and brooding way.

But she looks about her as prompted and acknowledges that, certain, it seems so. Yea, the leafless vines form row on row of neat-trimmed skeletons. Peasant bundles of brown and grey plod after plough-oxen or pluck up weeds between peeping peas. But weedy greens do not interest her, lest of course they grow dye. Alys sees no sheep by the Rhine path. This German mud is too valuable for mere grass.

"More prosperous than the Auvergne," murmurs the Knyght.

"Well, you wolde know, Sir Sword-Swinger," she retorts. "You been rouleing thereabouts, poking poor Frenchies for coin and their daughters for fun, wertow not? And look what it got you – a jaunt to Jerusalem."

The sun is shining, her side is whole again, she has an Archbishop's seal in her scrip, and her barrels haven't been sampled since Cologne. She doesn't really feel like picking a fight but, by God, the pretty fellow walked right into it.

George stiffens and his courser performs a caper. He reins it back. Then, to her startlement, he begins again.

"You have spoken of your first husband, lady. But how came you to meet your second spouse?"

The Wife nearly laughs. This noble Sir is no conversationalist. He lurches from the inane to the intrusive with as much grace as a drunkard on stilts.

But she plays his game for the while. She is curious to see what lurch he will make next.

“Oh certain, I met him years before I wed the wight. Samson le Gold he was named, for all he had hairs blacker than thine. Now my lad Jankyn were more properly clept *gold*, dostow not think? Or even you, Long Tom.”

For the Quaestor has at that moment come nudging up, his mule’s ears indicating displeasure at his master’s sudden change of pace.

Alys eyes the fellow. Does Tom merely have a preference for dark and brooding riding companions, or have his hare-ears caught the current conversation?

“I wish my hair *were* gold, good Dame. It’d smooth my way something considerable,” says he, tucking escapee strands inside his hood. “But from what I hear, your second spouse was named well enough. All that he touched turned to the yellow stuff, they say. Truly, you did well out of that wedding, Dame Alys. What did you end up with – a mill? Not bad for three years’ espousal, by any man’s reckoning.”

“Oh, I earnt it,” she snaps back. “Every cursed penny. But thy gossips inform thee wrong. He ne gave me that mill, just the leasehold to it. The bones of it still been the Abbey of Bath’s, for all I keep the profits.”

He shrugs and nudges his mule again. “Leasehold – freehold, what do I, a penurious seller of pardons know? It all adds up to one thing, Dame. You are rich and I am poor.”

She turns on him. “Oh weylaway, thou penniless pardon-pedlar! Fortune hath treated you full foul. Oh, she beams upon this dwarfish Wife and frowns on you most dire, eh? Well, I’ll have you know Samson le Gold wed me with wide open eyes.” *For all those eyes saw namoore than a mole.* “I ne put him on no rack nor plucked off his spiteous fingernails. He were Wilkin’s fuller. He knew me for a fair hand with the wool and a full-exacting eye.”

Which was only part of the reason he proposed his strange deal.

The Quaestor turns to his Knyght-companion. “But I intrude on your discourse, Sir George. I apologise and shall withdraw.”

A flicker of alarm crosses the noble one's countenance. "It is no matter. My aim was merely to coax some story from the Dame. The way is long, and she tells a ... a gallant tale."

Alys peers at him. If the Knyghtling were of the complexion to flush, then she has no doubt those cheeks would glow.

"You desiren a story, and of this humble Wife?"

The dark and glowering fellow inclines his head. No doubt he is relieved to be relieved of requirement to make sound.

But the Quaestor makes bleat: "Dame, I pray you, continue as you began. Give us the next instalment of your Wifely deeds. Teach us young men of your practik."

Now she must laugh. Is this a plot cooked between them, the light and dark, the lank and the sweetly set-to? If so, they needs practice their pot-work some more. They want diverting? Well, she is the woman to do so.

"Suffice!" cries she. "As you leste, so shall it be. But mind you delve not for some second confession, Sir Sin-Sniffer. What sin moote I possibly bake within marriage number two, by God? None, I'll have you know. Full none, for Samson kept me so tight."

"I do not accuse you of sin, dear Dame. Heaven forbid," says Quaestor Tom. "I merely wish to while away the plodding hours, I and my friend." He glances at George.

Friends, is it now?

He so-named nods. It seems it is so.

Oh well, she has little better to do, and it is nice to have listeners conversant in English. None of this German incomprehension of plain language and of waving her hands about to make syllables speak.

A story it is. But mind you well, Sir Knyght and Quaestor – stories are woven out of whatever wool the weaver requires, and whatever thread seems best suited to her task.

She begins.

“Mine Husband-the-First died in circumstances full bloody and strange. This you know. I say it again for the acquiring of my second were spurred by the losing of my first.”

“Well, I trust you could not be married to two at once,” says the Quaestor, reasonably enough.

“Oh, there been a deal more to it than that.”

She pauses, feels the warmth and muscle of the mare beneath her, and is recalled to the days that followed Wilkin’s demise in red wool.

First there was the hue and cry. God above, Wilkin’s servants were pleased enough to stir the neighbourhood up. All the world could see what the fellow had died of, but, certain, a hue and cry were legal necessity, middle of the night or no. And who knew, maybe a murderous thief had fled in the dark. But no, of course the only real suspect was Alys, and she hadn’t managed to run anywhere.

The good burghers of Bath were all for locking her up – the Guildhouse had a storeroom that might do – but John stood surety for her. Poor, ghost-faced John.

And then, two days later, before Wilkin were ever sunk in his grave – Samson le Gold arrived at her door.

“Burgher Sam’d got himself appointed Council Interrogator. Oh, he were full cosy with the Merchant Guild, say sooth. He’d ne *quite* been mayor of Bath, but that were nat for want of trying. Others’ trying, that is. Not he. The last thing Fuller Sam lust after were the posy, public bisynesse of being mayor. No, he been content all secree amidst the Council and a-tweaking its strings.”

Council Interrogator was no official role like Mayor, yet she ought to have wondered at his taking it all the same. The Guild of Merchants had wished to ascertain the particulars of the death of one of their own. The Guild had a Charter. King Richard, (the first of that name, not the current boy-king) had handed them Bath – in swap for a handsome fee, by God. It meant them of the Guild had the rule over Bath, save for matters of deep treason or church business. Wilkin had been a citizen, as was Alys by default of wedding him, but Samson le Gold was the verray mill-wheel that turned Bath.

And Burgher Sam had set himself forward as chief gatherer of the wherewithal to present her case unto them that would pass judgement.

On who killed Wilkin.

“So yon Master Council Interrogator turned up to interrogate me, clerk and servant-boy in tow, and God been my witness, I was a quivering calf jelly. See, I ne been on friendly terms with Samson le Gold – but then, who was? Some gossips clept him Samson le Cold for all the warmth of his ways. Not that he ne been full courteous as he stood on my doorstep. By God, he were correct and proper, and as formal as you leste. Oh, but I wiste as soon as I laid eye on him that my doom were come.”

“My condolences, Dame Alisoun, or some such tripe spake he. I am come on behalf of them that rule Bath to discover what I may of this sad matter. And what could I do but conduct the fellow to the best bench and plunk a cup of wine in his paw? To say it short and plain, Samson han my life in his two hands.”

She recalls how she had gazed up at him in all innocence, and how Master le Gold had proceeded to fire questions at her with the studied aim of an archer at the Sunday butts.

“But you desiren to know what the wight looked like, no doubt,” she interrupts herself.

Lo, she raises the dead. A spirit sways before her – her not-yet Husband Two as she saw him that morning, seated in judgement before her, all the power of life and death in his gold-enchanted hands.

“He was a fuller, sires – *the* fuller of Bath. No man bothered to trot to the Prior’s wrecched mill if he could help. Them monks ne had no earthly notion how to run a fulling mill nor tend to the tentering afterwards. Any poor wight take his weaving to them and he’d as like get it back tentered too thin or fulled thick as felt. All be it, Samson le Gold looked like no fuller you never seen. He ne been white-wrinkly with water, nor bent like a laundry-maid, nor his palms cracked with fuller’s earth. No by God, he had his journeymen and day-labour to do the hard stuff. Samson were ever the Guild Merchant. Only a mite younger than Wilkin, but there were no gut on him. By God, he hung his fine clothes well. Passing handsome, was Samson, if you fancy the type. A goodly crop of hair, only a little clawed with frost, and a face on him fit to cut cheese with. Lips like pincers, a black brow to scare the

babes, and a jaw – yea, that jaw, my popelotes, it spake a deal about his aspect. God woot, it was as sharp as the shears that stint Wilkin’s life.”

The Quaestor looks bemused. “And his questions, Dame? I warrant they weren’t inclusive of a proposal of marriage.”

Alys snorts. “Oh that nolde not fit with Sam’s propriety at all. Bend the knee to a chit just widowed? Samson weren’t inclined to bend the knee to any wight.” She watches a cargo vessel flow northwards on the Rhine. This long, laden *Mainzer lade* needs no sweating beasts to tow it at danger of their lives, not like them heading south. The current sweeps it seawards and all the crew need do is steer. “No, but I trowe Sam kept it in mind. Espousal were wove through every little word he shot at me. Oh, certain, he craved a blow-by-blow account of the passing of Wilkin. And so I yaf it him – just as I confessed to yourself, Long Tom, not four days past. Did thy friend maybe mention this confessing, Sir Knyght? Perhaps murmured of Wilkin’s midnight mischance as you nested in the straw for sleep?”

And before he can consider the ramifications of admittance, Sir George is doing just that – admitting. He begins to nod and, lo, his noble profile freezes mid-incline.

The Wife chuckles and stores that knowledge away.

“So the clerk was a-scribbling mine answers all down and the servant-lad was hearkening with maw a-catching flies and, even had Master Gold ne uttered a word never after, I wiste the particulars of Wilkin’s last night’d be known from Wells to Bristol by next duskfall, and that the tale’d grow with every gabble-tongued telling. I was dead famous. By God, the whole cursed district’d flock to my hanging.”

There is audible breath from the Quaestor.

“You *admit* your guilt? The shears – you laid them a-purpose?”

Oh, the fun of an ever hopeful sin-sucker. She grins at him, and observes the battle-field upon his face. He *knows* she’s guilty, he prays it is so, and yet still he doubts.

“Certain, I do nat, thou silly man. Wilkin’s death been full tragic mischance, recall?” She shakes her head in sad remembrance. “Natheless, the stretching of my neck hung on the will of the Guild and them that juried for it. I ne been much beloved by certain burghers of Bath and still less by their wives, even then. Things

han't amended much since, neither. I trowe the most of hem'd love me better beneath St Michael's sod."

Thomas Quaestor grounds his gaze upon his mule's prickly mane, and Alys takes opportunity to glance behind them. Her Parson is trailing with the sumpter-nags as usual. His heels lack assertion, and certain, his horse knows it. Jankyn and Cecily are riding side by side somewhat nearer, Jankyn doubtless belabouring her poor niece's ears with something scholarly and arcane. It seems Alisoun's discourse remains for an audience of two.

"You disobeyed your husband, quod Burgher Sam at end. Weaver William died as a result of thy neglect. God above, I tell you I fair melted into a puddle at that. Does the business of wool mean so much to thee, Dame Alys? he spake on. That thou wilt disobey thy husband for the lure of thread? Well, I suppose I squeaked out some answer or other. I tell you true, I were in full-quivering frailty and fright. See, he ne stint staring at me. Oh, not your usual lickerous eating up of the eyes. Just this look like the wight could spyen right through me. By God, the fellow fair set me a-quaking."

Whereon she recalls those eyes. Blackish brown to match his hair they were, yea, but also somehow blue. The Wife knows colour, none better, but those eyes ... they defied definition.

But then what had the creature said?

Master le Gold had paused. Even the stoop-shouldered clerk ceased in his quill scratching.

"Have you nothing to add, Dame Alisoun?" Samson had said.

She had shook her head, mute as a sock.

"Then it remains for me to touch upon the disposal of your husband's tenement and chattels, Dame. I have his testament here. It was held at the Guildhall for safe-keeping. Doubtless you are aware of the contents."

It was not a question. It ought to have been.

Wilkin had a will? Such a thing had not swum into Alisoun's purview. Not that she could read it if it had, were it written in Latin or bastard-French or English

or all three. Wills she cognised not, but Alys had seen enough of the law in action to be aware of what happened when a husband dies.

Here, then, was a new horror.

Up to this point she had been concerned only with the past, the pressing matter being to convince Sam of her pure and snowy innocence. But now the future intruded, and it did so with veritable rudeness. One way or another, Wilkin's death was the end for her. This testament-thingy would only confirm it.

For here was the law as Alys had observed it: only men owned things. Wives were skipped, no, quite leapt over in the inheritance stakes. The widowed one got her dowry back and with that might consider herself content. After all, she would likely wed again, so handing her new spouse all the old one's goods and lands. Where was the point in that? Only if said wife had produced a fledgling heir might she remain in her home until the fledgling came of age and for the nonce consider his inheritance hers.

But Alys had birthed no heirs, not live ones, least. She had no reason to stay. And the only dowry she had brought was the buying rights to her dear brother's fine flock of sheep. One could not eat a promise of wool.

She would have nothing. She would be stripped of the very clothes on her back and tossed out of her home on Broadstreet. Likely then she'd be chased out of Bath as a vagrant, too. They'd never liked her here. She would have to beg from hamlet to village for, certain and doubtless, her brother would never take her back.

A sob arose. Alys stifled it, but not quite. Some feeling told her that Samson was unlikely to melt before a flood of tears. The clerk, however, was made of different metal. His quill was cast aside, and Alys perceived a pair of spaniel eyes upon her.

Not that he mattered. It was Samson le Gold she had to win and his face was a pool without a ripple. She discerned no pity on it.

"I bring the matter up now simply because if you, Dame Alys, are judged in any way complicit in your husband's death, the will must be considered void."

"But ... but I did say, Master Gold—"

He held up a hand. "I make no judgements, Dame. I imply no blame. I merely indicate the well-spring of some discontent, even accusation, amongst my fellow

councillors and also from the Priory. Indeed, it has made one or two look upon that night's doings with considerable suspicion."

Samson the Fuller indicated a tome on the trestle.

"The testament, clerk. Read it out."

It seemed a Merchant of Bath would not lower himself to read the sordid article himself. The clerk's eyes, though, were awash with curiosity and perhaps pity, but mostly the former. Oh, he would drink well off this gossip in the ale-house tonight, Alys knew well. The fellow cast her a fleeting smile and tugged the ledger towards him.

And read:

I, William Weaver, citizen of Bath, in the presence of ...

(And then followed the names of a good half of the Guild.)

... make my will in this manner:—

I bequeath my body to be buried in St Michael's Without the City of Bath beside the baptistry of said church.

Item, I give and bequeath to my wife Alisoun, citizen of Bath, all my tenement and its appurtenances being upon Broadstreet Without the City of Bath to hold for the term of her life, to pass upon her death to the heir of both our bodies, and so forth until our line do cease. In default of the foregoing, the said tenement shall pass unto John, the Parson of St Michael's Without, that he celebrate ten masses for my soul upon the anniversary of my death in perpetuity.

The weedy fellow paused, and ran an expert's eye down the curl-edged page.

"And then there's the gifts, Dame Alisoun. A great list of them. Oh, just the usual stuff – shillings for all and sundry, donations to the church, a flitch of bacon here, a gown there, pennies for the needy ..."

Said widow was barely listening.

"... and then it finishes with this: *Of this my will I make Alisoun my wife executrix, and bequeath the residue of all my goods to my said wife.*"

The clerk ceased his peering at the parchment. "All in Latin, of course, but I believe I have rendered faithful translation," said he. "It is dated to the twenty-fourth year of our Lord King's reign. Then there are the witnesses and the Guild seal. All in good order, as you may see for yourself, Dame."

Alys looked. There was the blob of dried wax and the scabble of brownish scratchings upon a grainy parchment. She was about to request further translation in plain English, but Samson le Gold intervened.

"Are you with child, Dame Alisoun?"

She managed to focus on his face. She discerned upon it just a hint of enquiry, nothing more.

"No," she peeped. "L ... least, he nath nat ... No, I ne think not, Master Gold."

See, he didn't even get the deed started yesterday. And prior to that, well, Wilkin had been so anxious about the whole progenitory business that, more often than not, when push finally came to shove, his tackle had sagged most sad. No, it was unlikely in the extreme she was with child.

"I gat one babe, but it died," she said. "He ... Wilkin craved more, but I, well, I ne I liked the doing of it over much."

Not something one normally mentioned in interview with an eminent burgher, but it was the truth – and it was well to lay whatever trails away from recent occurrences as came to hand.

"But you did your duty, did you not?" Samson all but barked.

"Certain, I did," she gabbled. "Oh, siker and sure. I was a good Wife, Master Gold. I did my husband's bidding. God been my witness, I did it so for years."

"So your husband made his testament in expectation of an heir, but not in possession of one," Samson declared.

A pause.

"Nonetheless, even in the absence of an heir the will is beneficent, Dame Alisoun. Perhaps surprisingly so. You will perceive why it is that some within the Council and the Priory are ... suspicious."

Beneficent. Was that a good thing? And if it was, did that mean good for her or for someone else? Alys had comprehended little of the reading beyond a blur of *bodies and bequeaths.*

It was the clerk who rescued her.

“Your husband left you the house and business on Broadstreet, Mistress,” he said in a murmur.

The burgher shot him an irritated look.

“That she knows full well. What woman would not, given the terms? I required you to translate *not* that the Dame become acquainted with the contents but that she recognise why it is that a good portion of the council suggest *she* instigated yesterday’s events.”

“But I—” Alys managed two words merely.

“Petty treason. That is what they accuse you of, Dame Alisoun. The murder of your husband.”

Her interrogator paused. He fixed her with that blank, all-seeing stare.

“Now, Dame, I repeat. Have you anything to add?”

Widow Alys could do naught but gape like a nestling. First the fellow dangled the incredible possibility that she become mistress of the house and concerns on Broadstreet, and then, having offered her the whole world, he all but declared her a fiendish murderess. Her future was assured.

She would swing from the gallows for all Bath to gawk.

“Well?”

It is the Quaestor. It is time to abbreviate.

“Well, what’d he tell me next but that Wilkin’d willed me near all his stuff. Me! Villeinish undergrown Alys. And on such basis that most everichoon who bethought themselves anybody’d leap to the conclusion that I’d gone and stabbed the woolly wight just to get at his substance.”

“Not such a far-fetched supposition,” murmurs Tom.

“So why didn’t you hang?”

Oh, God have mercy, the statue discovers the power of speech.

“For I ne been guilty, thou noble gnof!” Alys bites back. “And Samson spake as such within the trial. Parson John, too. There was none that could convince the coroner otherwise, and so my neck-bone been preserved from rope.”

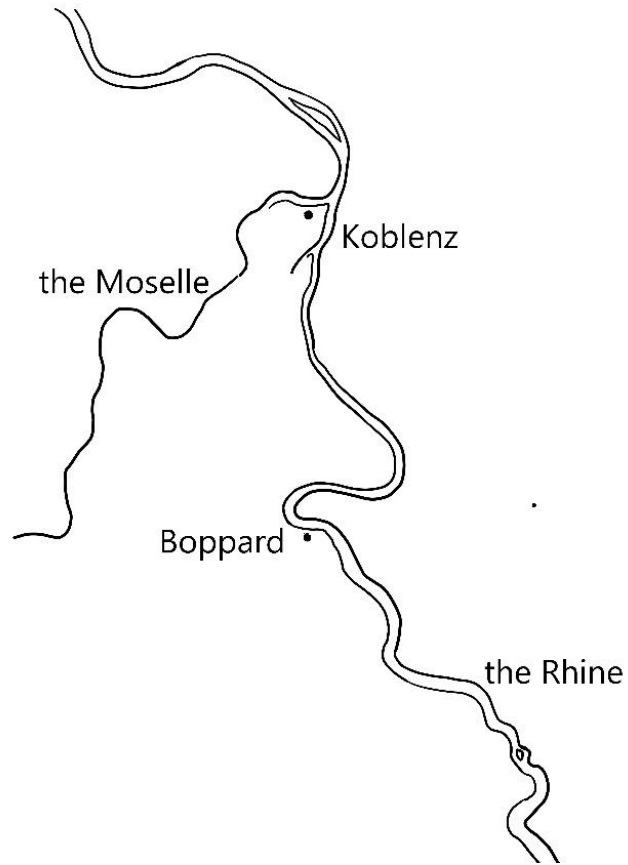
“*Samson?*” The Quaestor makes echo. “Whatever did you offer him, Dame, that he withdrew his wonderings? The way you had it a moment ago, the fellow seemed fair to string you up to the nearest tree himself.”

“Oh, it ne been what I offered him, thou sin-sucker.” And here the Dame grins at him, although she isn’t feeling over-much humour. “It were what peculiar mix of potage Master Sam had in mind to offer *me*.”

She turns to he who initiated this delve into her past.

“And that, Sir Not-George, nis not strictly how I met mine Husband Number Two, but certain, my Knyghtling, it were the initiation of his courtship. Now. Artow content?”

31. Boppard



Are we content, asks she? Sweet St Stephen, not by a peddler's half. She answers nothing, this Bawd. She poses us riddles and insults us on the back-swipe. It is enough to make me suspect she suspects.

Lordings, we mull over the Wife's dubious tale that very evening, Sir George and I. Or at least, I mull and he makes occasional monosyllables. Stuffed in this tiny, Rhiney hamlet – Boppard, they call it – Sir George condescends to share my hay-scented bower. It is the first time since Calais. It is, of course, prompted solely by the need to discuss a certain Bawd. Or is it that, in absence of a Venetian, his funds again drip low? I do not ask. I sense that money is a delicate matter with my Knyght. A man's funds are his own affair – especially when he has none.

I declare the Dame of Bath toys with us. I say she must be shaken out of her playing.

“She was stabbed in Bruges,” says the Knyght. “That did not shake her.”

George looks at me direct at this. It is a thing I have noticed, that he does not often catch my eyes. I wish he would not now. It is a look at close quarters – in sleeping quarters – and there are none here but us. I drown. I flounder most helpless. I flush hot and pray to God he does not notice. He suspects me of perforation.

“Heaven have mercy, Sir George,” I twitter, “but that only made it worse! Stick a hole in her belly, and she leaks two separate stories.” I cannot catch my thoughts, I know not where to place my eyes. In fine, I quite forget to defend myself. “I speak of something less ... violent, perhaps. Yes, it comes to me now. I will try it tonight.”

He shrugs, slowly. As if there is something more he would add. He is looking at me still, the sunset dim turning his eyes luminous. All-seeing. What can I do but declare that cabbage craves my company and a sausage shouts my name, and scurry to the tap-room and dinner?

The moon is riding the clouds when I return, and the earth is a ship's deck beneath my feet. My thoughts toss likewise.

I return to my Knyght in the stable, and stand staring down upon him, my one hand upon an unsteady wooden railing. Pale light filters through the stable shutter. George sleeps, moonlight-streaked, and I grip the wall and consider the whole shambles – or try to.

Lordings, women are supposed to shed secrets like a wolfhound in spring. They spew gossip. They are incapable of concealment. But this one – I begin to wonder whether the Knyght's naming is indeed apt. The Bawd is a fiend in female form. There is no knowing whether anything she says is truth. Like pagan Penelope she weaves us a tapestry only to tear it up next day.

It is a hollowing thought. The Prior has taken my bulls, my livelihood, and worse, he withholds the cleansing of my soul. And now it creeps on me, honeyed and irresistible – I shall compound my sin. *Multiplicat et crescit*. I do so even now, if only in thought.

For he chooses my company. He leans on me. I have the power to light a smile upon his face.

Multiplicat et crescit. It increases and it grows.

In the swaying dark, I lay a hand to my bone. I close my eyes. Ah, it is a most comforting solidity. No, it is a divine slap on the cheek. There she is: Ursula's maid warm against my skin. Against all convention or propriety I have released her from the cloth pouch within which I initially laid her. Now the virginal bone is wedged within the waist of my breech day and night. Oh trust me well, most especially by night.

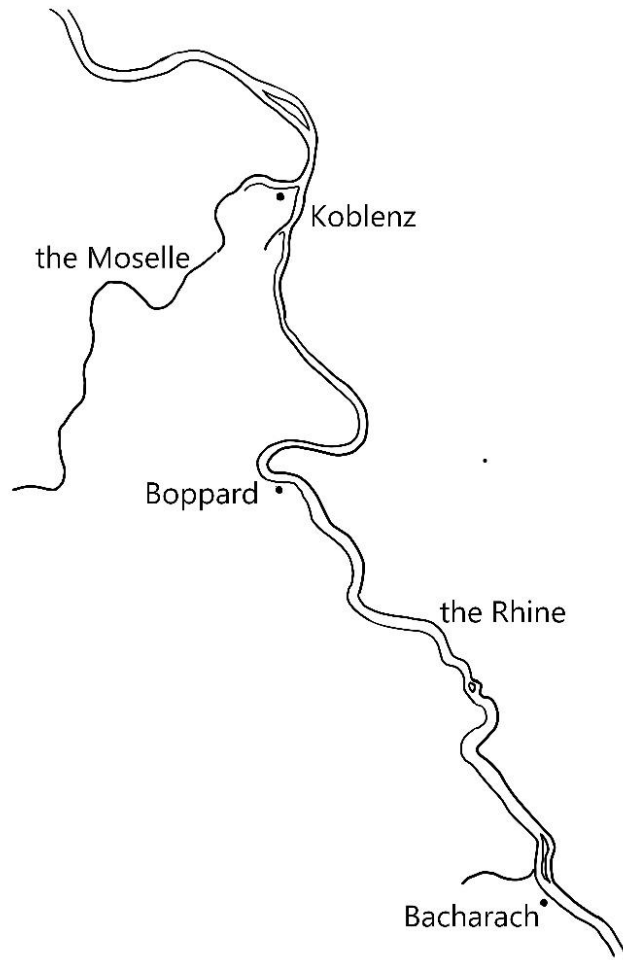
I need the Bawd's sin in swap for my own. And soon. Outright confession has failed, and tonight I tried by means of lubrication, much *much* lubrication. The result? Christ knows whether I will remember any of it by morning, but there was little enough of value.

Stephen save me, this is a fool's mission. What can I obtain of sufficient value that the Prior will ever return my bulls? Perhaps I should turn back, cut my losses. Start again elsewhere.

Even now it is not too late to return.

But do I want to?

32. Rhine Path



“Hält!”

Two burly fellows, who a moment ago had been strolling most inoffensively toward the same bridge upon the Rhine path they too are approaching, are now barring their way.

In the normal way of things, this would not bother Sir George. He is on horse, they are on foot. He is a knight, they are most certainly not. What hope have two commoners against a noble, a trained warrior? No, what renders this barring so effective are the eight-foot poles that have by some sorcery manifested themselves in the men’s hands. Verily, they were not there a moment ago. One glance at this change of affairs, and the Knyght has the situation summed up with gloomy precision.

The poles were secreted behind opportune trees.

Each pole is topped by that axe-and-spear confection that transforms a length of wood into a lethal weapon. They are halberds. Knyght-killers. And the fellows in whose grasp they lie look entirely willing to wield them.

The Dragon utters a tiny scream, quickly muted when a halberd wavers in her direction. The Knyght reins up, his courser’s nose near-nuzzling her mount’s tail.

He should have anticipated this.

George has been riding – or plodding, more like – through mist like autumn smoke, scree of leafless wood and vineyard to the right of him, Rhine to the left, for a mere handful of German miles this day. The plodding is not to his taste. It is early morning. He and his courser itch to ride at twice, no, thrice the pace, but the others are sleepy – or worse the wear for over-abundant Rhenish wine.

The Quaestor and the She-Dragon had seemed set to drain a tun between them the night previous, and George had retired to his bed-chamber while he could still walk (the stable again – the Venetian’s money wouldn’t last forever). He hadn’t even heard his companion of the straw stagger in. What had the fellow done – bedded down with the Wife instead? Now there was a dire expedient for extracting

a story. Well if he had, it had been a brief proceeding. When George awoke in the grey dawn to the whickering of nags, the Quaestor had been curled up like a cat in a shit-free corner. The fellow had been most reluctant to wake and, when he did, the greenish tinge to his cheeks and lankness of his locks brought to mind some sprite plucked from the Rhine. George had swallowed a smile.

The Dame had been desirous to be up and off as soon as may be, but it seemed her stomach couldn't stomach anything faster than a walk. They had exited the gates of Oberwesel with no more than a wave of the Wife's new archiepiscopal parchment and began to plod upstream, letting the Rhine lead them ever southwards.

As they had yesterday, and the day before that, and the one before that as well.

Mist muffled the wooded, vine-ranked slopes and stirred like cauldron-steam over the Rhine. The path they trod squeezed between slimed river-pebbles and steep valley slopes. Sometimes the trees leaned so close as to drip cold kisses upon the Knyght's neck. And above the trees, perched high on cloud-wrapped crags, crumbling towers and curtain walls loomed down on passing travellers. The quantity of castles along this stretch of the Rhine is quite astounding.

Not to mention concerning.

The hairs on the Knyght's neck have been prickling all morning. He had hoped it was just the cold.

But now this. The perfect time and place for an ambush.

The *routier* in him appreciates the many merits of the situation – from the brigand's point of view. A burbling stream carves a miniature valley to intersect the greater gouge of the Rhine. The path they tread dips away from the river towards the little bridge that spans it. The Rhine, that busy highway of river-barges, is shielded from view by a willowed island draggling close to the western bank. Then there is the mist. The chill morning. It has ensured they have seen no more than two travellers since Oberwesel.

He is about to bark a command to about-turn and gallop – and hope to Perdition his companions have the gumption to follow – when a squinting fellow with a crossbow steps out from behind a tree.

He is squinting at them.

The Knyght's hand slips from his sword-hilt. The crossbow is spanned and quarreled. It levels first at the Wife, and then, on George's movement, at him. The Knyght's arm drops limp by his side.

His un-mailed, un-plated, near-unprotected side.

Before him, the Dragon inflates like a cat trying to double its size, or like the serpent set to strike.

"We," she declares slow and loud, "been pilgrims, good sirs." She taps her chest. She cannot miss. "Palmers. *Peregrini*. Jerusalem. Now justow step aside like good brigands, by God, and I nil nat go gabbing to the nearest wight in a castle."

"Alys, he won't understand you," hisses Jankyn.

"*Peregrini*, eh? Is *gut*."

It is a fourth fellow who speaks – and now, O saints above, there is a fifth and a sixth. Worse still, these latest thugs appear on horseback, and from the road behind them. *Behind*? Sir George's heart sinks to the mud. He has been herded here like some hapless sheep, likely all the way from Oberwesel, and now the trap has closed.

The Wife twists around. A lout with a halberd shouts a warning, in German, but the meaning is clear enough. *Stop jiggling about, thou silly jade! You make a bowman's finger twitch.*

"What dostow mean – *gut*?" she demands of the minimal English-speaker. "No, thou knave, is not *gut*! Them that offer a pilgrim harm better take kep of their souls, by God. You poke that nasty pike near me, and it been straight to Hell with you. Now be a popelote and lat us amble on. I'll even pray for you at the Sepulchre, if you make shift."

George is tempted to put spur to flank, leave the lot of them behind, and chance that the bowman will miss. The foul termagant seems set to get them killed anyway. He may not have armour (beyond the padding of his aketon) but he still has his spurs, that symbol of knighthood and effective means of putting distance between nobility and the common muck.

His heels quiver with desire.

His courser quivers with his need.

The newcomer saunters closer, pleased to delay his response to the Wife – or perhaps he is temporarily dumbstruck, which is as likely a reaction to that female fiend. It is act now or be snared.

And yet ...

And yet upon second thoughts, the Knyght sags. What is the point? Abandon the Dragon and he will remain excommunicate, without inheritance and, indeed, without his head should a certain merchant make good his threat. He is a knight at the mercy of mere commoners.

The nominal English-speaker has approached the Dragon's mount. He grabs her reins. He grins up at her. The teeth of his upper gum might be numbered on one hand.

"Peregini is *gut* 'cause peregrini got silver." He shakes his kettle-helmed head at her in reproof. "Real peregini is poor. No silver. Rich men no go to Heaven, y' know. I take care of your soul, eh?"

"I han't any more of the silver stuff than is suffisant to get me to the Sepulchre, thou gnof. What coin I have is full needly. Touch it and thy soul wol shrivel and singe. Him in Rome clept it. So let us go." She shakes her reins in attempt to free them of Rhenish hands. Her horse dances.

The fellow jerks his head sideways. His doughy face has turned business-like.

"Down. Git down." He looks at the rest of the party. "All. Down."

The nasty end of a halberd approaches George's aketon. Without his armour, he is helpless as a crab unshelled, but still the Knyght hesitates. Dismount, and there is no chance of escape. The others are descending, but still he wavers. It is not that he has over much silver to lose, but he still has his honour. He has pledged his troth. He is meant to *protect* Alisoun of Bath and her troupe – at least from the violence of strangers. A Knyght is one-who-fights, not one-who-stands-by. What use is he otherwise? Here is the first test, and already he is failing.

So George acts.

He dashes aside the over-intimate halberd with his left hand and slips his sword free with the right. A jab of the spurs and his courser near knocks the brigand-in-chief over, and when the rough fellow regains his balance it is to find the tip of a knightly sword levelled at his swine-bristle throat.

Of course, what happens next is that every other thug seizes upon his nearest unhorsed pilgrim and likewise advances a dagger toward some vulnerable part. The Quaestor yelps as some unwashed German jerks his hair back. Cecily is secured by the waist and attempts to stamp on her captor's feet.

The Knyght stares down into brown brigand eyes.

"Let them go or you die," says he.

A babble of German. Strangely, it does not emerge from the throat George is currently threatening with aeration.

Instead, the mouth above that bristly throat broadens into a smile – or the Knyght assumes it is to be interpreted so. In fact, the bared teeth and the peeled-back lips more closely resemble an ill-mannered mongrel.

"He says put your knife down or get yourself a new arsehole. In the ribs." The chief ruffian indicates, unmoving save with eyes and brows. His English has become surprisingly good in extremity.

The Knyght exhales. The crossbowman. The squinting one has a quarrel aimed square at his back. It is as plain as if he had eyes in his horse's rump. Even the finest steel habergeon couldn't stop it from this range – and his is back in Calais. George closes his eyes. Slowly, he lets the sword-tip drop. His arm goes limp.

Oh well, never say he didn't do his knightly duty. Or something of the sort.

The sword is plucked from his hand. He tightens his fingers too late. The weapon is gone. Someone yanks him sideways and he half topples, half dismounts from his unhappy courser. Once grounded, he is patted down for further weaponry and relieved in short order of one rondel and a ballock dagger. They are severing limbs. He is armless now.

And then – now that he is plucked as a pigeon – the brigands forget him and turn their sauerkraut-breath and rampant brows towards the Dragon.

"Right, *Frau*. Point out your valuables sharpish and you can be on your way. Can't be more reasonable than that. You behave, and I'll even let you keep your mounts, or most of 'em. But you get cagey about producing the goods, and we'll just swipe the lot, donkey and all."

"Mule," mutters the Quaestor.

The bristly brigand doesn't even glance at Tom. The Chief Thief has acquired a nervous twitch of the foot. His turd-brown eyes flick up and down the Rhine road.

The fellow is in a hurry, and who can blame him? This path is a highway, and the river itself is a watery street through Christendom. It may be all but deserted now, but it won't be long before the next party of travellers comes along – and they may be better equipped for the dispatching of outlaws.

The brigand-in-chief barks some orders to his cohort. His leather gauntlet indicates pack-horses and saddle-bags. The first item of luggage approached is Jankyn's bulging leather bag.

"Oy! Don't touch that! No, get your hands off my hose!" Jankyn bounds forward, only to reverse at halberd-point. "Alisoun, tell them!"

"Dostow want valuables?" says the Dragon. "Well, there ne been none in there, save them that keep my Jankyn's jewels cosy. So reft thy paws and I'll show you. Go on, shut the cursed lid."

The flap is not shut, but the brigand steps back at a bark from his boss. Then – what is the Dragon doing? The Wife has plunged a hand down her corsete and is fishing about within. Lo, the bandits draw close as helpless bees drawn to a blowsy and odiferous bloom. Indeed, they are distracted. Verily, one would think there was no room in that casing for aught but bounteous bosom.

Heartbeats clang by. He begins to think the Dragon lost in her own corsete. The Knyght grows restless, but the brigands' eyes remain enchanted. It dawns upon the Knyght that her performance is somewhat calculated.

Finally, a leather pouch emerges from the depths. Fine Spanish cordwainery. Her bosom ceases its seismic stirring and her audience deflates. First she jingles the purse, then she tugs open the drawstring and admits a ray or two to glint upon that within. The Knyght's jaw drops. Gold. There before him are true gold nobles, Edward Third-of-his-Name vintage. More than he has seen altogether since his now-deceased father paid up for his sole-son's knightly harness. By St George and blessed Archangel Michael, this Dragon stows a hoard between her breasts.

But not anymore.

With nary a blink, she tosses her bag to the chief brigand.

First the bedazzled fellow drops it. Then he descends upon it like the stooping hawk and is in short order clinking out the coins. The Knyght turns away, distinctly queasy. *He* never had such a haul in all his five years of French routiering. He wouldn't be in this state of affairs if he had.

He expects that will be the end of the affair. Having got what is clearly the core wealth of the party, the brigands ought now to disappear up the streamlet path and make for the hills that they may fight in safety over their loot. Verily, the Knyght would. Anyone could appear round the bend of the river path at any minute – a well-guarded merchant, a local lord and his men-at-arms, even a rival brigand. You've got the gold, you don't hang about, or you might hang in truth. For outlaws in a hurry, these brigands seem reluctant to depart. At a guttural grunt from the thug-in-chief, a halberd-bearer sets to messing with the packhorses. More precisely, with that of the poor beast destined to labour beneath the Dragon's episcopally-sanctioned barrels. Two horses along, the Wife's sack of spinning-stuff and sundry other items of varying intimacy are parted from their sumpter. Another fellow has returned to Jankyn's as-yet-unsealed bag.

"Oy!" The Wife and husband yell with one voice.

"You got my gold, you thieving swine. Now leave off the rest!" shrieks Alisoun.

The bowman merely levels his means of knightly slaughter at her.

A Dragon is not so easily cowed. "There's naught but holy water in them barrels, thou kaynard. You leave hem be!"

She attempts to bustle forward, to be stopped by a hand rather personally placed on her person. In the meantime the barrel-horse has been untied from its place in the train, its load still swayingly secure.

The Wife shrieks and wriggles. She calls upon an impressive breadth of vocabulary. She promises hell-fire and precious gems, flaying and sepulchric blessings, none of which make any impact upon her audience. The brigand-in-chief waves his minion toward the narrow path winding up the streamlet valley and away from the Rhine. The ruffian restraining the Wife is forced to clamp the creature against his burly person. She looks fit to take wing, what with arms flapping and legs off the ground. She bellows at her companions to: "*Do somedeel, thou caitiffs!*"

George looks about him. Where is the fellow with his sword? Did he not promise it be returned? He may not have harness, but a Knyght must have a sword. And then a brigandish fellow approaches him. Saints above, the creature dares to lay hands upon his person. The villain is fiddling at his waist.

“What—?”

But it is plain what the churl is up to.

George’s foot shoots out. It catches the kneeling thug between the legs. The fellow topples back with the noise of a toad in trouble. In less time than it takes to draw a breath, two fellow-thugs hit George with all the force of a battering ram and the Knyght finds himself thrown flat on his back, his chest the seat of one and the other busy about his middle.

His hips, more precisely.

George kicks, squirms, and strikes, wild as a worm in a beak. All that achieves is a wallop on the head, courtesy of the boot by a passing brigand – the one plodding by with the Wife’s precious packhorse, barrels and all. There is a burst of stars within his skull. It is obliterated by blackness.

George wakes to find himself unencumbered.

Of thugs, and of far worse.

He struggles up onto elbows. The Quaestor leans over him to one side, his courser on the other. The beast has been lipping at his ear but now it startles back. But neither circumstance does he fully cognise at this juncture. Instead he stares wildly about him, left and right. The world wobbles.

“Where are they?” he cries.

“What? Yon welked and wrecched thieves? Yon cuckold knaves?” The screech pains his ears. He does not need to twist around to know the speaker is a Dragon.

“Gone! Hied hence!” she snaps in self-reply. “Fled like fleas to the forest.”

He receives his second kick for the day, but this time to the upper arm and of considerably less force than the first. Dragons are not equipped for kicking.

“Arise, Sir George! Stint arraying thyself on the muck, nigardish Knyght-protector that you are. They’ve hente what’s mine, and I desiren it back.” Another kick. “So get thee up!”

He lurches upright. The trees tip and sway. Quaestor Tom proffers an arm in support, but the Knyght shoves him away.

“We ride them down,” he mumbles. His tongue seems too large in his mouth. “Bring me my horse!”

“Oh, certain. Gallop after the cuckwolds. And then wostow suggest, by God? Ask hem full courteous for our stuff back?”

He blinks at her. What does she *want* him to do? The Dragon’s face is blotched with red and white. Her eyes spark fire. They focus on the middle of his person.

“Oh.”

The Knyght follows her glare down his torso to his left hip. It is bare, but not of cloth. Nothing mars the line of his aketon or the tunic beneath. His hose cling snug below. There is only an indent where that which was central to his manhood used to lie.

His belt is gone, and the scabbard with it. They have disarmed him not temporarily but permanently.

The bastards have taken his sword.

33. Burg Stahleck

One would not have thought the day could get any worse – but it just has.

The Venetian has entered Burg Stahleck.

Just when it was possible she was getting somewhere with this thin-lipped and stolidly officious official – if only by weight of harrying – Alys is interrupted by Giovanni Balducci Minotto.

He enters the audience chamber as if he owns it. He, and not the Ritter von Stahleck, the absent lord of the castle. Of course, the bailiff moves immediately to greet the fellow, so turning away from her. She, the wronged party with the prior claim to his reluctant attentions! By God, the fellow is useless. He barely speaks English and a three-way conversation must be conducted with John casting her demands into suspiciously abbreviated Latin. She had suggested it be Jankyn who took the honour of communicating such a portentous matter to the chamberlain, but her Oxford scholar declined. Ah, it must be the shock of the robbery. Her boy is now deficient a goodly number of hose. He is not to know there are far more significant matters at stake. She has not told him.

No, the key to her recovery of lost goods shall not get away so easily. Alys inserts herself between Minotto and her target.

“Now just you advise your master about me and *then* you moote make gab with this foreign fellow here. No, I care nat one leek if the Baron’s abed riding his latest filly or receiving the last rites – just you roule on up and tell Lord Whatever-He-Been that a merchant-woman has been robbed, and *on his land this verray day!*”

John hastens to translate. Alys is tempted to enquire of Jankyn the fidelity her priest employs in swapping English for Latin. She wonders too how firm the chamberlain grasps the ancient gibberish. It is possible he understands more of her shrill English than he admits. But now is not the time.

Now is the time for this uppity servant to produce his master, and for said master to flush her out a nest of thieves.

But the bailiff is not listening, neither to her nor to John. He has stepped out of her line of fire and is bowing to Giovanni Balducci Minotto, and Minotto is uttering honey-coated German in return. Least, that's what it sounds like.

Alys is just inflating herself for renewed attack when the Italian turns to her.

"Signora Alisoun. Sir John. *Signori.*" He sketches a bow towards those of her companions lingering at some distance. Distancing themselves from her and her commotion, no doubt. "Our paths cross again. Well met – or perhaps no? If you will forgive me for saying, *bella signora*, you seem a little ... over-wrought?"

Over-wrought?

"Perhaps I may be of assistance," the smooth fellow continues. His black eyes rest upon her, knowing and unknowable. They slip from face to corsete then back again, and with every evidence of calm. The skin of her upper chest heats. "I have some ability in the native tongue," he continues. "Perhaps I may translate your concern to this good fellow?"

Alys has no words. She is about to explode. Implode. Yon slimy Venetian slinks in here, slurps up the bailiff's attention, and then proposes to *assist* her?

In her momentary muteness, John steps in.

"Thank you, Sir Venetian. We were set upon beside the Rhine, our persons abused and our goods pilfered. We crave —"

"No we never! John, you lat be. This ne been Minotto's affair. No need to fret his kind soul on our behalf, by God."

But the Italian is already turning to the stolid bailiff fellow. Fluid German is the result and, before the Wife can interject, the Baron's man has bowed his way out of the room and Minotto has the temerity to gleam a smile. At her.

"Just you gat back here!" she cries. Too late, the door is closed, the bailiff vanished. She rounds on Minotto. "Now look wastow've done!"

"*Sta tranquilla, signora.* Heinrich goes only to petition his lord. But tell me, where is your guard? I pray he was not laid low in the attack?"

"Oh, he were laid low." Alisoun can show her teeth too. "God woot, as low as they come. Right down to the Rhiney mud. But he picked himself up again, more's the pity. No, Georgey-boy's off a-hunting himself a new knife in yon village.

Yea, that jumble of cobbles and wine-swillers we crawled through to get here. Bachy-rack.”

The Venetian frowns. It is the first veritable emotion she has seen him display this day.

“I told it him,” she declares. “Whan I yaf my word to the Prior to take him along, it been for a proper knightling, not some toothless, clawless palmer. First he loses his shiny armour, and now the caitiff’s without a sharp bit of metal to his person. No, nat even his ballocky dagger. By God, that limp rag of a Quaestor’d protect me better. Our noble Knyght, what’d he do but get himself rolled in the dirt when push came to punch? No, if the silly wight desiren to been any use, he moote acquire himself a skewer. That, or I’ll find myself a better bully eftsoon.”

And as she speaks, she eyes the Venetian most narrow. So what’s his concern with Sir Not-George?

None, apparently, for the Venetian shrugs.

“*Certo, signora*. A guard-dog without teeth is no guard. You would do better to travel with me. Men-at-arms I have, and in plenty.”

Ah, he is back to singing his old song. Well, she will have none of it.

She shrugs too. “If he crave free passage to Jerusalem, he’ll hente himself a sword. I have faith, Italian. My Knyght will maken good his quest.” She pauses. Decides to bob a curtesy to courtesy. “Oh, and thankee kindly for thine offer, Sir Minotto, but ne goon a-bothering yourself about me. If this Baron fellow here nil nat recover our goods, there been nothing for it but to turn tail and scuttle home. Yea, all the way to steamy Bath.”

She feels Parson John jolt. The Venetian opens thin and shapely lips only to close them again.

Alys would grin if she could – only she’s forgotten how.

34. Bacharach

*His gold sporez spend with pryde,
Gurde wyth a bront ful sure*

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

The Knyght wends his way down the steep and winding path. Before him curls a sweeping vista of the Rhine. He eyes it not. Closer at hand, he might partake of an eagle's-eye view of the clustering houses that are Bacharach – all wooden shingles, twisted dark beams, and floating smoke. He spares no glance for these either. Or, should he pause to look behind him, he would find Burg Stahleck towering above, perched like a glowering troll on a rocky knoll. Even as he skirts the sweetly-dreaming Gothic confection of St Werner's Chapel (child martyr to blood-drinking Jews), the Knyght glances not up.

A knight has no use for views. A knight's sole pursuit is noble worth. This particular Knyght is negotiating the slippery-slick clay of the path to the town where lies the consummate symbol of his knighthood. He is in haste, and there is the danger that he will slip. Besides, he is consumed with remembrance of the vision just vouchsafed him in the castle.

A Venetian, a Baron, a Dragon, and – arrayed before them in the castle bailey – two barrels and a froth-mouthed pack-nag; one bag overflowing with particoloured hose and assorted clothing of the gaudiest; a sack of wool, part-spun and entirely in disarray; a pair of daggers, the hilt of one shaped in strong likeness to a man's nether-purse; and a leather belt, scabbard hanging therefrom, sadly scuffed.

And his sword, sheathed snugly within.

All that was unrecovered were the thieves – and the Dragon's gold.

As if this reappearance of their goods were not miracle enough, a second wonder followed sharp upon its heels: a Dragon rendered silent. No roars. Not even a puff of smoke. The Wife of Bath simply stood there, eyes wandering from barrels to belt to Baron. It was up to her husband to break the silence.

“My hose!” cried he. The youth sprang forward and gathered said items in a loving embrace. Then he held them up, leg by finely-knitted leg, inspecting each with the eye of a connoisseur. “Christ above, they’d better not have worn them. What is it – three days since they were stolen? Time enough for some hairy German to shove his hoof into my hose.” Whereon Jankyn raised the stretchy wool to his nostrils and snuffed most cautiously.

“Well, my dove?”

The Dragon had rediscovered her voice, for all it came out subdued.

Her husband had elbowed his dearly beloved in the ribs – or more-like her shoulder. And lo, the gleam in his blue eye worked a third miracle for one day. For the first time the Knyght received an inkling of why the Wife dotes on this husband so. That blue gleam bespoke affection. Fun. It transformed a sulky boy’s mien to that of a youth effervescent with life.

“No thigh but mine has breached these hose, Wifeling dear. These nostrils do not lie. My hose remain mine alone – to case your favourite shanks therein.” He grinned down upon his spouse. Indeed, he even ventured to wrap an arm about her scarlet shoulders.

The Wife basked – and remained content to be silent, praise God.

But the Knyght could wait no longer. He strode forward, to the bench upon which the pilfered goods were laid. He grasped the belt. The scabbard dragged most reassuringly heavy. His hand caressed the protruding hilt like a long-lost lover. The blade slipped free of its sheath with a serpentine shiver. Oh, the joy, the melting relief. He lifted the naked blade. He turned it, tipping it slowly, letting light slip up and down its steely length. To all appearances, he interrogated its shining surface for nicks and dents. He did not. An urge to shout his delirium near stormed the Knyght’s defences. He resisted, but only just. He selected the next best response.

“Show me the thieves,” he growled. “They will pay.”

He saw the Ritter von Stahleck glance at the Venetian. The nobleman – or what passed for noble in these parts – gargled some words.

“I regret ... the thieves could not be caught,” Minotto translated, or did he transpose?

“Why ever not, good sir?” the Quaestor asked, yet the man seemed little enough concerned. After all, he had not lost anything that needed to be regained. The lissom fellow raised pale brows at George.

Minotto merely smiled. “One glance at my men – and those of the Baron, *veramente* – and your fearsome brigands abandoned their spoils and dug heels for the hills.”

George had frowned. This accommodating Italian seemed to tell a straightforward tale, but ...

“Hey, where’s my Wife’s gold?”

Jankyn, of course, but what struck the Knyght as uncharacteristic was the lad did not claim the gold to be his. Wed a wife and she passes all worldly possessions to her spouse. She is not a person any more, but only half of one – and the lesser half at that.

Giovanni Balducci Minotto had merely shook his head in sorrow. The gold, it seemed, had gone – vanished as surely as if the brigands had eaten it.

Vanished. Now there’s a hideous thought. George lengthens his stride and nearly up-ends on a stray dog-turd. He curses all German mutts for hounds of Hell, and notes with relief that he is almost upon the (nearly) level length of cobblestones that mark Bacharach-proper.

In retrospect, though, one thing strikes him as strange. Why a Dragon’s muteness? The boy-husband was the one squawking about the gold removed from his beloved’s bosom – not its normally-vociferous owner.

“How’re we supposed to get to Jerusalem without coin, eh? Swim? What, do we beg for our bread and bed down in chapels?”

The Knyght had to blink. In the absence of words from the Wife’s mouth, her husband has taken to ventriloquising. But Alisoun of Bath was not even paying attention. She was moving towards the trestle laden with returned loot. The Venetian answered not. He had eyes only for the Wife.

She dragged a bench to the trestle, the better to inspect.

“May I assist you, *Signora*?”

She did not so much as acknowledge the dark man’s presence. She knocked gently first at one barrel, then the other. A dull sound of cooper-work, well-filled

with liquid. The Wife demanded a lever and was supplied one. A barrel lid was pried off. The Dragon, wavering upon a wooden bench, bent to breathe deep from the uncovered contents. Her eyes closed. Sir George was reminded of the prior performance of her husband. What, are they bitch and dog that they must go around sniffing their property?

And behold. One would have thought Alisoun of Bath had sucked in the smoke which assassins of the east inhale to evacuate fear, heathen cowards that they are. A true knight does not need jagged leaves to fuel his fire.

The smoke of ecstasy had flushed the Wife's visage like blood disobeying gravity. Then she recalled herself – and her audience. She clapped on the lid, hammered it down with the end of the same tool which had levered it up, and jumped to the straw-matted floor like a robin from a twig. And all in a brisk and business-like manner that deceived no-one – not the Knyght, and, if he was any judge, most certainly not Giovanni Balducci Minotto.

And yet this insight seemed not to please George's Italian co-conspirator, his erstwhile source of coin for information on Wifely movements. Black brows inscribed a fleeting V. The following instant, the slate of Minotto's face was wiped clean.

Upon consideration, the Dragon permitted something of her former bliss to reinhabit her face. She turned to the Baron. Verily, she pattered up to him, melted to a puddle at his feet, and seized his fingers that she may lay lips to reddened knuckles.

"Danke, danke, Herr ... Sir ..."

"He is the Ritter von Stahleck," murmured Minotto.

"You han sheltered us these three days and succoured our pain," she cried. "Heaven's grace shine down upon 'ee, Sir German-thingy. Yea, and I'll make certain it do, just so soon as I set toe upon holy soil. I wol pray for you at the Sepulchre, sweet Ritter. The Queen of Heaven herself'll beam down on thy hairy brow."

Sir George shakes his head and stops to look about him for the first time since exiting the gates of Burg Stahleck above. There is a bustle of German peasants and craftsmen. Foreigners, too – he hears French accents (the devil drown them all), Lowlanders, and a fair smattering of southerners, Spanish and Italian. It is a

prosperous little town, this trade-post on the Rhine. Even a Knyght can see that. It occurs to him that Von Stahleck likely does very well out of controlling this stretch of river, thank you very much. It is only in his interests to string up such brigands as might frighten off the legal toll-payers who flock here.

So why didn't he? Choke the thieves on the nearest tree, that is? Surely brigandish horses are not so fleet of foot as those of a nobleman's men-at-arms? Was that why something had jarred?

But now it is time to consider more important things. He has reached the smithy.

It occurs to him belatedly, as he steps into the pocked and singed courtyard, that he should have brought a translator. The blacksmith is burly and bullishly German, as George discovered upon his previous visit. True, the knave seems to deal with customers of all tongues, but he mangles English more than he mangles his iron. Yet there is a reason the Knyght enlisted no aid in this quest, even that of the Venetian.

The shame is too deep. He must recover some of his pride first.

The hulking fellow is bent over a horse's leg. A horseshoe faint-glowing from the forge is aligned to trimmed hoof. There is a sizzle and odour of cooking. The smithy glances up once, registers his presence, and then proceeds with all unflappability to the anvil to deliver the hot shoe a judicious clang or two.

The iron is dunked in water.

The Knyght seethes. In between the shuttling of nails and further shoes to his master, an apprentice offers him a beaker of beer. Sir George must sup the bitter stuff and observe the completion of the horse-shoeing before the smithy deems himself at leisure to speak to his honoured guest.

"Guten Tag, Herr Engländer," the fellow grunts. *"Again."*

He is dusting his plough-share hands off against a scarred leather apron. Another horse stamps nearby. The smithy casts it a less-than-covert glance.

Sir George pats his sword – the imperfectly-balanced and inferior one that hangs scabbardless at his right side.

“I would return this, smithy.”

“What? Is not good?” Then the ugly fellow, his beard patchy with burn marks, fires off some lingo at his lingering apprentice. The lad blushes.

“I do not doubt the quality of your work—” George continues. It is not precisely the truth. “—but I have got my own blade back.” He pats said item in clarification.

The smithy peers, first at his right side then at his left. No, his eyes do not deceive him, the Knyght does indeed wear two weapons.

“Ten *pfennig*,” the smithy grunts. He nods at the superfluous sword.

“He will buy it back, sir,” the apprentice explains.

Ten German pennies? St Michael have mercy, it is a pittance. Verily, it is an insult.

“No coin, just return what is mine.” At the smithy’s blank look, George grits: “My spurs. Give me back my spurs.”

More German is fired at the apprentice. The lad frowns, shakes his head. George feels his temperature rise. It is in no way connected with the blasting heat of the forge.

“He says he sold your spurs, sir.” It is the apprentice who speaks, and somewhat timidly.

The Knyght steps forward a pace.

“Well *unsel* them, then.”

The apprentice steps back. “Umm, sir ... well, you see. We can’t.” He glances at his master, his eyes speaking a plea.

On one level, George feels a spark of remorse. A knight does not bully his inferiors. On quite a different level – and one distinctly closer to the surface – a Knyght is in truth no knight without his spurs. Verily, they are fair to look on. Useful for goading a horse, too – not that his current steed needs any goading. But overriding all, a knight’s spurs are the very symbol of his knighthood. That, and his sword. When he is dubbed, a new-born knight is girded with both spurs and sword. These are the essentials.

The Dragon gave him ultimatum when first they were robbed. The foul Hag forced him to choose between sword and spurs. No weapon, no Jerusalem, said

she. Christ's bones, did she know what she asked? Like as not, and so the reckoning grows. But what choice did he have? It seemed he might count himself lucky his spurs' gold plating rendered them of sufficient value that the smithy would swap them for a sword.

Sir George rounds upon the blacksmith.

"Where are they?" he growls. It is the sound of a mastiff about to bite.

"I ..." The smith glances at the gate, then at the apprentice. Neither seem to offer any solution. "He ... They are *geschmolzen*," the blacksmith says.

George swings upon the apprentice. He awaits translation.

"Your spurs are no more," the boy says, quivering. "The goldsmith melted them."

35. Tunnel

Oppenheim-en-Rhine is a town riddled with tunnels. It is a burgh on a hill as hollow as an ants' nest, its citizens as industrious as the same, forever burrowing more tunnels that they may store up their Rhiney wine and whatever else they deem fit to secrete in the dark.

And it is sending Alys as wood as a March hare – save it is now April.

She swings her legs over the edge of the hostelry bed. They hang a goodly distance from the floor. She jumps down. She walks to the window. It is shuttered against the night. She pats back to bed. It is empty. Cold. And she is too restless to settle to warming it up.

And tired. Unable to sleep, too fidgety to spin, disinclined to join the rest of them (save her Parson) at the superior drinking establishment the Venetian claimed to have foreknowledge of.

She is fatigued by the constant travel, that's what it is. Back sore, bum sore, and breast lighter a good deal of gold. Or is it her age? After all, the others have energy enough for jollity. No, that is Jankyn speaking. *She* is the more weighted down by responsibility. She is their leader, and, by St Magda, she feels as young as she ever has. She has purpose. She has her barrels. It is just, well, she will admit it – it is the first day of her monthly flow.

Which has turned up barely two weeks after the last.

By God, this is the verrey obverse of growing gravid. Does the Lord on High send her a bloody message? Are her fertile days hurrying to a finish?

No. Her mother – God rest her soul – was still whelping children well into her forties. (Or the still-born corpses thereof.) She just has to get Jankyn to see to his duty a little more assiduously.

She smiles, but then the smile slips.

Poor lad, the rigours of the journey are taking it out of him too.

She turns away from the bed with more purpose. That's it. She will join them at this drinking establishment. She will see that her clerkling is gulping good, health-

giving ale and putting the rose back in his cheeks – not to mention stiffening his stem.

And on the way, why it will do no harm to confirm with her own eyes what that pestilent innkeeper said.

The tunnel entrances are locked after curfew, Fraulein. All of them. Fear not, your barrels are safe.

Least, that's what the Venetian declared the fellow had said. Not enough for her, the innkeeper's half-English assurances. If Minotto is going to travel with them (and certain, she must show grateful for his role in the retrieval of her goods), then by God she will make use of him. He is a passable translator, and not unpleasant to look upon, for all the fellow is as swarthy as a certain husband past.

"But why dost he stow hem down there at all? There's space enow in my chamber, and I'm dishing out silver aplenty, God knows."

The fellow had raised his hands. It is the way. Oppenheim has tunnels and them that rule Oppenheim decree they be used. Exclusively. Exhaustively. No matter what the Wife had tried – batting of eyelids, bribes, more silver than was decent – their beery host was immoveable.

The sun has sunk, curfew called, and now her barrels are locked somewhere beneath their hostelry. Alys adjusts the wad of cloth between her legs, flings on a kirtle – scarlet of course – and patters her pattens down the creaking staircase, horn lantern in hand.

Merianstraße is deserted, no nightwatchman to be seen. There is plenty of opportunity for Alys to bend and examine each and every little arched door set low in every house-wall she passes. Not content with merely examining those on her side of the street, she must then cross over and inspect the arches opposite. It seems just as their host said, all are locked – and with an impressively weighty array of ironwork. Nevertheless, she has inspected but half-a-dozen by the time she reaches the inn.

The house of superior liquor lies but a few doors up from Alys's accommodation. Minotto was quite specific in his direction, his point being that, at such a short walk, the outing would not tire Alys at all. Now she wishes it at the other end of town. These arch-gated tunnels stretch across Oppenheim like a verray

spiderweb, a subterranean shadow of the streets above. Or so she has been informed.

She cricks her neck at the sign hanging from the beams of the building before her. What is the paintwork meant to depict – some king's head? A saint's? Alys is of the opinion that the artist was halfway to pickled on the establishment's brew when he daubed it.

There are footsteps behind her on the slick cobbles. Brisk footsteps, large, and entirely likely to be made by the feet of a nightwatchman. Alys sighs, and ducks into the establishment of the unidentified head.

She enters an inn-yard. To one side emanates the smell of horseshit and hay, to the other, stale hops and wood-smoke. It is clear the direction she must go – and yet the Wife of Bath hesitates.

For there, set into the side of the inn-yard, at short distance from the tavern door, is yet another of the little arched doors. *And its doors hang ajar.* As Alys stares, a light blooms from within. The crack creaks wider and, lo, a head appears, lit by a wavering lantern that is balanced in turn on the lid of a tun.

A tapster steps out, his arms wrapped around a tun of wine. Alys sees immediately it is nothing like her barrels. He kicks the cellar door to with a negligent swipe of his foot and stumps off towards the rumble of voices that announces the tap-room.

Alys waits. She begins to shiver in the night air, uncloaked as she has come, but no, the fellow does not return. And there before her gapes the indubitable evidence: the tunnels of Oppenheim are not safe.

Ergo, her goods are not safe.

There is nothing for it but to enter the underground forthwith and ascertain that her barrels are present and unpunctured. Each tunnel connects, she has been told. The passage beneath her hostelry is the same as this.

But just in case the negligent tapster recalls the padlock in her absence, Alys seizes the ugly hunk of metal. She has no fancy for spending the night sealed in the dank and dark. Well-trodden steps lead down, and when the packed-earth floor is

reached, she slips off her pattens and deposits lock and overshoes both behind a tun.

She raises the lantern and looks about. The arching bricked roof seems sturdy enough. Stone lines the walls. To one side, in a sizeable indent, are stacked wine tuns and ale. To either side, a tunnel stretches forth, swallowing up her lantern-light and breathing cold, dank air. It is a labyrinth of cellars that twists on for miles, she has been told. It is a town under a town, but right now it is as silent as the tomb.

Alys is tempted to be satisfied at that. So sealed-up and dark, abandoned by the living, surely her barrels are safe? She shivers again, although only partly in remembrance of her cloak. She is turning without realising she has made the decision, towards the steps. She bends to retrieve the lock.

When she hears the sound.

A voice. No, voices. It is unmistakeable. They emanate not from above but from beyond – beyond the lantern-light and to the south. Down the tunnel in the direction in which her barrels must lie.

She drops the lock and strains to listen. It is a mere murmuring. Words, purpose, even language undistinguishable, but there is something stealthy about their timbre. It is enough. Alys holds the lantern high and pads off southwards – down the tamped-earth tunnel and into the dark.

The tunnel widens into a second cellar-space. Here goods are piled up. They threaten to spill into the tunnel-proper. She sees bales, an iron-bound chest, a few hams hanging from hooks and a veritable tinker's collection of household effects. There is another flight of stairs leading up, no doubt to one of the doors she passed on the street. Alys ignores it and pads on. She feels the floor with each foot before stepping down with cat-like care. The voices have fallen suspiciously silent. She is worried they have heard her.

Ahead, the tunnel curves slightly around, descending a few stone-flagged steps. She must be getting close, but now Alys hesitates. Her light. Should she conceal herself the better to see what they are up to or simply confront them? It

occurs to her that while they may have a legitimate reason for being down here, she most certainly does not.

She feels to make sure she has her flint about her, and then does the deed.

The lantern is snuffed. She places it by the wall that she may have her hands free to feel her way.

She has only gone two paces before the sounds begin again. Only this time they are different – and much closer. Alys pauses, hand against the wall, and grins. Ah. The darkness is no longer oppressive and fearful – it is a haven for assignation. What she hears now are little panting moans.

Someone is having fun. Some two, in fact.

That mystery solved, Alys once again considers retreat. Whatever lies around the bend is no threat to her barrels. The two likely slipped down here to achieve a little privacy from the tavern crowd. She should leave them to it.

But no – on second thoughts, she has come this far. Her own hostelry cellar cannot be far off. If these two got down here, then others might too. Alys itches to reassure herself that her cargo is whole. She bears no light and the noise-makers are clearly otherwise occupied, so there is every likelihood she can pass them by without ever their knowing.

She creeps on, towards a growing glimmer of candlelight.

She enters yet another cellar space piled with goods. Bales, mostly. Some merchant's stock. However do they fit them through the little arched doors?

Then Alys turns to stone.

There they are. Two lovers. A candle-lantern glows feebly on a nearby bale. The golden light dances upon something even more golden below. It is a head crowned with curls the colour of ripe wheat. The head is moving, causing the curls to ripple like living gilt. She can only see the back of the head, for it is sunk between a pair of white thighs. The upper regions of the woman to whom they belong are cast in candle-shadow. The burning golden hair is all she sees. It burns into her verrey eyes.

Without a doubt she knows it.

The head is Jankyn's.

36. St Cat

*If any wight be in this chirche now
That hath doon synne horrible,*

...

*Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace
To offren to my relikes in this place.*

The Pardoner's Prologue

Holy Mary grant me mercy. I beg you, intercede for me. Cleanse me of this base desire.

I gaze up at the lady in question. I peer with squinting, hopeful eyes – and I slump. No, lordings, there's no mercy in Mary's mien for me. In fact, her face is near nothingness. It is consumed in a glare of white light, and same goes for the baby Son in her arms.

Oh Christ, my knees hurt.

The virtuous Virgin shines down on me from the gaudy window opposite, all sparkling halo and glowing red cloak. Her stained glass is bright and new. The sunlight fairly blazes through her innards. In fact, workmen are stomping about here still, noisy gnofs that they are. Chiefly they range along the gallery that tops the south-facing chapels, of which I am in one, hence directly below the noisy lumpards. The wallops of their hammers echo through the airy vaults. It is not that St Cat's is a church under construction. No, the opulent Oppenheimers in their pride are just peopling her lacy edifice with saints and gargoyles. Glass and stone. All very pretty – and quite without pity.

At least for Tom of Rouncivale, foul sinner that I undoubtedly am.

I slip a hand into my tunic. My fingers close about the bone. Ah. Sweet breath from beyond the grave. It is my virgin's leg, recall lordings. The sole remnant of Ursula's maids I bore with me from Cologne. The holy maids – all eleven thousand of them – were from Britannia, or so the *vita* says. Trust me well, I will do this one the favour of taking her home. Eventually. In the meantime, I have secured her with a leather thong, wrapped and knotted until even I was reassured it would

not depart my person. (My lords, I lived in fear that she would slip through my breech entire.) Now she hangs naked about my neck, tucked into the waist of my most intimate garment and radiating her blessed influence all the way to my soul.

And she isn't nearly strong enough.

Christ, forgive me –

Oh, for the love of God, I am become that prosy Parson. I have heard the tonsured one at prayer, and lordings, I lay oath he bores the Almighty to tears with his flagellation. But for myself, where lies the balance? Christ above, I am unpractised at this self-confession.

My eyes wander. They seek holy inspiration, no – salvation. They skim over saints' statues and frescoes, mincing priests and pie-vendors. And what they eventually light upon is about as far from divine as this church is like to contain. Except perhaps for myself.

The Bawd.

Perhaps it is my eagerness to ignore mine own soul's grime, but something prompts me to bend attention upon the Bawd. After all, she represents salvation to this sinner too, if only I can scrape sufficient dirt on her.

She wanders on, pausing at a shrine here, a triptych there, and paying attention to none. She doles out coin to hovering priests that they send masses heavenwards for her. (Where does she get this endless coin? I thought her bosom-trove emptied before Bacharach.) Her pet Parson is abandoned at the first shrine, for the woman will not stay one moment still. And yet the Bawd does not move fast, but slow and drooping. Lords, it is indisputable: Alisoun of Bath is forlorn. She is lower than a Flemish ditch. She is a roaming cloud of gloom.

Perhaps it is just reflection of her corsete, resplendent as it be, but Alisoun's eyes seem to me distinctly red. She comes to St Cat's for comfort, does she?

I am surprised by a stir of pity, and counter it immediately by recall to my own, far more pressing woes. *Go thy way, woman*. I must find a saint to cleanse my heart before I smirch my soul and hazard my quest beyond repair.

I turn away. I seek a more worthy focus.

There is a window of Solomon a little further along. The kindly king is offering to chop a boy-child in two. Oh, to be fought over by two mothers! Not even

one wanted me. Perhaps Wise Solomon is the man for me? After all, he had kingly appetites, albeit the Bible'll say his taste ran to female-kind merely. Who knows, he might have fancied a buttock or two alongside all those wives. After all, look at the goings on between his Pa and Saul.

And just when I settle to pray before Solomon – *O help me, Great King, and I swear I will offer a coin unto the furniture of this church* – I am distracted again. The maiden Cecily has hurried in. Yea, my pigeons, you hear me right. The unflappable maid is in fine flap, for all she tries to damp it within St Cat's. She scans up and down the nave. She peers into chapels and vestries, but her eyes skim over me quickly enough.

Barely have I leisure to process this fresh oddity than another, and far more distracting one, presents itself. Said distraction paces slowly up the nave – locals washing out of his way like water off a rock – to pause before the Virgin's window. He stands directly in my line of view. That position achieved, and all unawares of me, he gazes up at the glass, crosses himself and then buckles to his knees in beautiful supplication.

Sweet Jhesu, art thou dead against me? Is this Thy notion of salvation?

And so I am distracted. The Wise King will earn no coin from me today. It is all I can do to twitch my eye-beams off Sir George to trail them up and down the nave again. My scattered senses inform me that the Wife has taken to clasping and unclasping her hands before my aforementioned window of Solomon. Now there's an inspiring image: two women and a bawling babe about to be sliced in two. (Lengthways or crossways? The former would seem more fair.)

I itch to observe again my Knyght-before-the-Virgin – I fight most manfully against this urge, and have nearly succumbed – when the Bawd startles.

Note well, my lords: one may startle within and not show it without, but this, I assure you, was not such a case. No, Alisoun of Bath quivered within her scarlet casing so cruelly that I feared some article of her toilette might drop off entire.

A quiversome Bawd. Now here is an item of interest. I look in the direction of her quivering to discover the origin of the earthquake.

It is merely Jankyn, in company with that Italian who has insinuated himself into our party. The Bawd's boy-husband seems pleased to be keeping company with a slinky southerner – he struts and he preens – but I am not so enchanted at the growth in our entourage. The foreign fellow wants something. What it is, I cannot identify. Whatever it is, it is urgent enough to have him worm his way into our assemblage and to seem set to take over the pilgrimage entire. The Bawd of Bath struggled against it, she did. She avoided the Venetian through the Lowlands like he bore plague, but he caught her in the end. The crafty caitiff made her so cursed grateful for his rescue of her barrels and her boy's leg-gear that she had no choice but to clutch him to her bosom. For the rest of the wretched road. Yea, over the mountains and to Venice, so it seems.

You heard me a-right, gentils. It turns out it was Minotto's band of bullies who ran down the bandits of Bacharach. He sent them out a-purpose. What a truly Christian action, think you not? And for a Bawd he barely knows.

But the immediate question is: what hellish vision has set Alisoun of Bath a-quaking in her corsete? Is it Jankyn or Minotto, or something else entire?

I turn to gauge the Wife's visage yet again, but no, the creature is gone. Her slugdom is shed, and she is hustling in a rush-stirring sweep of skirts up the nave – in the opposite direction to that of her husband and new friend. St Stephen, but her posterior makes shift! I have no taste for Wifely meat, but even I can see a certain fascination in that dance of thigh and haunch. She looks to left and right. She hastens to the tower stair, but is stalled by a masonic-block of a workman descending, chisel in hand. She turns about. Like the dithering water-fowl she searches for an out, but what fox is it she flees? I observe in mild amazement as the bold Bawd of Bath patters by me with a sob, and, having circumnavigated St Cat's nave, achieves the lower north door and vanishes without.

And there we have it. The anomalous behaviour of Alys. All thought of personal iniquity forgot, I interrogate the remaining contents of St Cat's to see if others too wear a wondering gaze. Who has observed Alys? What do they make of her?

No-one stirs.

Sir John kneels before a bloodied cross. The scarlet X of his cloak echoes the one above. A Parson crucified, and oblivious in adoration. Of the others – no sign. Where are they vanished to when just a moment earlier they were clear before me? Hurried after a Wife-in-distress?

I am about to shrug and put the thing behind me, even to return to supplicating old Solomon, when I am yet again distracted. This time it is by a noise, a sound that lifts the very wisps on my arms and sets my skin to pebbling.

It is a shriek.

37. Stone Sheep

It was a gargoyle, and it was carved in the shape of a sheep.

Or it used to be.

Why, O Lord, did one of Thy sacred monsters descend upon Alys outside of St Catherine's? Was it judgement?

I saw it not. I was within the church of Oppenheim at my daughter's request. She wished to see this marvellous *Kirche* of which the townsfolk were so proud. She wanted to appeal to St Catherine for wisdom. That is what she said – or what I understood her to say by means of a collection of broken-off sentences and side-tracking rambles. But I did not question her too closely. My daughter's eyes were puffed, though she tried to hide it. I may not take her confession, O Lord, but I can still offer my company in comfort – and a listening ear if she is inclined to pour aught into it.

Besides, I too desired to see this *Kirche* of St Catherine's.

All this was after Terce, the morning after we arrived. In the usual way of things, we should have departed soon after dawn, but our Italians held us up. Signor Minotto had business to conduct with a mercer and his men-at-arms were using the opportunity to get their horses' hooves tended.

Alys made no mutter about tardy Italians. That in itself was surprising. I shadowed her up the hill to the church – she with her short legs outpacing me over the meagre distance – and she stepped in with never a glance at the astounding facade of that rosy-stoned edifice.

It seemed Alys was not here to gawk at architecture, a sentiment I might otherwise applaud. Yet these structures are built to turn our thoughts to Heaven, are they not, Lord? They are conduits of the divine on earth. Although sometimes I question whether earthly pride has more to do with their specific decoration.

But St Catherine truly turned my fragmenting thoughts to Heaven. Such radiant beauty can only reflect Thy true perfection, Heavenly Father. And while my

soul was transported, my daughter and mother, she who is two persons in one, vanished from my thoughts and sight.

Until she screamed.

My flesh moved before ever my mind returned from the aether.

I plucked up my cassock-skirts and ran. I was constrained to shove an exit through the south door. The main portal was funnelled full of folk all attempting to get at the same knowledge at the same time – whence cometh this fun?

But I knew Alys's scream. As the mother weeps milk at hearing her baby wail, so my body made haste to hers.

There she was, sprawled upon the packed dirt of the churchyard. Beside her was a headless sheep.

She was raising herself to her elbows as I rushed up.

"That lumpen thing near crushed me in two!" she squeaked on catching sight of me. Her eyes were huge. They lent my daughter the appearance of a mistreated kit.

I hurried to help her up. She wobbled a little on my arm. O Lord, she leaned on me most sweetly. Once I had satisfied myself my daughter was apparently in one piece, I began to cast about for Jankyn or the Knyght. Why, even Quaestor Thomas would be a better man for the occasion than me. This was no proper role for a parson to play. It is for good reason, Lord, that Thou hast decreed a consecrated priest never touch female flesh. I am a man like any other, and Alisoun was clinging to my arm.

But when Jankyn at long last appeared, what did my daughter do but turn her back on him and begin straightway to gabble about sheep.

"Hastow ne seen such a curious-strange gargoyle, Sir John? A sheep, no less! Horns and stony fleece and all. God above, but it would've took Heaven's own time to carve. It did asterte from the roof, John. The sheep, I mean. See? Up there!"

She pointed with quivering hand. I followed her finger-trail. Above us, a couple of masons craned down from a precarious balcony-ledge above the southern chapels, distracted no doubt in their task of beautifying St Catherine. One lifted dusty hands to shoulder height, shrugging the air. *God alone knows*, the palms said

plain. The other was mouthing off sentiments that seemed, to my limited understanding of German, improper to a sacred setting.

“It ne been the masons.” Alisoun had not ceased talking. “Never them wights. Not a soul was on the edge when I came out. I looked up, see? I hearkened them at their chip-chipping, but ne saw nothing but carved lace and fiend-ugly stone monsters. Not that this one’ll ne spit water namoore. He’s learnt his lesson, yon stupid sheep. By God, his head’s fair sheared from his stony – *oh, get out of my sight, thou pestilent pustule! Canstow not see a Wife’s near been rammed to death? Depart! Get gone! No, I ne requiren thy fawning about me, foul slinking honour that you be.*”

She had received a shock, O Lord. A stone sheep had just broken itself at her feet. Any closer and the ram might have survived but Alys would not. Sudden dismay makes the best of us volatile. Jankyn, by arriving just at the moment his Wife was coming to herself, was thus the unwitting recipient of all her alarm.

Forgive her, Lord. Female flesh is born unsturdy.

Jankyn’s cheek acquired a chalky cast. He stumbled an uncertain step back, into the path of the Quaestor, the Knyght, and Cecily, all of whom wore expressions as bewildered as his. The Venetian stepped into the breach.

“*Dio mio, signora!*” Minotto hastened to offer his arm. I untangled my own in, I confess, a mixture of relief and reluctance. “Can you walk, *cara signora*? Shall I summon a litter?”

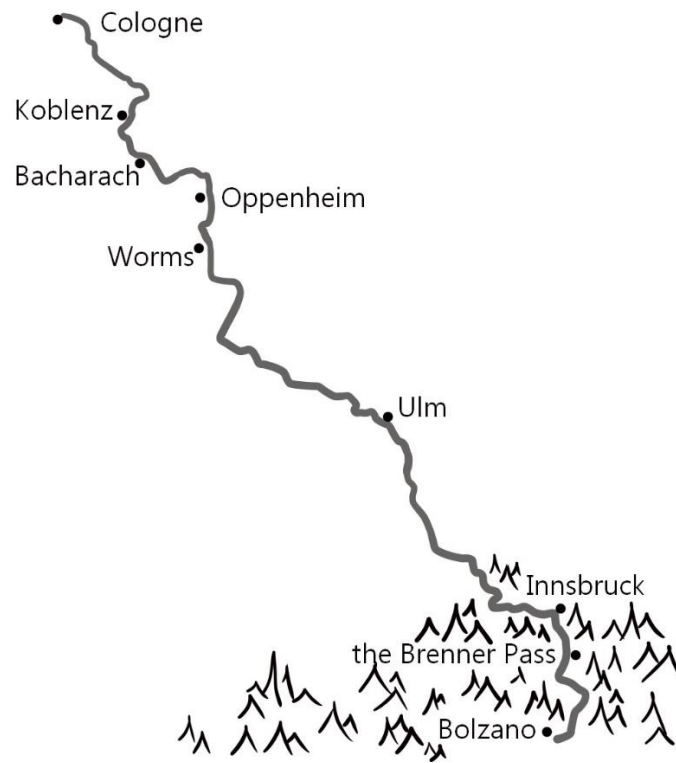
And so forth. The Venetian was solicitude and courtesy itself. It did Alys more good than all my heartfelt hovering ever could. Soon she was recovering from her close encounter with sacred architecture by means of unstintingly-applied Italianate unction. I might leave her with an easy heart to enquire into this matter of unstable masonry.

Except, O Lord, my heart was anything but easy.

Should a pilgrimage to the land of Thy Son’s Birth and Passion be so riddled with peril, O Heavenly Protector? Is it a warning? Fatigue I anticipated. Discomfort, in abundance. Cold and fever and the evil effects of strange food, too – I welcomed them. A pilgrimage bought at no perturbation of the flesh is no pilgrimage at all.

But falling sheep?

38. Ulm



She will not let him in her bed.

She sidles up to him when she thinks no-one is looking and trails her hand upon his thigh. His inner thigh, where hose ends and breech begins. Her posterior sways most inviting.

She coos at him at terce and fair bites his nose off by noon.

Christ, it seems he possesses not one Wife but three. What can he think but that some shard of the sheep struck her head after all?

They have left the Rhine. They amble now through flattish German lands with no great river to guide them. They sleep in towns and hamlets with uncouth names. Take for example their first halt after Oppenheim: Worms (whereat Alys suggested that his manly instrument was of no greater use than said earth-worm, and better to shove it in the ground than let it come squirming near her). Who names a town after a boneless crawling slug?

Jankyn has attempted to be soliticous. His Wife has had a shock. Indeed, now he comes to consider it, she has had three shocks: one near-dunk in the Channel, one dagger to the midriff (she still winces a little when he performs his husbandly duty, *when* she permits it), and now a close cut with a sheep. Perhaps it is no wonder she acts unhinged.

No solution came of the ovine mystery. Who pushed the ram, or did it simply fall? No-one saw a thing, or at least, no-one will admit to seeing. Yet there is a third option, and one his Wife will not consider: divine judgement. A sign. A church is a piece of Heaven on earth. Its stones obey Almighty Will. What does Alys say to such a suggestion? *Beshrew thy foul face, thou fiend! Thou lickerous holour! You been the sinner of the piece, not me. Judgement? By High God above, that horny ram ought to have fallen on you, yea and crushed thy nether-purse quite flat.*

Indeed, she is overwrought. But maybe it is necessary to be male, a creature of reason, or even better, schooled in Latin and logic to appreciate this third thesis.

So Jankyn is kindly and considerate. He tries not to bite back. The thing is achieved for the most part by keeping a judicious distance. So too, he ceases to carp about the purpose of pilgrimage, the needfulness of the barrels. And if his dear Wife does not wish to call in the marital debt, or even to attempt fecundity, well then, Jankyn will not press the matter. He has options.

There are some who do not liken him unto a worm.

39. Heere continues the Wyves Tale

*For soothe, I wol nat kepe me chaast in al.
Whan myn housbonde is fro the world ygon,
Som Cristen man shal wedde me anon*

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

They are in sight of the mountains and he has lost sight of his goal.

He has allowed the Venetian to distract him. In fact, he has allowed the journey itself to distract him.

The mountains urge this feeling upon him, that of time eaten up in a million small bites by a progression of clopping hoofs. On the other side of that blue and misty knife that serrates the sky is Venice, the end of their horse-borne journey and the beginning of a watery one.

He needs to squeeze truth from a Dragon – or failing that, a nearly-truth. It is time to couch his lance (absent), flip visor (left in Calais), and spur his nearly-charger at a Dragon.

He waits until the woman is riding at the head of their cavalcade before he touches spur to his courser's flank. Sweet Jhesu, but his mount near unseats him in its eagerness to respond. It is with greater difficulty that he reins it in beside the Wife's ambling mare. That coquette of a horse swishes her tail and casts a sideways glance at his. Her rider does likewise.

"Sir George."

There is knowingness in her tone. He feels his purpose to have been rendered instantly transparent. Nevertheless he stays the course. He sweeps one aketoned arm out wide to encompass the spearing wheat, the cud-munching cows.

"Dame, I crave you," he says. "This landscape lulls me to sleep. Tell me more of your story, I beg. You spoke of meeting your Husband the Fuller, but you told nothing whatever of your marriage or how that idyll came to an end."

It is a speech planned and rehearsed, and yet still he is proud of it. It sounds ... knightly. Odd that it is the influence of a lowly Quaestor that inspires him to such eloquence, but it is true. The persuasive fellow has become more than just proxy-squire to a barely-Knyght but also the nearest thing to a companion one might admit in one of so disparate social estate.

The fiend he must accost cocks her head to one side, bird-like.

“And there’s me thinking you’d forgot, noble Sir. That you cared nat a wilted leek for a poor Dame’s tale.”

She is mocking him, but nevertheless it is somewhat true. These last weeks have been passing pleasant – when he forgets he is but a penniless knight clad in mere chivalric underclothes, that is. Friend Thomas has enough wit for two – George need only provide a monosyllable here and there, and behold, a bubbling conversation flows forth – and the Venetian and his men-at-arms lend a degree of dignity to their procession. When a Knyght has had his fill of Quaestorly quips, there is always Minotto with whom to converse in more decorous fashion. (Nonetheless, the Italian cautions him not to seem too close. God forbid the Hag conclude George is second pair of eyes to a merchant.) The weather is warming, his buttocks have accustomed to the prancing of his mount, and it is most seductively easy to overlook the reason he is in this company at all.

“I ...” He has run out of rehearsed speech.

“Oh, take no kep, thou stuffed Knyghtling. You want a tale, I’ll tell a tale. Besides, what’s amiss with the landscape? Too unravaged for thy taste? Still yearning after burnt and bleeding France, eh?”

She has not the grace to let up on his deviation into routier-hood. Well, it makes sense of a sort. A Dragon will always drool after death and destruction.

“It is all the same,” he mutters, jerking his head at the offensive vista. “Hills, woods, green grain, brown peasants. Crest one rise and the view in front is the same as the view behind.”

He knows even as he speaks that he does the place a disservice. If he were only lord of just a handful of vales, he would be content. The villages are prosperous and neat, and the peasants in the main have some meat on their bones. The

company left the Rhine days ago, and now they trundle southwards through rolling fields untouched by war.

“What side of the stable didstow roll out of this dawn, my Knyghtling?” The Dragon chuckles at his expression. “Oh, glower not, Sir George. Squeeze a smile. You’ll summon the thunderclouds with thy lowering brow and, God woot, this sun is fair caressing on my breast. Oh, I’ll tell you a tale, if you leste.”

She pauses as if to collect her thoughts, and George glances with all casualness behind. He sees winding behind a trail of horse-after-horse, some with riders, some without. They amble in line. It is in the nature of dumb beasts to follow mindless, one after the other, to assume that the one in front has a clue where it is going. He notes the Quaestor’s mule is close at hand. As it should be.

“So after the trial, after some goodly time had fled, he layen his proposal before me,” she begins. “Samson le Gold, alderman and fuller-man. Yea, he did propose a marriage the like of which the preachers do sing. Christ cross His legs and lickery be dighted, Sam demanden we be as chaste as a pair of old nuns. What sweet romance! What girlish delice! And dostow think I could refuse? He had me by the neck-bone, did Fuller Sam. What if he changen his tune about Husband-the-First’s end? Him who moote twist the ears of all the burghers in Bath, yea, them that loved me nat.”

“But why wed you, if not for heirs?”

“Ownership! To gat me under his governance, and usen me like a verray slave,” she retorts. “Well, dostow recall how I han my fill of dighting under Husband One?”

The Knyght’s lips shape a grimace before he can order them otherwise, and his look of pain is taken as assent.

“I say full sooth, Sir George: even a lickerous woman-creature can have too much lust a-bed, not to mention that without.” She grins, but it seems only for the joy of riling him. “No, Fuller Sam desiren me as help-meet, not bed-mate. For which Heaven and all its saints be praised.”

She hesitates, an indecision most atypical upon her appled cheeks. In that moment of delay, the Knyght is struck by an insight entirely unprompted and undesired. This Dragon is glowingly, vividly attractive. He sees it, and despises that

in him which sees. She radiates like a dancing hearth-fire in a peasant grate. But cast a shade of blankness, even stillness, upon her features and suddenly Dame Alys is rendered pale. Like an unlit candle. As now.

Thankfully, his introspection is interrupted. The Dragon has found her fire again.

“Oh, you moote as well know it, Sir Knyght. Samson’s long dead and turned to mould. Sam-the-Son’s firm enough in his Pa’s clothiering concerns. I reckon mine oath to Husband Two were dissolved when the wight himself left life.”

George is caught between noble outrage and lewd interest. *An oath is ever an oath, be it sworn to one sepulchred or insane! In absence of thy word, thou art nothing, faithless woman.* On the other hand, it is his business to know. In fact, certain people are most insistent it is so.

He cannot even reassure her he will tell no other.

So: “Samson wanted me ‘cause he was blind,” she says. “Or near as. Losing his sight, the wight was, and it were greatly to his disliking. No-one on life knew of it, save his darling son, and that was just the way he wanted it kept. Mum. Silent as the grave. And *why, saystow?*”

The Knyght hears himself say precisely nothing of the sort.

“Well, it ne been clear to me for a goodly time neither,” she says on. “But I divined it at end. John’d name it *Superbia*. Pride to over-top towering Babel itself. Deadly sin, no less, and the most villanous of the lot, if them prating clerks be believed.”

What the Knyght does hear himself enunciate is a sigh. The Quaestor has said it – *she’ll gab ‘til the rooks come to rest* – but to endure her in full flight is another matter.

The Dragon has trained her motley gaze upon him. Striped cloth is the devil’s hue. Her eyes are likewise: multi-hued and changeable. They reflect the fiend within. Better to focus on these than on her dubious attractions.

“What? Do I bore thee, Sir Knyghtling? Do I set thee to sleep quicker than the corny fields after all?”

He mutters a negative and she babbles on, like a stream that cannot but flow.

“Sam swore me to secrecy. I were ne to tell no-one he had no sight. No-one! / must be his eyes instead. I wolde dress him, steer him through Bath and about the mill, and then doon enough wrecched work for two, all with him hanging over my shoulder. / were to be fuller with no-one to wene it weren’t Sam. So I sniffed about the tentering frames, Sam on arm. I poked the wet and felty cloth in the fulling tub to judge when it been done. I poured the information of mine eye into Samson’s ear and by God, you’d have thought he saw it all himself. He spat out the orders, certain, but I been their true source. I were part-time clothier too, least when my fine new step-son been abroad. He ne did liken me one bit, Sam the Younger. I been set to steal his inheritance, see? For his Pa’d will me the mill-lease so long as I stayed mum, swinked like the verray slave, and kept myself full chaste and pure.”

This time, instead of sighing, he makes some effort to drag her back to her theme.

“And the *Superbia*, Dame? Why pride?”

“By God, the silly creature did it all for pride, of course. Precious burgher Samson, all lofty in the Guild and a full important figure in Bath. He’d crawled up the ladder all his life, built the mill from the ruin the Priory passed him when first he got the lease. He been forever scrabbling after reputation and renomee. Now he’d clambered to the verray top, certain, he’d ne see it slip away just because he ne could see.”

“But he had gold enough?” the Knyght observes.

“By God, the stuff stuck to him like iron to the lode.”

Here is a notion to ponder. Reputation worth more than gold. Repute that cannot be bought. Yet without gold, this Samson would never have lured a Dragon to guard that renown. There is something almost knightly about the dilemma.

But the Wife is waving her digits at him.

“And me, he desiren me for my fresh baby eyes and my full magical fingers. I tell you true, Sir Knyght – this bunch o’ twigs can twine and weave and tenter more subtly than any.” She shrugs. “Better than any I’ve ever seen, leastways.”

“So he wedded you for your fingers and your eyes.” And not for the body-parts more traditionally the focus of spousal acquisition. “That was the outset of the match, good Dame, but what was its end?”

She shoots him a glance somewhat sharp. It is the look of the blackbird that sights the worm. He has been too direct. He has not the deviance of a Quaestor, nor the patience.

“I trowe you wiste full well how he ended, Sir Knyght. You’d ’ve boned up back in Bath – or *been* boned. In default of that, you’ll have grilled Long Tom for the gossipy low-down. Well? Or do I grasp it wrong?”

George stares at his courser’s mane. It could do with a comb. Indeed, *he* could do with a comb – and a bath. Perhaps friend Thomas will oblige.

He must consider his next words with care.

“When the Prior proposed I join your party, Dame, he informed me of the ... possible purposes that spur your journey eastwards. Of course it was but conjecture. Mere gossip, as you say.”

There. Surely that will content her? It is a reasoning entirely reasonable. That it is not quite the truth is an obstacle she need not stumble over.

The Dragon snorts.

“Well, least there you speak some sense,” says she. “But you ne want to goon believing all the fat man says, Sir Knyghtling. No indeed.”

She pauses. The thoughts that slip across her face do not reassure George of an unadulterated truth to come. Which is precisely the point – he desires a tale of adultery, and of the sort that led to fouler crimes still.

“I was a slave, Sir Knyght. No serf namoore, nor Wife proper, but turned into a verray slave. Samson had me swinking for him all the day and into the night. A cold, cold fish was Husband Sam. He ne touched me in lust – not once. I woot not if he fancied boys instead or whether the wight simply had no drop of juice in his loins. I ne caught him stroking the serpent nor waking in a puddle of curds, but certain he kept himself off *me*.”

In between entirely proper revulsion and a struggle not to demonstrate the same – in that tiny space between – Sir George considers it is indeed likely a wanton such as she would seek to sate her lust elsewhere. He cannot recoil. He must have the sordid matter out, and from *her* lips.

“But Samson ne trusted me, by God. I was woman, was I not? Yea, a gabber and a slattern by direct descent of Eve. So my sweet spouse had me observed every moment of every day. If I ne been by his side, then one of his man-servants moote escort me – for my own good, dostow nat see? What chance had I of straying, I ask?”

The Knyght frowns. Perhaps one of the man-servants themselves provided the adulterous opportunity.

“Surely you must have been granted some time alone? For your ... womanly ablutions, perhaps.”

The particulars of which he takes care not to imagine.

“No.” The Dragon is quite definite. “He had a hag of a maidservant who did revile the verray toes of my feet. She doon report back to Sam on my monthly courses and shuffle even to the bathhouse with me. By God, did she stare! Oh, I couldn’t sink me into that green and bubbly water quick enough with that old hag’s eyen upon me. Hastow ever steeped thy pretty limbs in the steamy waters of Bath, Sir Knyght?”

He jerks his head sideways. Share a slimed pool with the likes of her? Christ forbid. He is a Knyght, not a whore.

“By Heaven, sweet Knyghtling, it is a thing most beautiful. You been full deprived if you ne han dipped into a bath at Bath. It puffs out a few odours, I grant you. You’d think the earth itself had let wind. But yea, it unknots every ache and grumble you ever knew.” She grins. “I trowe it’d sweeten your temper no end.”

“The story, Dame,” he grunts. “You divert.”

“Oh, certain I do, Sir Knyght. I yaf you fair warning, did I not?” She pauses. “Now what was I about? Ah, how our marriage concluded. Well to speaken short and plain, it been the fault of our good friend Brother Petrus. Him who put you on this pilgrimage, eh?”

She casts him a look far too shrewd.

“I barely know the man,” George mutters. He is no good at these games. A knight needs no double-speaking words. A noble takes a direct and honourable approach.

“Have it as you leste,” she says. “Natheless, him who is now Prior turned up at Bathwick Mill one fine day. Near three years into mine marriage most chaste and virginal it was. And what does he do but demand speech all secree with Sam. Alone, dostow hear! Without no addition, and most especially nat mine. Well, my fine husband han always instructed me to cleave to him like wax whenever we two ventured abroad. He had the eyes of a verray mole, you woot. By God, as much sight as the earthy worm. So now some dotard monk demands that Sam’s eyes getten themselves gone? Oh no, indeed. I am a true Wife. Whatever Brother P decree, I knew Sam’d want me to stick close. So I shooed the ‘prentices and journeymen off to the tentering field or the far end of the mill – it been divided in two, you understand – and I followed most obvious behind hem. Then, by God, I turned about and crept back in – simple enough when you’re my size – and peered all privy bitwix two bales of cloth.”

A pause.

“And that’s how I came to see it,” says she.

More silence.

“Well? Came to see what?” He attempts not to sound impatient.

But she will not be hurried. “Brother Petrus had a lust to be Prior.” She chuckles. “I woot nat why. Bath Abbey been falling to rack and ruin even then. Half the monks got knocked off by the Pest’s first visit, and monks ne breed up again over quick, God woot. The current Prior was doing his damnedness to die, and I reckon old Petrus thinks to himself, *if only I fill up the Priory purse, the brothers’ll vote for me in a flash*. Godliness be shrewed. A monk prizes bed and board well above an upstanding superior. And the surest way to fix finances? Why, gat the lease of Bathwick Mill back.”

“It belongs to the Priory. It should be returned,” the Knyght states.

“Oh no, thou innocent. You been no man of business, that much is plain. Sam paid good silver for the lease-hold. He paid even more to turn a wreck of a corn-mill into a cloth-mill all fulfilled with hammers and tubs. Oh siker and certain, then the Priory desiren the best fulling mill for miles about back in their graspy, greedy hands. But Samson mad purchase of the lease for life and more. By God, he had it granted to the next descent, to pass unto whatever heir he chose to name.

He were ne goon to pour money out on fulling gear just to toss it back to them slug-lazy monks.”

Sir George rests his eyes upon the slowly passing landscape. Green, endless green. Some clusters of fruit trees in virginal blossom. A pretty peasant-girl weeding. A squirrel ripples up a budding beech. Why had he thought it a good idea to squeeze a sordid story out of a Dragon on such a sparkling day? This Hag will enclose him within a damp, dark mill, awash with noise and sodden with intrigue. Indeed, with downright murder if he has it aright.

“What then?” he murmurs, more out of form. He knows there is no hastening this Dragon.

“Why, hearken to what I did witness next, Sir Knyght. And I tellen no lie, no matter what thy monkly informant hath said.”

She draws portenteous breath for what he prays is a finale.

“Yon conniving monk had writ out a new contract. He was wafting it before Sam’s nose and making gab about why my spouse should sign. It been some scribble of one mill-lease returned early in swap for masses for the soul. Many, *many* masses. That been all the bargaining power a monk can swing, Sir Knyght. Paltry promises for the hereafter. Well, by God, old Sam ne been seduced. He weren’t over-pious at the best of times, my husband dear, and when some monk on the make who’d only mangle cloth comes a-bargaining and threatening, well Sam snaps back, *You moote take that parchment and shove it. In fact, I’ll shove it for you. See here!* And he snatches the parchment from the monkish paws, and gallops to where the fulling hammers are a-pounding the cloth into felty squish, and ... well.”

St Michael’s sword, will the woman never conclude?

“Well what?” He tries not to snap.

“Well, I told you he ne could see none too well?”

George jabs a nod.

“Well, it gets a deal wetter about the fulling tubs, you woot? Stands to reason. The water splatters something incontinent, and the clay-ey, claggy fulling earth ne aids in the matter of slimeyness neither.”

He supresses a sigh.

“So my husband slipped, to speaken short and plain. He was in such a cursed hurry to pound a bit of parchment to inky scraps that he tossed himself in the fulling tub instead.”

The Knyght’s brows furrow.

“What are you saying?”

“What? Artow as blind as him I wed? Canstow nat picture it? Sam ne could espy the treacherous stuff he stepped on in such a flurry. Samson slipped, that’s what I’m saying. By God, he did turn some curious footwork upon the fulling floor. A bit of damp and slime, and mine husband turns verray acrobat. Oh, the parchment flew into the tub fair enough. Only problem was my husband flew after it – or something very like.”

He eyes the diminutive narrator. It is hard to tell beneath the yard-wide hat she lives under, but it seems to him that she grows pale. Or paler. But what does it signify?

She is eyeing him back. “What with you being so fine and noble, it been likely you ne know what the belly of a fulling mill looks like, eh Sir George?”

While it goes against the grain to agree, he must at this point nod.

“Well, there’s mills and there’s mills, but my Sam had constructed some mighty sizeable stocks. (That’s fulling hammers to you, thou watery virgin.) The water spins the wheel, the wheel spins the shaft, and the shaft lifts the hammers up and up ... ‘til they can rise namoore, then down they smite. Two stocks for each fulling tub, like two fists a-pounding away at the earthy cloth below. And that’s how cloth been fulled – beaten under water and earth for hours on hours, by God. Not that you taken no kep, Sir Knyghtling. You been full content to wear a bit of fine broadcloth, but you ne give a leek how it got made.”

And verily, George doesn’t care to know now, but he does begin to see the gist of where she’s going.

“God knows, it’s fair difficult to throw thyself into a fulling tub – but manage it mine husband did. He scrabbles his feet on the slippery slabs, he throws his arms forward, and yea, he splashes into the tub just as the cursed great stock has reached its peak.”

Sir George winces and his horse shies in sympathy. He steadies the beast with his calves.

"Ill fortune or the Almighty, whichsoever you divine it, that lumping great hammer came a-swinging down and there were *nothing* I could do about it, dostow hear? There was me lying hidden and that mouthy Brother Monk, and never a thing to be done but hearken to wood kiss bone." His narrator pauses and blinks once or twice. "And by Jhesu above, a great smacking kiss it was too."

George cannot help but picture the scene. What sound did that wooden hammer make? Was it an egg-crack to the skull, or a dull thud to a torso padded with flesh? And why does this account tally so oddly with that of the Prior's?

"Did you pull him out?" he barks.

This is the test.

"No."

He is not sure whether his shock is due to the Wife achieving a one-word sentence or to her admitted inaction.

"*You left him to die?*"

"Well *I* couldn't heave him out, could I? He, a man full grown and me so puny and midget-undersized? Besides, the monk been a deal nearer the tub and he were thrice my weight."

He pictures her there, watching, calculating and calm, while the hammers thud down yet again. And again.

On the man she has sworn to honour and obey. Whose secrets she gave oath to keep.

"The monk went to his aid," Sir George states.

"Oh no, not he. There was me, dithering and squeaking about what I was to do – flee for the labourers, assay to fish him out, or do somedeel to jam the hammers – and I scream to the fat man for aid and finden the fellow scarpered. Gone. Vanished. By God, the godly brother abroached the back door and scuttled, his nether-tail bitwix his legs, I dread it not. Reckon he thought he'd get accused of throwing old Sam in his own trough if he raised his hand to being there."

"That is not what the Prior says," says George. And then clamps his lips.

He feels her gaze.

“Well then, Knyghtling – have out. What *does* the fat man say?”

He looks up. He turns away. He observes the ears of his courser and the green grass beyond and answers not. The words that quiver on his tongue would do him no good, however satisfactory their saying would be.

That you slew your husband, Dame. That the Prior revealed your foul lechery to your husband that day. He exposed your many adulterous and lewd actions, revealed to him by your partner in harlotry, verily, none other than a priest. Upon the monk's leaving, your husband confronted you with this fact. And behold, what happened then? Strange to say, Samson le Gold fell beneath the hammers.

With none else but his Wife standing by.

40. Mountain Pass

*Saynt Valentyn, that art ful hy on-lofte,
Thus syngen smale foules for thy sake*

Parlement of Foules

It is cold.

O Christ Jhesu and His Blessed Virgin Mother, Alys knows it to be an understatement. Even here within what passes as a chapel to St Valentine (a boxy Roman edifice perched like a pimple in this valley of howling wind) the Wife is chilled to the womb. The whole world beyond – a sea of grey mountains, skittering snow and sloping alpine meadow – is but one breath away from ice. To top it all, it is soon after sunrise (never the warmest time of day) and she has spent the night in a cold and empty bed.

Empty, that is, of all but barrels.

Which of course makes it not empty at all. But God above, cooper-ware heavy with holy water make ungiving bed mates. Alys slept on a ridge between two bed-companions more rotund and mattress-sagging than ever Wilkin the Ram had been.

There is no chaplain within the chapel. The sensible fellow is probably still abed. There is not even a lad to take her coin and send a post-dated mass winging the short space upwards to Heaven. (Certain, she must nearly be there herself, the amount of climbing her poor ambler has done since Innsbruck.) If Alys wants saintly intervention, then it seems she must apply for it herself.

So she kneels. She clasps hands before the crude paint-splash of a saint above the altar. St Valentine. There are small birds flitting about him. He is being beaten to death and he wears a beatific smile. It was a Roman Emperor who ordered it – the beating, not the smile. Another bloody Italian. The birds flit in pairs, each smitten with the other.

She prays.

She has heard rumour of this St Valentine, rumour that he invoked the ire of Emperor Whoever by conducting marriages on the sly. Of course Holy Church emphasises the blood-and-gore – the walloping to death for heavenly devotion over the mere facilitation of the earthly – but even in this holy space, the love-birds flitter in.

She pleads to Valentine for mercy, and she shivers.

For Alys knows not where Jankyn slept last night. God knows, it was not with her. Ever since Oppenheim the rift between them has cracked wider, until now it seems as steep and cold as this Brenner mountain pass. And a sight less forgiving. Valentine brought couples together in holy matrimony. Now she asks him only half that trouble. Why, the hard part is done – she is wedded already. All she craves of this holy dead Roman is to have her husband back.

She prays for her boy's heart and loins. She was once so secure of both. He understood her hunger for scarlet and was willing to share her. No longer, it seems. He had slept by her back in Innsbruck, but, it being the Holy Week of Easter, they had lain most laudably chaste. Last night he had waxed unreasoning wrath. It was the barrels or him in the bed, he declared. Better that their cursed contents freeze than he bruise his balls on wood in the night. Or, Christ above, does she want him to hump them instead? She thought it mere bluff and bluster, but no. He vanished, she knew not where. Now she just wants her boy back. So she prays. She pours out so much of her soul to Valentine that she is not aware of anyone entering the chapel.

Until that someone kneels beside her.

Alys blasphemes.

She has prayed for a golden boy and now look what the idiot saint has brought her. The verray opposite.

"I'm coming, thou impatient Venetian," she snaps. "Surely the sumpters ne been loaded already nor mine slug of a husband out of bed."

Whoever's bed that may be.

"*Sta tranquilla, Signora,*" her dark demon murmurs. "I am in no hurry to set forth. I have more regard for my finger-tips than that. No, we will wait until the snow ceases."

“What, then?” she cries. She will not be tranquil. She has been caught at a disadvantage – on her knees, no less. “Surely *you* gat no need to come a-calling upon Valentine, Sir Dark-and-Handsome? Doubtless, you got a wifeling hente at home just a-bursting with little Italians, yea, and then all of Venice’s *puttan*as reclining for thy ducats when thy wife’s had her fill.”

Minotto just raises his brows. “I had no notion the saint—” He glances at the peeling image. “—had any talent in that area.”

“Oh,” says Alys. Perhaps rumour of the saint’s speciality has only been recent.

“But as to a wife or ... others awaiting me at home — well, perhaps I ought to pray to the saint as well. You say this Valentino looks kindly upon lovers?”

Alys glances sideways. He kneels close by, too close for her to observe with any perspective. But his voice has softened somewhat. It caresses.

What in the sulfurous depths has Valentine sent her? Perhaps the saintly ancient has bungled her English. She should have attempted a line or two of Latin.

And yet ... she is intrigued. Her soul craves balm. It is bruised and cold. She will test the warmth of this flame.

“You?” And she chuckles. It is good to laugh. She needs this. She flicks the clasp of his cloak with her nail. “You gat no need of St Val, Master M. Whereas I—” She allows a sigh. “Oh, you may as well know. My sweet spouse did warm another bed last night. Yea, I will admit it, full harsh to my heart though it be. What is a poor, cold Wife to do but to kneel before an Italian?”

She inclines her head at Blessed Valentine, but the saint looks preoccupied. A thrashing will do that to you, and the effort of looking beatific at one and the same time. Antonio Balducci Minotto, however, looks far more present. By God, he seems most present indeed.

His eyes are of velvet. A shiver slips down her spine.

“You are cold, *cara signora*.”

In a breath, he has unclasped his long black cloak and has swished it about her shoulders. He fastens it with fine-fingered care about her throat, and the smell of him wraps her about. “Your Jankyn knows not the value of what he has,” he murmurs as he does so.

“My Jankyn will be awaiting me, thou flatterer,” returns the Wife, but she says it with a smile. *Come flatter me some more*, that smile says. Nor does she protest that he will be cold. Ardour ought to supply warmth enough. She allows him to take her hand, to raise her to her feet, and together they depart the chapel.

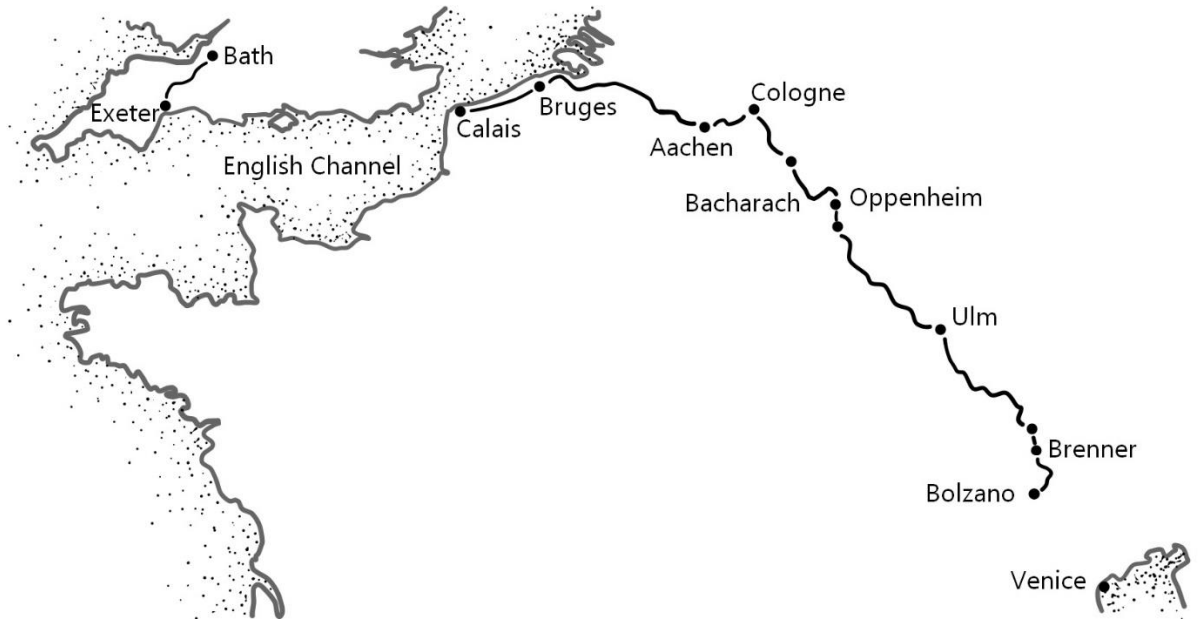
And she smiles to herself as she takes Minotto’s arm, as he leads her through the fairy snowflakes, the dancing, moth-like manna. It seems old Valentine has a circuitous method of answer, but a solution has been given. In fact, he provides two answers bundled into one.

Now her neglectful spouse will see that his Wife is desired and desirable. He will see how she ought to be treated in the example of a Venetian. But secondly, and near as reassuring, is the answer provided to the riddle of Minotto himself. Why hadn’t she considered it before? The signs were all there.

He has succumbed to her spell. Alys would grin but the cold has frozen her cheeks. Her heart is warmed and set at ease. Alys knows not what spell she weaves nor how it is achieved, but she can recognise the poor mazed results. It has happened again. A man bewitched. Minotto beguiled. He craved to travel with them, to shadow them, protect them, and it was all because of her. It took a verray saint to show her. Saints above, has she stowed her eyes in her scrip all this while?

The Venetian followed her to the chapel because he wanted her alone. Now Jankyn will see them together.

41. Magdalene



*The seconde manere of chastitee is for to been a clene wydewe,
and eschue the embracynges of man,
and desiren the embracyng of Jhesu Crist.*

The Parson's Tale

Father, forgive me.

No.

I cannot ask it of You, Lord. Even Your divine mercy does not stretch so far.
What I have committed is unforgiveable. I cannot ask it.

The remembrance of it has conquered my reason.

*O Lord, if it were simply sight alone, I would put out my eyes. I would take up
a knife. I would gouge.* But it is not merely images. It is a swamp of sound, scent,
taste, and touch. O Lord, I am beset. I cannot stop up my ears, my eyes, my
fingertips all in one. These infernal things, they glow more real and warm than ever
this cold Franciscan chapel did. They will not be banished.

I took her above Bolzen to redeem her, and returned ...

O Heavenly Father, it is foul. It is beyond pardon.

I should confess to one of these Franciscan friars – but I cannot. The consequences
are too ... well, in all conscience I should not continue any further on this journey. I
ought to confess my crime forthwith that the bishop perform the requisite rites. It is
my clear duty, and yet it would also mean delay.

She will not brook delay. She itches to arrive at Venice. I do not understand
her hurry, but I do know this: he who slows her will be left by the way. Witness the
Knyght in Calais.

Likewise, the Bishop of Trent would detain me. Fine me. Lock me up. Dictate
a sorrowing missive to his brother in Bath and Wells. He would be well within his
rights.

If it were only my soul at stake, perhaps I would do as I ought – but it is not. I must at all costs continue to Jerusalem, Lord, and in this precise company. I have been the instrument of prodigious harm, Thou knowest, but with Thine aid I may still make some amend. Others have reached the Sepulchre only to die. Perhaps it is all I can pray for on my own account.

I have fallen beyond redemption, and the true test of it is this – I am not wholly sorry.

Our steeds were spent from ascending the Alps. From Innsbruck up to the Brenner Pass and then winding down again, we had not halted a day. Lord, I was exhausted. How then would the poor beast that bore me up and over those bleak mountains feel? Jankyn complained to his Wife of the pace, but she wouldn't listen, and truly, that takes some doing. The lad is nothing if not persistent – nor is he used to being ignored by his Wife. She distances herself from him most pointedly.

But she couldn't ignore the limp in her mare or the stumbling of her sumpters. She spoke to the Venetian, and he urged that we stop a day at this town of Bolzen. And she listened to him.

She did more than listen. Lord, she treats her wedded spouse as if he does not exist and smiles sweetly upon this Minotto instead. She rides by his side and coos at his stories. He points out the sights, he discourses on passing travellers for her amusement. He knows this country well, it is true, but he knew the way from Innsbruck to the Pass too and she did not hang upon his every word then.

That is why I did it. I feared for her soul. I feared the taint of Eve was leading her astray. Again.

This Bolzen – Bolzano to the Italians – is a town cupped by mountains. Endless, sky-reaching teeth of rock. O Lord, I yearn for the tame hills of Bath. It seems a decade since I was last truly warm, and yet it is little more than a week since we were at Innsbruck. Even then, we were hemmed in by rock. Today was to have been a day of renewal. (*Requievit die septimo. On the seventh day He rested.*) Yet when I heard of the chapel, I thought it was holy inspiration that drew me hence. Now I know it was the urging of the Fiend himself. That was how my

daughter Alisoun and I came to be plodding up yet another vertiginous slope in the bright, cold sunshine of an Alpine spring.

Leading a sumpter loaded with barrels.

She would not leave it behind.

“The horses should be resting,” I said.

“Hold thy fuss, John dear. It been just a short ramble, so said you. Just a stretch of the legs. Won’t do old Myde-ass no harm.” And she patted the long-suffering mule on its flank.

I tried again. “Surely your barrels will be safe enough with the Franciscans?” I point to the trail we must follow, clambering the ranks of vines above. “The way is steep. What if ... if Midas stumbles?”

She shot me a sharp look. “Recall the Rhine?” she snapped. “If it were ne for friend Antonio, we nolde never have seen them barrels again. Besides, Myde-ass han’t stumbled yet, Sir John, and he won’t this day. He comes, or I don’t.”

And so he came, and tore up mouthfuls of dandelion and daisies every time we stopped for breath. Which was frequent. And I wondered yet again why she must bring two barrels of Bath water – now and to Jerusalem.

For the end for which she claimed they must come seemed strangely ignored of late.

The barrels contain water of St Winifred’s well, she says. From Bath. Not that I have ever knelt at that spring. It is a place for women only, and those in rather specific need. But it has come to my notice these last weeks that a rift has opened between Jankyn and his Wife. I do not like to monitor such matters but, in the cramped sleeping quarters of recent nights, it has become clear that Alisoun sleeps not by her husband. It can no longer be Lenten abstinence, for we celebrated Holy Easter in Innsbruck. Perhaps it is chastity for the greater efficacy of pilgrimage. But if this journey to Jerusalem is primarily for the purpose that she get with child – as certainly her determination to cart the saint’s water attests – then why does she avoid the very person and act that facilitates that end? Why does she cast her smiles upon an Italian instead?

I may not shrive Alisoun or hear her confession, but I am still chaplain to this company. I may still pray with her and offer her counsel. Better yet, I hoped to urge an epiphany through images.

A Franciscan of our hospice told me of a wonder perched above Bolzen – a simple chapel planted amongst vines, yet containing sufficient to inspire any sinful Eve to choose the strait and narrow path. On our day of rest, I urged my daughter hence. She was restless, yet reluctant to stir from our accommodation. She would not go without her barrels, she declared, and so the barrels came.

She paused on the way to buy wine. She did not have to search very hard. Every huddled hut by the way housed vine-workers, and not a few had crude signs signifying bunches of grapes propped without. She up-ended her leather travelling-bottle on the daisies, let every drop of water fall, and filled it with wine instead. She began on it immediately.

“What, Sir John?” she declared, lowering the leather and looking at me level only thanks to being higher up the slope. Stain of wine kissed her lips. “Thy hill hath given me a thirst. Besides, *you* heard tell of a fair chapel, but I heard they brew a fair-miraculous wine up here. The tapster told it me. Doubtless, it been the holy influence.”

She gestured with the bottle towards the tiny spire jutting above us. A wisp of cloud tangled itself about the crucifix atop. The chapel was fairly besieged with neat, bare vines. She offered me the flask, and I hesitated.

Then drank – and, to my shame, I coughed a little. Lord, I am not used to unwatered wine. But I too was thirsty, and the wine was good. I drank again, and its red fire slipped seductive down my throat.

By the time we had achieved the chapel itself, the bottle was distinctly lighter – but so too were my steps. It was a steep slope to climb on a day of rest and without the benefit of a horse’s hocks. I was grateful for that wine. I thought it a brew blessed by the Magdalene, holy wine sanctified by the presence of her shrine.

I was wrong.

The chapel was no more impressive at close quarters than it seemed from Bolzen – stolid, plain, tile-roofed, and pale-plastered. I began to wonder if I was the butt of a bored Franciscan’s joke – send two tired pilgrims trudging up the steepest hill in the vicinity to gawk at some humble edifice beloved of a handful of peasants.

Alys raised brows at me, but refrained from comment. She settled for tying the sumpter somewhat fumble-fingerly to the nearest vine. The beast set to weeding with enthusiasm.

My daughter cocked her head towards the unadorned plank door. “Well? Shall we, Sir Parson?” Then the wine-red lips quirked. “Your notion, dear John, you first. Go on, sweet Parson. Enter the Magdalene’s womb.”

Perhaps that should have warned me, but I thought it was merely the wine speaking. She is but a small thing, O Lord. There is not much of her for liquor to penetrate. I took the bottle from her and stowed it in between a barrel and the horse’s sweaty flank.

And then I entered the chapel.

I had resigned myself to disappointment. Perhaps that is why it struck me as it did. I opened a door into a cave of human construction – round-ceilinged, near windowless, and dim lit by a mere handful of flickering candles – and my feet took root upon its threshold. The chapel seduced me. Its roof was a frescoed starry night and its walls were painted golden with day – and hope. It was a cave of colour.

“Well, Sir John? Lat me see. Go thee in or out, but ne dither on the doorstep.”

I mumbled some apology and made way. As she stepped in, I sealed the door behind her to shut out the profane world. And listened to her gasp.

I waited for the holy images to lift her spirit heavenwards.

“Ooo, John, that priestling ne did lie.”

“Friar,” I corrected her, but neither of us were paying attention.

The four beasts of the gospel gazed down at us from the starry ceiling. Christ in Majesty blessed us from above. But Alisoun had eyes only for that which wrapped the walls about – the frescoed Life of Mary, called Magdalene.

It was all I'd hoped.

From her initial scolding by Martha up to the Magdalene's elevation by angels, her Life was all there. The Wanton Redeemed. The paint was so fresh the figures seemed to move in the flickering light. The Franciscan had told me the painting was finished but a year ago. Alys floated from scene to scene, cooing at the colour and examining each. As for myself, the wine seemed suddenly to reach my legs. I buckled to my knees, directly below Thy Son in Majesty. I began to pray for my daughter's soul.

I did not get to pray for long.

"Why han't she got red hair?" Alys was surveying the scene of Mary banished from the Holy Land on the boat with neither rudder nor mast (although inexplicably showing a flimsy central pole with sail attached). "All the other pictures I spied of her do. You know, red hair for full scarlet sin."

She tweaked at a curl escaped from her wimple and looked impish. I did not reply.

"But look here, Sir John. All these wights been as blonde as my boy Jankyn. Every one, save the old man, God woot. You'd ne know which one is the Maud if she weren't stuck in the middle."

Yet she did not seem to require an answer, for she moved immediately to an image of the Magdalene smiling at a man and woman lying naked in bed.

"And what in sweet Heaven's she up to here, Sir John?" She chuckled. "Why, the sainted Mary looks like to join them two betwix the sheets! I heard she was a whore, but I ne thought to see it daubed upon a church."

I closed my eyes and prayed for strength.

"Do you not recall the story, my child?"

"Don't you *my child* me," she declared, but without rancour. She plunked herself down beside me and leaned against my shoulder, still staring about her. I was about to set her upright, to put some proper distance between us, when she murmured, "You han't told me a tale in so long, dear John. Dostow recall how you used to tellen me stories all those years ago? Me, a midget serf and you not yet a priest?"

She had rested her head against my shoulder then, too. When she was but a child – truly a child.

“Tell me of the Magdalene,” said she.

And so, snuggled warm against my side, she gave me my permission to preach.

“Mary was of the castle Magdalo, hard by Jerusalem, or so her *vita* tells us, Alisoun. There she dwelt with her sister Martha and her noble brother Lazarus.” I indicated the first image, to the right of the altar. “See, a castle upon a hill and Lazarus, adorned in hose Jankyn himself would be proud to pull on. And there is Martha, speaking harsh to Mary for her idleness.”

In this at least, there is no parallel to Alys. If Mary was too idle, listening at the feet of the Lord, then Alisoun is more a busy Martha. At least she does not have her spinning today. Nevertheless I seize the opportunity.

“But when Martha reprovved Mary, the Lord sweetly excused her, saying *But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.*”

“Well? And what was that needful thing, Sir John?” And she giggled. It was the wine, Lord, for my daughter is not prone to giggling. “Stroking his feet with her hair, perhaps? Kissing his toes?” She pointed to a later picture.

“No. Listening,” I said in reproof. “Mary sat at the feet of the Lord and listened in sweet silence.”

Alys cast me a roguish glance, but look the point.

I softened my tone. I was there to persuade and to show example, not to exhort.

“Yet we are told that, before the Magdalene came unto the Lord, she was indeed worthy of reproof,” I said. “She abounded in riches, and gave herself up to all earthly desires. She shone in beauty and submitted her body to delight, and lost therefore her good name and was justly called sinner.”

O Lord, I know her legend well. More so than any other saint.

Alisoun nudged me. “Well then, what kind of desires? What, artow so bashful you nil nat wrap your tongue about their names?”

I gazed upon the woman peopling the wall. Many Magdalenes, blonde and beautiful, adorned with costly fabrics and furs.

“It is said she spread her favours between many men,” I admit with low voice.

“Her *favours*?” Alisoun chuckled – or was it a giggle? “Oh, my dear virgin John, you been so ... so virginal. Why not speak it as it is? Behold, the Magdalene was a fair wench, with an appetite as hungry as her hair. Least,” she amended, “her hair when it been shaded correct. Yea, Mary the Maud lay with men. By God, she curled her legs about a good few.”

Then she waved her hand at the second image and shook with merriment.

“And I ask you, what’s the Maud up to under the table there, a-crawling towards Our Lord? Were it any other wight, and I’d a-said for certain he was about to get full fortunate, and at dinner too.”

I am accustomed to the manner in which my daughter’s tongue runs, O Lord, but in that moment I was shocked. What was far worse, I immediately visualised what she meant. The lifting of Lord Jhesu’s hem not to anoint his feet but ...

“Alisoun!” I removed myself from her person with alacrity. “The blessed Gregory instructs us how we are to interpret the Magdalene.” I scoured my memory for his words. “You see her there bestrewing unguent – *previously* used to perfume forbidden acts – upon our Dear Lord’s feet. *She had coveted with earthly eyes*, but now through penitence her eyes are washed clean with holy tears. *She once displayed her hair to adorn her face*, but now her hair dries tears from the Redeemer’s feet. *She had spoken proud things with her mouth*, but in kissing the Lord’s feet, she became consumed entirely with him. Thus she turned every carnal lust to virtue in order to serve her Lord entirely in penance.”

I may not have produced Gregory’s words in exactitude, but it was certainly their gist. More importantly, we were moving from the sinner Magdalene to the wanton-reformed.

“Lord Christ cast seven devils from her,” I intoned. “One demon for each deadly sin. And in time, the Magdalene became *apostolarum apostola*, apostle to

the apostles and beloved of Christ. It was she who first saw him risen and brought the glad news to the disciples.”

“Oh certain,” my daughter interrupted, laying an importunate hand upon my arm. “But you waiven the point, dear John. What’s the Maud up to in yon bedroom?”

She pointed again to that portrayal of Mary with the naked lord and lady. I sighed.

“That was after the followers of Christ had been banished from the Holy Land,” I said. “Mary and her friends were cruelly cast into a ship with no rudder nor tackle by those who would see them dead, but the Almighty blew them safe to Marseilles, whereon they found the populace to be heathen idolaters.”

“Not much has changed, then,” Alys declared.

I ignored the poke at her rivals of Provence.

“Mary preached full sweetly unto them of Marseilles. Many were converted, but the prince of that place held stubborn.” I took a breath. Here, I ventured back onto dangerous ground. Dangerous, but fertile. “He and his wife were barren. They made sacrifice to idols to have a child. The idols availed them not.”

I paused that my words might sink in. I prayed that the wine stay silent upon her lips. She simply gazed up at the image – golden Mary standing smilingly over a naked prince and his spouse.

“You see before you the Magdalene appearing not in the flesh but in holy vision,” I explain. “She appeared before these two thrice in their bedchamber at night. She admonished the lord and lady. *Lie thou not in a palace wrapped in silk*, she said.”

In fact, the sainted Mary said somewhat more, but her views touching upon clothing are particularly pertinent to my point.

Of course Alys had to add, “Pity the painter-man ne knew that. Far as I can see, they been both naked as the day they were born.” She tried a grin but it didn’t quite kindle. “Reckon the holy Maud hente them at it. You know, a-making the beast—”

“The *vita* does not tell us,” I hastened to insert.

“Well it wouldn’t, would it? Writ by monks with namoore knowledge of bedwork than what they readen in books. But why else would she visit them in bed? So?” she continued, a touch of intensity about her tone. “What did thy Magdalene do? Did she stiffen his rod? Did she magic a babe?”

“The Lord granted them a child,” I say with some sternness. “But only after they had foresworn their fine riches and luxury and followed the Magdalene in all things, just as Mary had followed Christ.”

Her eyes narrowed a little at that. I feared I was too transparent.

I hurried on. “Like you, the noblewoman was overcome with desire to see the Holy Land. Her lord husband was to sail hence, and she – despite being great with child – would not stay at home, no matter how he begged.”

“Ha. Menfolk always want their women to bide at home. Only them with coillons are allowed to wander, by God.” She snorted. “It been beyond me what’s so special about a nether-harness that gives hem leave to leave.”

I attempted to return to my tale. “Perhaps the lady would have been wiser to listen to her husband.” Seeing my daughter inflate, I quickly added, “In *this* case. For when they had sailed but a day and a night, a fierce tempest blew up. What with the great waves and the troubling of the sea, the lady began to wax feeble and fell into travail. She was delivered of a fair son but soon after died.”

“*Died?* Before ever she reached the Sepulchre? Why a God’s name artow telling me this, John?”

Saints be praised the chapel was empty, for her voice fairly filled that cave-like space. Or in hindsight, perhaps a fiend had lured its chaplain away.

I made haste to point at another scene upon the wall, one of a woman shrouded in white and lowered to bare and rocky ground. “The sailors left her and her wailing babe upon a bleak island and sailed upon their way.”

“*What?* They left it? A living babe?”

“They had no milk to give it, and the sailors could not abide its cries.”

“Some use yon sainted whore was to hem then!” Alys burst out. She jabbed a finger in Mary’s direction. “What’s the use in the bawd, by God? She gives them a babe then refts it away, yea, and takes his wife withal. What didstow bring me here for, John? Pretty pictures, I grant, but a right evil whore upon them.”

Forgive her, Lord. She was distressed. And a little inebriated as well. Perhaps I was too, for I did not rebuke her as I ought. Instead I remembered how she was back then, in those days – months – after her own travail. She was maddened. Torn. A broken thing. Thus I looked softly upon her, and with great priestly love.

“The Magdalene is protectoress of pilgrims, my child. But not because she smooths their way. No pilgrimage would be worthy of the name without—” I had been about to say *travail*, but stuttered to another term, “—some suffering. That which is gained easily is not valued. Penance must be earned through pain.”

“Pain, I grant, but *death*? A God’s name, yon lady ne even been shrived, from what you say. And the boy-child – was he baptised before they left him to the gulls?”

“The Magdalene watched over them—”

“Them? A pile of bird-picked bones, more like.”

“And the lord sailed on to Jerusalem with much weeping and heaviness of heart.”

“Yea, weeping sore with one eye and a-seeking out a new mare with the other. I woot how men are, Sir Parson. Wives been replaceable. Well, I give hem fair warning – him who dangles a nether-purse been full replaceable too!”

“And when that bereft lord achieved the Holy City,” I continued with some doggedness. “St Peter spoke these words unto him: *Be thou not heavy. Thy wife sleeps, and the little child with her. Our Lord is almighty to give, and to take away, and to give again that which He hath taken, and to turn all weeping into joy.* And then Peter led him into Jerusalem, and showed to him all the places where Christ worked miracles, and the place where He suffered death and rose again.”

This time Alys made no comment, but stared instead between the sixth and seventh images upon the wall. I followed her gaze and saw the source of her perplexity. One’s eyes saw as if double. It seemed the painter had forgot himself and painted in error the preceding picture again on the next panel. Again the ship was moored by a rocky isle, and there again was the lady, dead within a shallow grave. But – look more closely and the observer catches subtle differences too. Alys was looking close.

The words of the tale seemed to flow direct from Thee, O Lord. I remembered the vita in all exactitude. *“And when this lord of Marseilles was well-informed in the faith, and two years were passed since he departed, he took his ship to return into his country. And as he sailed, he came by the ordinance of God to the rock whereon his wife and son were left.”*

“Ah,” said Alys, gazing upon the image. Her eyes had moved from the woman now, and dwelt instead upon the child. This babe was no pile of bones upon a deserted shore.

“And when that lord came, he beheld a little child playing on the seaside, and he was much a-marvelled. But the child, who had never had seen people before, was afraid and ran to his mother's breast and hid under her mantle.”

“But she was dead and rotted,” said Alys.

Sure enough, the fresco showed the lady still wrapped and in her rocky grave, yet looking remarkably preserved for a two-year-old corpse.

“And then the lord lifted the mantle and found his child, which was right fair, sucking his mother's breast.” Alys made a horrified squeak, but I continued as the legend relates. *“Then he took the child in his arms and said: O blessed Mary Magdalene, I were well happy if my wife were now alive, and might come again with me into my country. I know verily that thou who hast given me my son, and hast fed and kept him two years on this rock, mayst re-establish his mother to health. And with these words the woman respired, and took life—”*

“You’re doing this a-purpose, aren’t you John?”

She cut across my tale like shears on wool. I suppose I gaped a little. She was right, of course, but I had not expected to be tackled direct on the matter.

“You reckon I’m thy Magdalene.” It wasn’t a question. “But you gan mixed it up. It ne been the sainted Maud who birthed a baby and near died of it, nor her who made pilgrimage. Make up thy mind, preacher. Am I thy Maud or some pagan lady, for, certain, I ne fancy dividing myself in twain.”

When I failed to answer, Alys sucked in her cheeks and spoke on.

“And you know what? I misdoubt them monkish tales. What do they know of Mauds and ladies, a-shut up in their cloisters? Only time they lay eye on a woman

is in their juicy dreams. That tale you been a-telling comes direct from some monk's dusty great book, nath it nat?"

Does she include me among her monks? Am I thus the enemy? To my shame, I was struck by the need to prove otherwise.

"Why didstow bring me here, John? Yea, the wine's passing good and the painting's pretty, but I've seen better. Why, they nolde nat even get the Maud's hair right. Every wight knows she's got red hair – even you. By God, most especially you, for I reckon you see me as some midget Magdalene, yea, with red hair and all."

Whereon she plucked off her wimple and let flow her copper curls in most unseemly abandon.

I might have reproved her, but she was off upon another tangent before ever I gathered breath.

"Well, if I'm some Magda – by which I wene I been a wanton and a lecher and over-fond of clothes and thankee very much – what role doth that hand you, Sir Preacher Man? Well?"

It was a question that had never occurred to me. I had been so focused upon curing my daughter-in-spirit that the larger allegory had slipped me by.

"A parable does not need to apply exact in every instance," I began.

"Oh, but this one does, Sir John. Least, in this one respect. But you han't finished your story, John. You've got, what? Some three pictures to go." She eyed me as if I too were a fresco she desired to examine. "I nil nat determine who you been 'til you finish, now can I? So speak on!"

Upon which command, she left no space for me to speak, but instead pointed out the eighth panel. "That one been easy enough. The lord hath sailed his wife and babe safe home and is giving thanks to yon Magdalene. But the last two, John – what are all the angels up to about her skirts? Full six of them, I count. Never tell me you cast yourself as a feathery angel about my skirts?"

I grasped onto the story as a drowning man to a spar – which metaphor may yet eventuate in all corporeal reality when we set sail from Venice. The last part of the legend had less obvious application to my daughter, but at least the tone was indubitably lofty.

“Upon the safe return of that lord and lady, the blessed Mary Magdalene sought out a right sharp desert and abode alone there for the space of thirty years. She had no comfort of running water, nor solace of trees, ne of herbs. And yet Our Redeemer provided for her food celestial. At every hour she was lifted up in the air by angels, and heard the glorious song of the heavenly companies. She was fed in such wise with right sweet meats, and then was brought again by the angels unto her rocky cave, in such wise as she had no need of corporal nourishing.”

The ninth image clearly shows this happenstance. The Magdalene dwelling in her cave and the angels attending her.

“And the last?” Alys asked, but her tone is subdued. She has an inkling what is happening here. Something of the sort must occur at the end of every saint’s tale.

“At the end of thirty years, she was called to the bosom of her Saviour, O my daughter. Angels carried her, dying, in their arms unto the priest. From him, Mary Magdalene received the body and blood of Our Lord with great abundance of tears, and after, she stretched her body before the altar, and her blessed soul departed into the embrace of her Lord.”

Alys leaned her hands back on the rushy floor not a finger’s length from my own and stared at the images.

“Ah, how like a romance it is,” she murmured. “Yon Magdalene begins as a bad knight-lady. But then she layen eyes on her beloved – well, upon His feet, leastwise – and her heart is His forever. What moote she do then but be banished and quest in the wilderness that she may make herself worthy of him. Yea, but finally she gets her embrace – from a goodly number of angels at least – and gets a-hoisted to Heaven to be with her true love in bliss.”

She turned to smile at me.

What did she perceive, O Lord? A tonsured one in dun drab with jaw a-drooping? Yet even in that state I registered it as a smile full strange.

“Why John, certain I’ll be thy Magdalene. I’m on a quest, am I nat? I wander the wilds too, though I han’t noticed a deal of angels. Maybe they got tired of carting Mary about. But one thing still wants an answer, my sweet John.” And she looked at me most direct. “What art thou?”

We were kneeling in the centre of the bare little chapel – bare except for guttering candles and the blocky altar-stone towards which we were facing. And the glory of the painted walls. At least, I was kneeling. Alys was plumped on her posterior, hands propped back the better that she could gaze around. The chapel was ours alone.

I lifted my arm and pointed. There was a drab priest painted in a corner of the penultimate panel. I had not mentioned him to Alys for he was not noteworthy. He was just a simple celibate who had stumbled over the Magdalene in the wilderness.

“If I must play a part, make it that one,” I said. For some reason, my voice was reduced to a husk. “A minor player merely. One who enters only to aid she who must be saved.”

But Alys grabbed hold of my arm before I could return it to my side. She swung it like the yard of a sail to point at the opposing wall, towards a different image. Towards the panel of a sinful Mary beneath the table of Our Lord.

“No, by God. You cast yourself as that one, John.”

A hollow space opened where my innards should lie. My jaw was bereft of bones and my arm lay limp upon her guiding hand. She pointed me straight at Thy Son, O Lord. At Our Saviour Himself.

Then she dropped my arm, jumped up, and slapped me. The flat of her palm hit the side of my face. Hard.

I toppled. It was more a matter of lost balance than of compelling force.

“You know what you must do now, John – or should I say Jhesu?” she hissed. “You gan turn the other cheek.”

Then she kicked me, and my falling was made complete. I lay sideways on the chapel floor. I did not attempt to get up, Lord. Perhaps I should have. Perhaps then nothing more would have happened. But no, I lay there unresistant, stunned by far more than her blow.

Was she correct? In casting Alys as Magdalene, had I the hideous temerity to imagine myself as her Messiah? *Mea maxima culpa*. I deserved far more than that

slap. It was my heinous iniquity, O Lord, that called down the horror that occurred next.

Her hands fastened on my shoulder. She was attempting to wrestle me onto my back. Was it that she might give me that blow to the other cheek?

“Look at me, John!”

I didn’t wish to. I turned my face away, a writhing coward. I was her ghostly father, her spiritual advisor, her pilgrim chaplain, her big brother, her step-son. The last thing I wanted was for Alys to see my naked soul, shredded by guilt. How then might attempt to I guide her?

So she pushed at me. She set her shoulder to mine and heaved me over. Such was her effort that she tumbled on top of me, if only for an instant. I stiffened.

“Get off, Alys,” I whispered. “The priest ...”

But no such priest had shown his face so far.

She sat up. Her hands shoved down on my chest.

“*Look at me, John.*”

My eyes remained averted.

She was not to be defeated. In a flurry of skirts, she lifted her leg and – oh, sweet Lord, the memory of it – she sat herself astride me. Having thus secured my person, she took my face between her palms. Unless I sealed my eyes, I was left with no option but to gaze up into her incandescent visage.

To say she was angry would be to understate the matter.

“You hold yourself to be Christ and me a wrecched sinner in want of saving? A wrecched *female* sinner? *Men!* Shrewed shrunk-balled clerics. By God, it been so easy to judge when you got a nether-purse, eh?”

O Lord, the horror.

She yanked up my cassock. She reached her small hand back – and took ahold of the aforementioned item.

I yelped.

She did not let go. She shook them a little, without ever looking at what she did.

“Christ han a set of these too, I woot. He was casten in the shape of Man, by God. He got tempted. That been the whole point. He was God made flesh. Yea, the

Magdalene tempted Him something cruel, her being so wanton and so fair. And a-licking his feet beneath the table, and God knows what else.” Her hand tightened. “But did He fall? Did He avail himself of pretty Mary’s charms? Oh no. I reckon Christ’s sely instrument hung limp as a raw sausage evermore.”

Upon which she wrapped her fingers about that item of my anatomy which should remain ever wilted.

No woman has ever touched me there, not since my mother sponged her baby son full tenderly. Alys was not tender, nor did I react as if a mother’s hands were upon me. No, my will was as water. My reason evaporated like morning mist. My body was all – every muscle turned to rock yet washed with liquid honey and quivering like a leveret before the fox.

Something about her expression changed. What it was, I was in no state to divine.

“Someone hath cooked thy sausage, Sir John. Toasted it over the Devil’s flames, maybe?”

And then, Lord, she caressed that shameful instrument. She slid her hand along it, and my body – my base and fallen body – juddered as does a hanged man upon the hemp.

“You reckon I been like Mary? Her that was scarlet whore ‘til redeemed by her Redeemer?”

Her voice was soft, but in no way was it gentle.

“Well, *you* been no redeemer, my John. Christ Jhesu rose again on the third day, yea, but He ne rose as you do now. So if I am thy Magdalene, then by God, I wene that this is what she’d do ...”

Why did I not move? Alisoun is of no great weight. Her small arms could never hold me against my will. I must admit it, Lord, I know the answer. I did not move in that last moment because because some part of me – some beyond-degenerate and everlastingly tainted part of me – did not wish it so.

And yet still I had no inkling of what was to come.

She twitched at her skirts, rose up on her knees, and then sank her womanly wetness full on that part of me that stood so shamefully hard.

I cried out. I shrieked. *The shock of it, the utter sinful bliss.* I could not move. I had to move. She sat immobile upon me for aching long heartbeats, as still as I myself, her eyes upon mine. Wide, they were, as if surprised, and her mouth too had come ajar. Then, with that gaze never leaving mine, she let herself slip slowly up until cold air kissed my dampened shaft and I nearly cried out for the terrible loss of her – before she sank herself back down. My hips shivered towards hers. Then again, she rose and sank. And again. Ah, the memory of it will never leave me. It will stalk my dreams and colour my vision whensoever I lay eyes upon her. Even now I harden again. *Mea culpa.* The thought of her rising above me, the sweet warmth of her abandoning me, only to embrace me like home again. And again.

But it did not take long. Oh, in what short space of time may one descend into the deepest pit! But to speak truth, in that accursed moment it felt as if I were shot to Heaven and not to Hell. Beyond Heaven. I cried out, helpless in the throes of animal rapture. My hips knifed up. I planted my foul seed in her. I owned her, and I watched her sweet visage glow.

And then I shoved her off and curled into a cringing ball.

EXEGESIS

Introduction

She's bad and bold. She's foul-mouthed and a frequenter of holy places. She's the Wife of Bath from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* – a vivid character that continues to beguile and perplex readers. This doctorate is founded upon my fascination with this complex literary creation. Why, I wondered, do I and so many others find Chaucer's depiction of the Wife of Bath compelling? What makes her the subject of so much academic debate? And, most importantly, how may I as a creative writer learn from, borrow, and expand upon Chaucer's depiction? Hundreds of academic publications have interrogated the Wife over the last half century, but Alisoun of Bath has rarely appeared in historical fiction – and even more rarely with any interpretive acuity. Yet this was precisely what I wished to do: reinterpret this multi-faceted medieval character in light of the ageless question she poses – what do women most desire?

Historical fiction reinterprets the past in terms of present preoccupations. I wanted to offer a new answer to the Wife's question through the person of its medieval asker, but in order to do so effectively, I had to present Alisoun herself in a persuasive manner. This is no easy task for, while the Wife's complexity is highly productive of academic commentary, it poses the historical novelist a significant challenge. If character complexity were not enough, the centrality of sexual violence to the Wife's narratives raises further interpretive dilemmas. This is compounded by the conventional status that sexualised brutality has acquired in medieval-set historical fiction, authorised by its perceived basis in historical reality. In this context, sexual violence against women frequently defines female characters and signifies a setting of barbaric alterity, with troubling reverberations. This exegesis sets out my analysis of and solutions to these obstacles to re-characterising the Wife in historical fiction. It also elucidates the theory and method behind the creative-production partner to this exegesis – the first half of an historical novel

reinterpreting Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, entitled *The Jerusalem Tales*.¹ The exegesis argues, as my creative practice demonstrates, that Elizabeth Fowler's 'social persons' approach to literary analysis may facilitate the (re)creation of a complex and multi-faceted literary character, and that the resulting social-person positions can negotiate the ethical minefield that adapting a medieval tale in which sexual violence is thematically central to a modern genre in which the depiction of misogynistic brutality is endemic.

The following exegesis is divided into two parts. Part One describes Elizabeth Fowler's theory of 'social persons' and applies it in the manner Fowler intended, as a tool for the analysis of character in medieval and early-modern English literature. This manner of social-persons analysis identifies underlying concepts of personhood current in a particular culture, evoked through textual cues in connection with character. Crucially, more than one social person typically attaches to any single named character. Indeed, an enormous number of social persons are conjured about Alisoun of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales*, and much of the power of her characterisation derives from these many and sometimes conflicting persons. In evidence of that multiplicity, I list a large number of candidates for social personhood I identify with Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*.

I then narrow the focus to just a few of the social persons Chaucer conjures for the *Wife*. It is impossible to analyse every social person that may be evoked about so complex a character; besides, I do not attempt to employ them all in my novel. The latter portion of Part One focuses upon those social persons I used as core elements for my recreation of Alisoun in historical fiction. Each of these persons emerges on the basis of cues which I discerned in the *Canterbury Tales* and examined in light of the historical context. However, the social persons that surface in an historical novel do not derive solely from the historical period in which the novel is set – they also reflect cultural currents and conventions from the author's (and readers') own contexts. A historical novel peers at the past through the lens of the present. *The*

¹ Due to the length of the historical fiction, I have only presented the first half of the novel in this thesis. See Appendix 1 for a summary of the second half.

Jerusalem Tales incorporates social persons suggested by the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly variants of wifhood, but my characterisations also deliberately invoke post-Chaucerian influences and ideas.

In Part Two, I examine a troubling aspect of this blending of historical and contemporary social persons in historical novels: the representation of sexual violence as definitive of medieval female experience. Sexual violence against women is so commonly – and vividly – portrayed in recent medieval-set historical fiction as to have become conventional, and female characters are shown to be fundamentally shaped by such experiences. But isn't this simply because the primary convention of historical fiction is evident historicity? After all, sexual violence is present in the medieval *Canterbury Tales* Wife narratives, if in a muted fashion. On the contrary, I suggest that the emphasis upon sexual violence is not so much prompted by historical reality as sparked by a desire to cast the medieval as Other, and to subtly eroticise misogynistic violence under cover of (post)feminist outrage. These undercurrents impact modern characterisations of the Wife of Bath, for each of the four historical-fiction Wife adaptations I identify foregrounds sexual violence,² a theme present but distinctly understated in Chaucer. These novels dwell upon and emphasise sexual violence in a way that Chaucer does not. Yet, given that the plots of Chaucer's Wife narratives pivot upon sexual violence, a modern adaptor is necessarily faced with interpreting matter that is ethically fraught. My solution is to turn to social persons: I argue that the portrayal of multiple and competing social-person positions permits a negotiation of sexual violence that offers the Wife's character – and the reader's interpretation of it – agency.

In sum, then, this exegesis argues that the adaptation of Chaucer's Wife of Bath poses the writer of historical fiction some knotty characterisation challenges: primary among these is the (re)presentation of a complex and ambiguous character, while the interpretation of sexual violence presents a particularly tangled

² There have been relatively few adaptations of the Wife of Bath; the four novels I examine are the only such historical novels I have encountered.

interpretive aspect crucial to the Wife's characterisation. While social-person analysis of a medieval text can facilitate the creation of a multi-faceted character, the social persons thus recreated in historical fiction are also shaped by contemporary genre conventions and cultural assumptions. I intend that the multiple social persons associated with my version of the Wife not only deepen and complicate her character but also enable her to narratively contest the sexual violence that opposes 'what women most desire'.

Chaucer and his Wife

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400) is a giant of the English literary canon. He is by far the best known of the medieval poets who, beginning in the fourteenth century, began to produce literature in the vernacular now referred to as Middle English.³ His longest and last poetical work, the *Canterbury Tales*, written between 1372 and his death in 1400,⁴ is the foundation upon which much of this reputation rests.

The *Canterbury Tales* is presented as a collection of stories told by a group of pilgrims as they journey towards the greatest of medieval English shrines, that of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury. The *Canterbury Tales* opens with the 'General Prologue', which acts as a framing narrative related by 'Chaucer' himself as a member of the fictional company and contextualising the tales in terms of a story-telling competition. Some of the tales that follow are also preceded by a 'Prologue' spoken by the respective teller and presenting purportedly autobiographical information. The Wife of Bath's Tale is one of these: it is preceded by the longest individual Prologue in the *Canterbury Tales*. The General Prologue itself provides preliminary character sketches of each of the twenty-nine pilgrims in the group. All but three of the party are male. The pilgrim described as the Wife of Bath – later

³ See Simon Horobin for discussion of the specific sub-dialect or dialects of Middle English of the surviving *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts: S. Horobin, *The Language of the Chaucer Tradition*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2003.

⁴ For a more precise chronology, see: L.D. Benson, 'The canon and chronology of Chaucer's works', in L.D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. xxv.

also referred to as Dame, Alisoun, and Alys (names which I will also use in reference to her) – is the only female of the company not in holy orders.

The General Prologue introduces Dame Alisoun in the following manner:

A good Wif was ther of biside Bathe,
But she was somdel deaf, and that was scathe.
Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt,
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt.

...

Boold was hir face and fair and reed of hewe.
She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve (ll. 445–448, 458–460)

The character Chaucer then has speak for herself in ‘The Prologue of the Wyves Tale of Bathe’ (hereafter referred to as The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, or Prologue for short) proves distinctly bold in speech as well as face. The Wife employs the bulk of her lengthy Prologue to describing her life in sexualised and combative terms; more precisely, she describes her career in marriages – five of them. This is a highly allusive narrative. The Wife begins by asserting that:

Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage (ll. 1–3)

That is, she claims that all the ‘authority’ she requires to speak of marriage lies in her own five-fold experience of it. The textual authorities which she claims to have no need of are then referenced extensively – and sometimes erroneously – in the course of the lengthy Prologue that follows. The result is that, in the process of telling of each of her five marriages, Alisoun also alludes to a wide range of textually-derived entities. These, in addition to her ‘biographical’ narratives, significantly colour her character.

That Chaucer has Alisoun relate these tales of the getting and losing of five husbands from her own militant and evidently-biased perspective creates significant ambiguity and space for interpretation. Further, the narratives Alisoun offers of her marriages are in no way comprehensive. We discover that Alys was first married when aged twelve to a much older man and that she did not enjoy sexual relations with this old ‘bacon’ (l. 418). The first three husbands then proceed

to blend together in description, each being old and rich, and so subject to relentless Wifely manipulations in order that Alisoun achieves some power over a distasteful marital situation. The lack of distinction between the three initial marriages leaves gaps in her narrative and leeway for interpretation. The Wife openly and unapologetically describes her husband-manipulation to a practically all-male pilgrim audience. Whether Chaucer has her thus damn herself as an arch-shrew and example of bad medieval womanhood or presents her with a degree of sympathy and admiration continues to be debated by scholars. The uncertainty over whether we are to see Alisoun as sexually subjugated, a subjugator, or a mixture of both, only adds to the range of ways a reader may interpret the Wife of Bath.

Regarding her last two marriages, Alisoun's fourth husband is described primarily in terms of his infidelity and his Wife's hurt and defiant response to it. Only her fifth husband, Jankyn, achieves much individuality of character. The Dame describes him as twenty years her junior, an attractive but troublesome toy-boy, and given to reading pointed tales of bad women to his bad Wife. This latter habit culminates in marital violence: she tears pages out of the offending book and punches him; in return, he strikes her head so hard that she collapses on the floor as if dead. As a result, Jankyn is so frightened and sorry for nearly killing his Wife that he becomes a model husband from that point on, granting Alisoun, as she puts it, full 'maistrie' and 'al the soveraynetee' in their marriage (l. 818). This notion of mastery in marriage emerges as a central theme in the Wife's Prologue and then structures the courtly quest-romance that Alisoun offers as her Tale.

The Wife's Tale describes a rapist knight's quest to discover 'What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren.' (l. 905) He is given, as is traditional to romance, a year and a day to answer this riddle. If he fails, he will lose his head as the penalty for raping a maiden. The knight wanders in search of the answer, asking many women and receiving a variety of replies, none of which seem to be correct. Finally he stumbles upon a group of fairies who, upon vanishing, leave behind them an ugly old woman. This crone promises the knight a sure answer to his riddle. In return, he

must grant her the first thing she asks of him. The correct answer to what women most desire is declared to be sovereignty and mastery over husbands or lovers. As a result, the knight gets to keep his head but is commanded to marry the old woman, as she requests. The knight is horrified, but the old woman is adamant. On their wedding night, far from feeling any impulse to rape, the knight is extremely reluctant to get into bed. As a sweetener to this forced marriage and sexual relations, the old woman offers the knight a choice: she can remain old and ugly and so indubitably faithful or she can be young and beautiful with the attendant risk of adultery. The knight thinks long and hard, and eventually answers:

My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governance;
Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance
And moost honour to yow and me also. (ll. 1230–1233)

He has learned his lesson and chosen correctly. The knight has given his wife 'governance' in shaping their marriage and she in turn rewards him by transforming into a beautiful young woman who assures him she will remain faithful. Of course, they live happily ever after.

In case the reader has missed the underlying message, the Wife spells out the moral of her Prologue and Tale with her closing words:

... Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves (ll. 1258–1262)

Evidently this Wife has had her fill of old and overbearing husbands. Her Tale shows domination and sexual violence by men to be corrected to the benefit of all. Thus, in a misogynistic age, a male author has his female character voice some decidedly feminist sentiments. Here is a woman boldly declaring for the inversion of medieval gender roles in marriage. Is Chaucer presenting anything more a portrait of bad womanhood laying bare its wiles here? The warmth, liveliness, and, above all, the complexity of the Wife's characterisation perplex any definite judgement – as the magnitude of academic analysis demonstrates.

Scholarly Approaches

The Wife of Bath has attracted an enormous amount of scholarly attention. An overview published in 1996 estimated that a complete bibliography of Wife-critique would extend to over one thousand entries.⁵ Publication has certainly not ceased since. The quantity of academic analysis alone is testament to the richness of Chaucer's creation. A side-effect of this wealth of research, however, is to render a literature review in the current exegesis quite impractical, hence what follows is indicative of the diversity of scholarly interpretation rather than exhaustive.

Much of the scholarly critique on the Wife of Bath has focused on separating the many and tangled threads of her character as Chaucer presents it. This discussion is further complicated by the tripartite perspective offered by the *Canterbury Tales*: the General Prologue sketch of the Wife narrated by 'Chaucer', Alisoun's self-depiction in her Prologue, and the characterisation a reader may infer back on her via the Tale she tells of the questing knight. The reader is presented with three different modes of viewing the Wife, each of which suggests characterisations that complement, add to, and sometimes contradict the others.

Academic debate is further galvanised by the Wife's strident declarations against men and the 'wo that is in mariage' (Prologue, l. 3), particularly after the advent of second-wave feminism. Is the Dame to be seen as a medieval proto-feminist?⁶ If so, does Chaucer present her as a role model or as a cautionary tale? As Anne Laskaya demonstrates, this has been a major source of dispute among commentators on the Wife.⁷ Debate on the Dame, however, goes well beyond a see-saw between proto-feminism and misogyny;⁸ scholars also argue that, for example: the Wife reflects

⁵ P.G. Beidler, 'A Critical History of the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale', in P.G. Beidler (ed.), *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Wife of Bath, Complete Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Boston and New York, St Martin's Press, 1996, p. 90.

⁶ A term applied to her by Lee Patterson, in: *Putting the Wife in her Place: The William Matthews Lectures 1995*, London, Birkbeck College, 1995, p. 13.

⁷ *Chaucer's Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1995, pp. 176–178.

⁸ For those arguing that Chaucer displays feminist sympathies, see, for example: S.A. Amsel, 'Formation of medieval female subject consciousness: a study of Italian and English mystics, Christine

medieval stereotypes of the 'witch',⁹ is androgynous,¹⁰ murdered at least one of her husbands¹¹ or alternatively is falsely accused of murder,¹² displays Lollard affinities,¹³ that her character is determined (or not) by astrology,¹⁴ is an advocate of penance,¹⁵ or is even a female personification of Chaucer himself.¹⁶ Then there are arguments for a number of masculine identities, including: preacher,¹⁷ pedagogue,¹⁸ knight,¹⁹ lawyer,²⁰ and merchant.²¹ Such arguments are frequently persuasive, yet the complexity of the Wife's characterisation ensures that fresh interpretations can and continue to be formed. That few such arguments can be dismissed as unfounded only emphasises the rich and composite nature of Alisoun's

de Pizan, Boccaccio and Chaucer', PhD thesis, The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2011; A.S. Haskell, 'The portrayal of women by Chaucer and his age', in M. Springer (ed.), *What Manner Woman*, New York, Gotham Library, 1978, pp. 1–14; Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer*, p. 149; and T. Pugh, 'Queering Genres, Battering Males: The Wife of Bath's Narrative Violence', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2003, pp. 115–142. On the side of Chaucerian misogyny, see: H. Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996; E.T. Hansen, 'The Wife of Bath and the Mark of Adam', *Women's Studies*, vol. 15, 1988, pp. 399–416; and A. Walzem, 'Peynted by the Lion: The Wife of Bath as Feminist Pedagogue', in K.A. Bishop (ed), *The Canterbury Tales Revisited: 21st Century Interpretations*, Newcastle, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 44–59.

⁹ R.R. Basham, 'Marked for Sin: A Feminist Study of Chaucer's Wife of Bath', PhD thesis, Southeastern Louisiana University, 1995.

¹⁰ J.P. Rhodes, 'Female Stereotypes in Medieval Literature: Androgyny and the Wife of Bath', *Journal of Woman's Studies in Literature*, vol. 1, 1979, pp. 348–352.

¹¹ D. Palomo, 'The Fate of the Wife of Bath's "Bad Husbands"', *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1975, pp. 303–319.

¹² M. Hamel, 'The Wife of Bath and a Contemporary Murder', *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1979, pp. 132–139.

¹³ A. Blamires, 'The Wife of Bath and Lollardy', *Medium Aevum*, vol. 58, 1989, pp. 224–242.

¹⁴ W.C. Curry's astrological argument (*Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1926) is inverted by J.B. Friedman, in: 'Alice of Bath's Astral Destiny: A Re-appraisal', *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2000, pp. 166–181.

¹⁵ W. Kamowski, 'The Sinner Against the Scoundrels: The Ills of Doctrine and "Shrift" in the Wife of Bath's, Friar's and Summoner's Narratives', *Religion and Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1993, pp. 1–18.

¹⁶ P. Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1990, p. 217.

¹⁷ A. Minnis, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, pp. 170–245.

¹⁸ A. Walzem, 'Peynted by the Lion: The Wife of Bath as Feminist Pedagogue', in K.A. Bishop (ed.), *The Canterbury Tales Revisited: 21st Century Interpretations*, Newcastle, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 44–59.

¹⁹ McTaggart, 'What Women Want?', pp. 43, 49, and 56.

²⁰ S.S. Heinzelman, "'Termes queinte of law" and Quaint Fantasies of Literature: Chaucer's Man of Law and Wife of Bath', in S.S. Heinzelman (ed.), *Riding the Black Ram: Law, Literature and Gender*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2010, pp. 1–23.

²¹ R.A. Ladd, 'Selling Alys: Reading (with) the Wife of Bath', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, vol. 34, 2012, pp. 141–171.

character. As a result, and as some commentators have pointed out,²² attempts to clarify the Wife's character by confining her to a solitary interpretation are bound, if not completely to fail, to present only a single facet of a multi-faceted creation.

I propose that the Wife of Bath's complex characterisation may be elucidated by viewing her through Elizabeth Fowler's theory of 'social persons'. As an academic proposition, this follows in Fowler's own critical footsteps: her study of *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* contains a chapter-long analysis of the *Canterbury Tales*' Pardoner and shorter introductory analyses of the Knight and the Prioress. To examine the social persons of the Chaucerian Wife, all I need do is follow Fowler's examples. As I will argue, this is a valid approach and one I adopt – but it is only the first step in my creative research process. As this exegesis explains, a Fowlerian analysis of Chaucer's Wife provides the basis for my creative reinterpretation of Alisoun's character into historical fiction, a process that then turns Fowler's scholarly method to the purposes of character (re)creation and engages multiple social persons to mitigate the tendency of the modern genre to define medieval female characters in terms of sexual violence.

²² For example: A. Lindley, "'Vanysshed Was This Daunce, He Nyste Where": Alisoun's Absence in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale', *English Literary History*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1992, pp. 1–21; J.L. Martin, 'The Crossing of the Wife of Bath', in K.A. Bishop (ed.), *The Canterbury Tales Revisited: 21st Century Interpretations*, Newcastle, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, p. 61.

Part One: The Many Social Persons of the Wife

If they agree on nothing else regarding the Wife of Bath, scholars concur that, in Alisoun, Chaucer has created a distinctly complex and vibrant character. But how does Chaucer construct such a character, and how may she be recast in a contemporary work of historical fiction? This chapter argues that Elizabeth Fowler's theory of 'social persons' is not only a valuable tool for literary analysis of Chaucerian character, but that it may also facilitate the adaptation of a complex and allusive character from medieval literature into modern historical fiction. I begin by outlining Fowler's theory and methodology, then sketch out the huge range of potential social persons that contribute to the complexity of Chaucer's characterisation of the Wife. This is followed by an examination of the particular social persons I have used to structure my re-characterisation of Alisoun in the light of my larger fictional aims. *The Jerusalem Tales* explores what women most desire and shows Alisoun's character metamorphosing across marriages and other experiments in desire. The novel sends the Wife on her own romance-quest in order to answer the question Chaucer has her pose in her Tale. This chapter presents the social-person choices that shape my interpretation of her, choices founded upon *Canterbury Tales'* textual cues and moulded by my fictional aims. In each instance, I offer an argument for discerning this social person in Chaucer, and then indicate how it is adapted to *The Jerusalem Tales* and why.

But first, a disclaimer. A social-persons approach is founded on the human cognitive tendency to schematise character types and traits. This tendency is assumed to be universal to all readers, but *the results* of that tendency are not. Thus the specifics of the social-persons identified and analysed in this chapter reflect my own cognitive perceptions; the larger process and principles, however, are applicable not only to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, but to character in fiction more generally. That is, Part One demonstrates a method by which literary analysis can provide the foundation for the creative reinterpretation of character, one that presents a reader

with a rich array of social-person clues which in turn trigger the perception of a multi-faceted character.

Social Persons: The Theory

Elizabeth Fowler's central assertion in *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* is that, in the process of making sense of a literary character, readers 'integrate the scrap-like details of characterization'²³ scattered throughout a written text into 'sets of personae'²⁴ – or, as Fowler defines them, *social persons*. Such social persons are the products of literary and social convention and, as such, 'are better regarded as the cumulative and changing sets of resemblances rather than as susceptible to definition by a list of features.'²⁵ Fowler demonstrates her approach upon late-medieval and early-modern poems such as *Piers Ploughman*, the *Faerie Queen*, and the figures of the Knight, Prioress, and Pardoner from the *Canterbury Tales*. This latter application of social person methodology to Chaucerian character provides a clear, even obvious, working model for an analysis of Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

Fowler defines social persons as 'familiar concepts of social being that attain currency through common use.'²⁶ That is, social persons are conventional models, even stereotypes, of character. Yet, unlike earlier formalist categorisers of character types, Fowler contends that *many* such social persons can attach to one character, sometimes by means of a mere word or phrase. Fowler's theory is one of multiple personae evoked in a reader's subconscious to haunt a nominally singular textual character. Further, echoing reader-response theory²⁷ and recent cognitive literary criticism,²⁸ the nature of the social persons conjured depends to a great extent

²³ E. Fowler, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 4.

²⁴ Fowler, p. 2.

²⁵ Fowler, pp. 1–2.

²⁶ Fowler, p. 2.

²⁷ S.E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1980.

²⁸ See, in particular: J. Culpeper, 'Reflections on a Cognitive Stylistic Approach to Characterisation', in G. Brône and J. Vandaele (eds), *Cognitive Poetics: Goals, Gains, and Gaps*, Berlin and New York,

upon existing conceptions of individual readers and their interpretive communities. Although Fowler does not elaborate on this aspect, her theory is clearly based upon reader cognition and the mental processing of linguistic cues. This is intimated in such of Fowler's assertions as:

When the human figure appears in words – in the tiniest evocative detail or the most generalized type – it offers the reader ... a foothold The task of interpreting the figure requires each reader to align herself or himself, cognitively and affectively, with the world that is conjured by words.²⁹

What this cognitive and affective alignment means, as Fowler goes on to illustrate, is that the merest hint of a social person in a text has the power to summon an existing notion of character type with all its attendant associations into a reader's mind. This pre-established model of personhood is then applied, subconsciously, by the reader to 'flesh out' the character with whom it is now associated. The degree to which this social personhood is understood to apply to the character in question may range from the nebulous (perhaps based on one or two textual cues) to the strongly linked (if reinforced by repeated or particularly pertinent textual cues). Nevertheless, a reader's repertoire of associations is necessarily founded upon their own cultural milieu and prior experiences. In recognition of this cultural-historical specificity, Fowler's own analyses are strongly historicist and focus upon probable late-medieval interpretations of the texts examined rather than those of modern readers. My own approach, although founded firmly upon Chaucer's text and context, affirms that historical fiction interprets the past through present preoccupations and is not exclusively historicist.

Fowler frequently draws an analogy between social persons and ghosts, a correspondence she uses primarily to indicate the ability of multiple social persons to haunt a single character. As she puts it, the various textual evocations of a

Walter de Gruyter, 2009, pp. 125–160; J. Eder, F. Jannidis, and R. Schneider, 'Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction', in J. Eder, F. Jannidis and R. Schneider (ed's), *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2011, p. 14; R. Schneider, 'Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction', *Style*, 2001, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 607–640; and L. Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2006.

²⁹ Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 32.

character have the ability to call up ‘a crowd of ghosts’,³⁰ that is – the ‘ghosts’ of *many* social persons may attach to a single literary figure. It might be speculated, in respect of E.M. Forster’s famous distinction between ‘round’ and ‘flat’ characters,³¹ that relatively flat figures evoke only a single or perhaps a small range of social persons, while constructions of more complex and ‘round’ characters prompt a larger spectrum. But this may be an overly simple proposition. For instance, when Fowler analyses the composition of Chaucer’s Pardoner, she focuses upon two central social persons. The first is the Pardoner-figure, facilitator of a shortened stint in Purgatory, and the second is that of a vice figure who leads others into sin.³² Although the Pardoner is shown to be associated with quite a number of additional types, Fowler asserts that this two-part split is the core of the Pardoner’s characterisation.³³ In Fowler’s description, the roles of ‘pardoner’ and ‘vice figure’ are so at odds with each other – in late-medieval society at large, and as embodied in Chaucer’s portrayal – that these two social persons alone would be quite enough in themselves to create a significantly complex and rounded character. This suggests that the degree of discordance between identities brought together in the same character can be more instrumental in evoking complexity than mere quantity of social persons. A character who displays conflicted dominant social persons is likely to be experienced by the reader as interestingly complex; however, such discordance is perceived only insofar as a reader’s pre-existing understandings permit. As Fowler’s detailed discussion of medieval canon law indicates, a medieval theologian would have picked up the greatest discordance in the Pardoner’s portrait, while a modern reader lacking this background receives a much vaguer impression of this particular conflict of social persons. That is, multiple identities may haunt a single literary character, but they will do so to varying degrees and the reading of their identities will vary between readers.

³⁰ Fowler, p. 3.

³¹ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK, Penguin, 1962, p. 75.

³² Here I have paraphrased and considerably simplified Fowler’s lengthy argument. In her words, ‘The Pardoner’s character embodies a conflict between the two primary jurisdictions of the canon law: the internal and the external fora. Thus, in Chaucer’s representation of the social person of the pardoner, we see a monstrous production of the divided structure of the canon law itself.’ (*Literary Character*, p. 54)

³³ Fowler, pp. 67–69.

As the example of the Pardoner indicates, while a text may associate numerous social persons with a single character, not all will exercise equal potency. Some social persons will exert a strong influence over a reader's interpretation while others have only a tenuous and distant association. A reader may interpret any one social person as of particular importance because, for example, the attributes supportive of that preconceived personhood are numerous, or because they are reinforced at regular intervals throughout the text, or are echoed through different points of view. Conversely, perhaps only a few character-cues point to this persona but are of such potency, or align so well with a particular stereotype, that a reader is inclined to give the social person evoked significant characterising weight. The relative weight will of course vary with the individual reader, just as will understandings or identifications of social persons themselves.

Fowler's approach has been largely overlooked by critics concerned with the analysis of literary character.³⁴ This oversight may well be due to Fowler's focus upon pre-modern literature, the critique of which occupies an isolated niche in literary studies. In fact, the very alterity of medieval literature has made one of the few critics to comment upon Fowler's theory, John Frow, judge a social-persons approach to have limited applicability to modern literature. He asserts that:

Fowler's analysis works particularly well for a feudal order with its structural restriction of the range of possible social roles. Yet in practice, and especially in the more fluid societies of modernity, the concept of social person has little predictive power because it is never a limited class: rather, there are as many social persons as there are roles for people to assume, and roles exist at many levels of generality.³⁵

Frow implies that Fowler's theory is both too historically situated and too broad in its potential application to be of any use in analysing the literary products of modernity. However, the period and place which Fowler's analysis covers – late-medieval to early-modern England – was one in which feudal order was noticeably

³⁴ Two exceptions are: J. Frow, *Character and Person*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 116–118; and J. Murphet, 'The Mole and the Multiple: A Chiasmus of Character', *New Literary History*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 259–260.

³⁵ Frow, *Character and Person*, p. 118.

breaking down and social roles were becoming 'more fluid'.³⁶ In fact, the very power of the characterisations Fowler illustrates in her case studies generally results from this state of flux in social roles. Estates literature, a medieval genre on which the General Prologue is modelled, focused upon the notionally-fixed classes of society and flowered *in reaction to* an evident fraying of class boundaries.³⁷ Literary characters arising from a medieval social context can also reflect multiple social identities – as in the case of the Wife of Bath. In fact, Fowler's theory is as useful an analytical lens for modern literature as for medieval and early-modern, for real people *and* literary characters continue to be interpreted in terms of their apparent social types today, however multiplicitous or blurred those roles may be. Indeed, a social-persons approach can be utilised not only for the scholarly analysis of literary character more generally, but also for the creation of character in modern fiction.

My analysis of the Wife of Bath – and the creative re-interpretation that springs from it – is thus based upon Fowler's theory of social persons. While firmly founded on Fowler, my understanding and application of social persons is also informed by insights from cognitive narratology which accord with Fowler's ideas. Primary among these is that readers comprehend narrative character by subconsciously linking textual clues to categories of personhood – social persons – already established in their understandings.³⁸ Given that readers approach textual character through many of the same mechanisms as they do real people,³⁹ these categories may originate in life experience.⁴⁰ Concepts of social personhood are also acquired

³⁶ Helen Cooper summarises the situation well, in: *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 6.

³⁷ S. H. Rigby and A. J. Minnis, 'Preface', in S. H. Rigby with A. J. Minnis (ed's), *Historians on Chaucer: The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 5.

³⁸ E. Auyoung, 'Partial Cues and Narrative Understanding in *Anna Karenina*', in L. Bernaerts, et al. (ed's), *Stories and Minds: Cognitive Approaches to Literary Narrative*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2013, pp. 60–63; and Schneider, 'Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character', pp. 607–640.

³⁹ D. Gorman, 'Character and Characterization', in D. Herman, B. McHale, and J. Phelan (eds), *Teaching Narrative Theory*, New York, The Modern Language Association of America, 2010, pp. 169–170; and S. Keen, 'Readers' Temperaments and Fictional Character', *New Literary History*, vol. 42, 2011, pp. 299 and 309.

⁴⁰ M. Grishakova, 'Beyond the Frame: Cognitive Science, Common Sense and Fiction', *Narrative*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2009, pp. 189–189.

through the absorption and modification of cultural norms, for example through portrayals of character types in texts.⁴¹ These processes of categorisation frequently occur at a subconscious or even nonconscious level;⁴² that is, readers rarely stop and consciously assemble textual cues into character categories. Further, there is the ever-present potential for social person modification or even negation in the light of fresh textual information.⁴³ Fowler's primary innovation and contribution to existing concepts of cognitive character, however, is multiplicity: not only may many social persons haunt a singular character, but different social persons will exert disparate degrees of influence upon the overall character. Person-categories will vary in weight of characterising power in a reader's mind. Identities also interact with and affect each other. Such considerations not only expand upon cognitive approaches to character, but also offer a writer enormous scope for the creation of complex characters.

A Wifely Multitude

It is time to turn Fowler's theory to the practice she designed it for – the identification and analysis of social persons in a medieval literary text. Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath is fertile ground for the cognitive seeding of personae, and Fowler shows that many social persons may haunt a single literary figure. The following section offers an indication of the multitude of social persons seeded about the Wife of Bath through Chaucer's depiction of her. But first, a brief explanation of terms is in order: I employ 'personae', 'character types', and 'types' as straightforward synonyms for Fowler's 'social persons'. 'Stereotype', however, I

⁴¹ J. Culpeper, 'A Cognitive Approach to Characterization: Katherina in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*', *Language and Literature*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2000, pp. 294–295.

⁴² N.C. Hayles, 'Cognition Everywhere: The Rise of the Cognitive Nonconscious and the Costs of Consciousness', *New Literary History*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2014, pp. 201–202; and A. Kuzmičová, 'Literary Narrative and Mental Imagery: A View from Embodied Cognition', *Style*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2014, pp. 278–279.

⁴³ S. Abbas and R. Rahman, 'Schema Disruption and Identity in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland*', *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2013, pp. 3–4; Grishakova, 'Beyond the Frame', pp. 190–191; and Schneider, 'Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character', pp. 607–640.

used to refer to a sub-variety of social person - one particularly widely-conceived of and in oversimplified form within a society.

Fowler offers a dense list of textual clues that may prompt a reader to connect a particular social person to a literary character. They include:

bodily posture and gesture, topos, title, nomination, attribution, built space, mapped space, landscape, allusion, ritual, ceremony, specialized lexis, genre, ethos, ideology, iconology, social relations and bonds, ideals and rules, narratorial attitude and tone, metaphor and other tropes, simile and other figures of speech, habitus, representation of the passions, allusions to social institutions and historical events, and literary conventions of characterization[.]⁴⁴

Amongst these textual clues is allusion, either of the straightforward literary variety, or 'allusions to social institutions and historical events'. The Wife's Prologue and Tale are replete with allusions to pre-existing characters of classical, biblical, folkloric or scholarly origins. These named, or at least identifiable, figures are among the most visible of the social persons informing Alisoun's character.

The Wife's Prologue is particularly rich in literary allusions, many of which derive from classical literature. These include: Metellius, who beat his wife to death for drinking (ll. 460–662); Sulpicius Gallus and his wife (ll. 642–646); Hercules and Dianaera (ll. 725–726); Socrates and Xanthippe (ll. 727–732); Pasiphae, queen of Crete (ll. 733–736); Clytemnestra (ll. 737–738); Amphiaraus and Eriphyle (ll. 740–746); Livia (ll. 747–751); Lucia (ll. 747–755); and Venus (ll. 464, 604, 609–620, and 679–708). Most of these are cast in the mode of 'wikked wyves' (l. 685) (and their suffering husbands) and presented as directly analogous to Alisoun by her bookish fifth husband, Jankyn. Yet such storied allusions are not so neatly confined to a single signification as Jankyn might wish – as Chaucer was likely well aware.

Allusions are by their very nature complex and rich. As Christine Havice notes in relation to medieval art, allusion to classical figures was performed 'partly out of deference to classical antiquity, partly because they were effective in representing complex abstractions, and partly because they were already available to express

⁴⁴ Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 16.

ideas that remained relevant.⁴⁵ One proper noun can conjure a wealth of associated traits, narratives, and a continuing tradition of interpretation. Thus, in referencing husband-murdering Clytemnestra, Jankyn cannot but conjure the circumstances that led to this wife's actions – prime amongst them the sacrifice of her daughter – which might be seen as more than vindicating her revenge. The name 'Clytemnestra' inevitably bears with it connotations of the terrible abuse of women, triggering a justified retaliation by a strong and oddly-admirable queen. So the colours of an entire story flock about the Wife by means of a single allusion, evoking sympathy, suggesting mitigating circumstances and traits of nobility, and always tinged by that final, murderous revenge. A ghost, once summoned, is not easily contained. The associations they conjure cannot be circumscribed.

The Wife's Prologue also draws to a noticeable extent upon a second ancient literary tradition much resorted to in the Middle Ages: that of the Bible. Alisoun is associated with the biblical characters of: Samson and Delilah (ll. 721–723); the five-times wed Samaritan woman who recognised Jesus as a prophet (l. 16); the much-married King Solomon (l. 34), who 'had seven hundred wives as queens and three hundred concubines' (3 Kings, 11:3);⁴⁶ Lamech, the first man in the Bible to have two wives (l. 54); Abraham, who engaged in extra-marital sex and was twice-married (l. 55); Jacob, another biblically-sanctioned bigamist (l. 56); Christ (ll. 139 and 1181); and the instigator of the first sin, Eve (ll. 715–720). As might be surmised, the Wife references Solomon, Abraham, Lamech, and Jacob primarily as justification for her own multiple marriages. Simmering beneath the surface of these allusions, however, is a deeper questioning of institutions of marriage and notions of fidelity. Abraham and Jacob, towering Old Testament figures, engaged in what in the fourteenth century would be considered very unorthodox sexual and marital arrangements – yet how could these patriarchs of Christianity be anything but orthodox? One implication such allusions carry in the Wife's usage of them is that Alisoun can justify and engage in not only multiple marriage, but also bigamy

⁴⁵ 'Approaching Medieval Women through Medieval Art', in L.E. Mitchell (ed.), *Women in Western European Culture*, New York and London, Garland, 1999, p. 353.

⁴⁶ S. Edgar (ed.), *The Vulgate Bible: The Historical Books*, vol. II, part A, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 715.

and adultery. They also endow Alisoun with a distinct masculinity and aura of authority – which latter is, of course, part of her purpose in her opening claim to ‘auctoritee’ via experience (l. 1). Indeed, the Wife’s Prologue is peopled with a horde of persons referred to by their proper names, each of which has, in the nature of allusions, the power to conjure up associated – and often unruly – characteristics and stories of their own.

Of course, allusion to a pre-existing figure does not necessarily equate to a perceived inclusion as an aspect of overall character. The Wife’s Tale is not so richly allusive as her Prologue, yet it still provides the reader with a recognisable range of pre-existing persons. Some of these offer potential social persons applicable to the Wife, such as the loathly-lady heroine, the fairies, King Midas’s gossiping wife (ll. 951–978), and even the wandering knight and dishonourable limiter-friars (l. 866). (Regarding the latter, readers may recall that Alisoun is described in the General Prologue as a wandering woman who had ‘passed many a straunge strem’ (l. 464) under cover of piety.) Alluded-to figures who are unlikely to join Alisoun’s character constellation in any direct manner, however, include: King Arthur (l. 857), Dante (l. 1125), Juvenal (l. 1192), and Tullius Hostillius – a peasant who rose to become an ancient Roman king (l. 1166). The Wife’s mention of such figures characterises her in a manner more indirect than allusion: they strengthen the image of Alisoun as a learned clerk wielding the authority of deep textual knowledge that was first conjured by the Wife early in her Prologue.⁴⁷ Alisoun adopts this persona in order to counter the authority of misogynist clerks on their own ground, yet the masculine, bookish and frequently monkly social person thus conjured is at odds with the Wife’s opening assertion that her lived experience as a much-married woman provides all the authority she requires. The Wife’s liberal resort to scholarly reference evokes and strengthens a social person connection that she initially declared herself diametrically opposed to. Critics have noted this contradiction in Wifely allegiance and conclude that Alisoun’s adoption of male rhetoric and modes

⁴⁷ As Martin aptly puts it, ‘The Wife crossdresses as a clerk via her use of male discourse and her use of male texts’. In: ‘The *Crossing* of the Wife’, p. 61.

of authority actually undermines her proto-feminism – that is, that Chaucer undercuts whatever pro-feminist argument he voices through the Wife.⁴⁸ As Fowler argues in regard to the Pardoner, however, such unresolved tension and contradiction between two coexisting social persons produces a felt density and complexity to that character. It provokes reader interpretation and reflection. Chaucer has the Wife don two social persons that she herself declares to be mutually antagonistic. She is *both* learned clerk and experienced wife. Such tensions between personae have certainly proven fruitful for academic discussion. Whether or not Chaucer makes a stand for feminism through his portrayal of the Wife is undoubtedly the question most frequently rehearsed in critiques of Dame Alys.⁴⁹

To take a Fowlerian stance, one may view the Wife of Bath's numerous allusions as many potential social persons – a veritable horde of ghosts. These allusions may inflect her character directly, or evoke other social persons by association. The shades of these named and storied characters from venerable texts are explicitly called up by the Wife in her narration. Once called, they linger about her, attaching their evoked identities and traits, however tenuously, to her. But what is a reader to make of such a bombardment of possibilities? The accumulated weight of so many potential persons is overwhelming. Cognitive psychology would suggest that the human brain *cannot* take all potentialities into account. Short-term memory has a limited capacity – incoming information must link to an existing mental model or in some other way pass into long-term memory, or, in its inevitable falling out of short-term memory, a reader's brain effectively dismisses it.⁵⁰ In part, I suggest that such proliferation of associated social persons acts to generate an impression of

⁴⁸ E.T. Hansen, 'The Wife of Bath and the Mark of Adam', *Women's Studies*, vol. 15, 1988, pp. 401–403; Heinzelman, 'Termes queinte of law', p. 21; and R. Mazo Karras, 'The Wife of Bath', in S.H. Rigby with A.J. Minnis (ed's), *Historians on Chaucer: The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 320.

⁴⁹ A view that finds support in: R.A. Baumgardner, 'I Alisoun, I Wife: Foucault's Three Egos and the Wife of Bath's Prologue', *Medieval Forum*, vol. 5, 2006, <http://www.sfsu.edu/~medieval/Volume5/Baumgardner.html> (accessed 25 September 2017); R. Knoetze, 'The Wife of Bath's Ideal Marriage and Late Medieval Ideas about the Domestic Sphere', *Scrutiny2*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2015, pp. 35–39; Martin, 'The Crossing of the Wife of Bath', p. 60; S.H. Rigby, 'The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women', *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2000, pp. 133–134.

⁵⁰ M. Burke, *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: An Exploration of the Oceanic Mind*, New York and London, Routledge, 2011, p. 13.

complexity, of the ambiguity and range of interpretation that scholars frequently identify with the Wife. Just as Alisoun herself seeks to drown audience objections to her arguments under a deluge of clerical glossing, so a reader subconsciously seeking character handholds is offered an over-abundance. The result is ambiguity and bewildering potential. The reader may simply conclude that this crowd of ghosts forms a smoke screen obstructing any definable figure lurking within. Alternatively, it might be seen that each allusion acts like a mask, fleetingly raised and as quickly discarded for the next. The face behind the mask is hidden. One implication medieval male readers may well have drawn from this effect is that women are unknowable. As the sole secular female pilgrim in what is, at least on one level, an estates satire, the Wife is certainly cast as representative of her kind. As quickly as her allusive mask changes, so Alisoun's character allegiance changes. One conclusion available from this is that women are fickle and changeable.

There is an alternative to simple bewilderment in the face of over-abundance – although I would argue that it is the rare reader who does not feel some perplexity. Firstly, it is a human reaction to multiplicity to reduce it to more manageable units by means of categorisation.⁵¹ For example, a reader who does not feel a need to differentiate between subtleties in type might lump together 'elf', 'fairies', 'elf queen' and even 'incubus' in the Wife's Tale under a single category of supernatural or magical beings. To do so would be to reduce textual richness and likely brush over any sense of connection between the shape-changing heroine of the Tale and her specific supernatural connotations; however, a reader, later alerted to an importance previously overlooked may re-read and, in the process, rethink the initial categorisation. It can be seen that I, in my above listing of allusion-types, have also performed a rough categorisation in order to manage multiplicity. A reader too may simply lump together allusions to Samson and Delilah, Lamech, and Solomon under pious biblical reference, unless they have cogent reason to do otherwise.

⁵¹ B. Aarts, 'Conceptions of Categorization in the History of Linguistics', *Language Sciences*, vol. 28, 2006, p. 361.

Literary-historical allusions are merely among the most obvious of social-person cues that haunt the Wife of Bath. The thirty-one lines introducing the Wife in the General Prologue, for example, are suggestive of the following social persons: wife (ll. 445 and 449); cloth-maker (ll. 447–448); pious attender of religious ceremonies (ll. 449–450 and 463–466); wearer of showy, fine-quality clothing (ll. 453–457); person with a bold, red-hued face (prompting consideration of what this redness implies – heavy drinking, a volatile temper, a sanguine humour⁵²) (ll. 456 and 458); an amorous, even lecherous woman (ll. 460–462 and 475–476); a traveller or wanderer (ll. 462–467 and 469–473); pilgrim – not only by virtue of being in the *Canterbury Tales* but also through mention of other pilgrimages made (ll. 463–466); a buckler- and spur-wielding knight of distinctly combative nature (ll. 469, 471, and 473); a gossip; a merrymaker (ll. 461 and 474–476); and even a bawd or a whore.⁵³

The Wife’s Prologue reinforces some of the identities suggested in the General Prologue, and then proceeds to bombard the reader with a wealth of further possibilities. As a first step to analysing the Wife of Bath, I sifted her Prologue for potential clues to character. What emerged was a wealth of textual hints, any of which might trigger a social-person association in a reader’s mind. Some of these clues seem to cluster together, so strengthening a social person in common. Others trigger fleeting schemata of less obvious application, at least in my mind. I offer the information I collected below, in part because it was an important first step in my analysis of Chaucer’s Wife, but also because many of these personae, even some of the most ephemeral, found their way into *The Jerusalem Tales*.

Female Social Persons

Social Person	Wife’s Prologue Lines	Notes
adulteress	ll. 303–307	
wife to an adulterous husband	ll. 239–242, 454, and 481–482	

⁵² Mazo Karras, ‘The Wife of Bath’, p. 325.

⁵³ As suggested in various ways by: R. Delasanta, ‘Alisoun and the Saved Harlots: A Cozening of our Expectations’, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 12, 1978, pp. 221–222; T.J. Garbarty, ‘Chaucer’s weaving wife’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 18, no. 322, 1968, pp. 342–343; and H.P. Weissman, ‘Why Chaucer’s Wife is from Bath’, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1980, pp. 11–36.

beautiful woman	ll. 473, 475, 606, and 784–785	
flirt	ll. 565–568	
lecherous woman	ll. 596–605, 609–611, 615, 622–626, and 737	
old woman	ll. 469–470 and 474–478	Echoed in the Loathly Lady of the Tale. On a larger scale, critics argue that the Wife bears strong resemblance to the old woman figure, La Vieille, of <i>The Roman de la Rose</i> . ⁵⁴
a wise woman	ll. 209, 225, 229, 231, and 524	Again, echoing the Tale’s Loathly Lady.
alewife	ll. 170–177	Brewing and selling ale was a typical later-medieval role for women, and so associated with specific traits.
a woman of property	ll. 204, 212, 214, 308–315, 814, and 821	
victim of misogyny	ll. 243 onwards, 632–672, 688–696, 706–710, and 772–785	
wandering woman	ll. 544–558, 564, and 639–658	This schema links into that of Wife-as-knight, at least as he appears in the Tale. Both are ‘errant’ – wandering in search of what women desire, and errant in their behaviour.
female conspirator against men	ll. 233, 382, 400–402, 529–540, and 576–584	
shrew	ll. 235 onwards, 365–379, 390, 405–425, 483–489, and 505	
a virgin		Virginity is the focus of much of Alisoun’s early Prologue diatribe, and attaches to her by negative assertion. We understand her by what she is

⁵⁴ Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer*, p. 143.

		not, but also what she must once have been.
an unchaste woman	ll. 339, and 611	
an abused wife	ll. 506–507, 511, 514, 632–636, 772–785, and 794–796	
gossip	ll. 529–540, 544, 547, and 638	
leman	l. 722	Unmarried mistress, associated with the Wife through Jankyn’s likening her to Delilah.
a woman of experience	asserted on l. 1 and continues throughout the Prologue	
child bride i.e. victim of sexual abuse	l. 4	Twelve was the lowest legal age for female marriage from a medieval perspective, but to a modern reader this looks like the sexual abuse of a child.
wife of a much younger man i.e. a sexual abuser	ll. 600–602	Jankyn, the Wife’s fifth husband, is twenty years her junior when she marries him at forty, but they appear to meet many years before her marriage.
wife of worthy men	l. 8	Implication of marriage for class status, or at least that the Wife was of a respectable social standing by virtue of her husbands.
much-married wife	ll. 4–8, and 567–574	
husband-murder	ll. 45–48, 277, 307, 365, 738, 747–748, and 765–771	The Wife threatens her husbands (ll. 277 and 365), ⁵⁵ and openly refers to their deaths (ll. 45–48 and 307). Jankyn associates Alisoun with husband-murderers Clytemnestra (l. 738), Livia and Lucia (ll. 747–748), and some

⁵⁵ D.J. Wurtele asserts these utterances reinforce an impression of the Wife as husband-murderer. In: ‘Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and the Problem of the Fifth Husband’, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1988, p. 126.

		unnamed contemporary examples (ll. 765–771).
murdered by her husband	ll. 578 and 794–810	

Religious Social Persons

biblical exegete and scholar	much of the early Prologue, and: ll. 365–381, 688–696 and 706–710	The Wife musters biblically-evidenced argument against the misogyny of learned theologians, adopting their masculine-tagged, scholarly mode.
an embodiment of purgatory	l. 489	
preacher	ll. 165 and 693–696	
one who listens to preaching	366, 369, 436–437, 557, 641, 682–696 and 713	
pilgrim/attender of religious events	ll. 495, 555–558, and 655–659	
a pious person	ll. 826–828	
obedient servant of God	ll. 149–150	

Other Social and Legal Persons

scholar	ll. 180–183, and 324–327	
able and persuasive speaker – one who wields textual knowledge, analogy, philosophical argument, and simple verbosity.	ll. 180–183, 192, 324–330, and 358	This role ties in Alisoun-as-exegete or scholar, but also with the roles of gossip and shrew, with the result that the reader does not know whether to condemn or admire the Wife’s verbal facility.
drinker, even a drunkard	ll. 170–177, 194, 246, 381, 459, 462–464, and 467	

merrymaker	ll. 455–459, 470, 479, 545, and 700	
bigamist	ll. 33, 86, and 96	
teacher	l. 187	
a person exerting legal power ⁵⁶	ll. 151–159, 219, 233, and 424	
slave-owner	ll. 151–159, 202, 215, and 223	The Wife describing herself as a ‘whippe’ (l. 175) only reinforces this notion of slavery.
creditor or beneficiary in an economical agreement (primarily in marriage)	ll. 130–131, 308–315, 409–416, 522, 814, and 821	
liar and false oath-giver	ll. 228, 233, 379–385, 397, 400–402, 575–584, and 796–815	
one who swears often and vociferously, frequently calling other people names	ll. 312, 331, 357, 365, 423, 431, 446, 476, and 469	Scholars note that the Wife swears with unusual frequency. ⁵⁷ This identity ties in with the more legally-inflected false swearer and with the gossip.

Animal Social Persons

cat	ll. 348–354	
lioness	ll. 637 and 776	
dragon	l. 776	
horse	ll. 285, 386, 602, and 813	l. 386 likens the Wife to an ill-tempered horse, l. 602 to a lusty colt, and l. 813 speaks of her wearing a bridle. Marilyn Desmond links these references to the ‘mounted Aristotle’ trope of the bridled man popular in medieval representation. ⁵⁸

⁵⁶ A subject on which R.M. Houser argues persuasively. In: ‘Alisoun Takes Exception: Medieval Legal Pleading and the Wife of Bath’, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2014, pp. 66–90.

⁵⁷ T.L. Burton, ‘The Wife of Bath’s Fourth and Fifth Husbands and her Ideal Sixth: The Growth of a Marital Philosophy’, *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1978, p. 41; and E. Treharne, ‘The Stereotype Confirmed? Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’, *Essays and Studies*, vol. 55, 2002, p. 109.

⁵⁸ *Ovid’s Art and the Wife of Bath: The Ethics of Erotic Violence*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 13–27.

dog	ll. 267 and 285	
pig/sow	l. 785	
bird	ll. 269, 415, 456, and 458	Respectively: a grey goose, a hawk, a magpie, and a nightingale. Each bird carries with it a quite different set of associations.

Object Social Persons

Item	Wife's Prologue Lines
barley-bread	ll. 144–145
flour or bran	ll. 389 and 477–478
rose	l. 448
various household implements	ll. 101, and 287–289
wild fire	l. 373
barren land	l. 372
vagina	ll. 332, 444, 447, 608, and 618
whip	ll. 175

Traits Suggestive of Social Persons

Trait	Wife's Prologue Lines
physically violent (or, at least, suggested so)	ll. 723 (blinding), 716 (burning), 729 (pissed upon), 751, 754–755 and 771 (poison), 769 (nails in the brain), 792–793, and 808 (hits Jankyn)
young (at heart)	ll. 602 and 606
stubborn and contrary	ll. 637–640, 659–663, 698, and 780
astrologically determined	ll. 604, 609–619, and 697–704
theatrical/ puts on an act	ll. 587–592, and 796–815
speaker for all women	ll. 515–524, and 688–710
cause of shame to her husband	ll. 534–542, and 782–783
rich	ll. 606 and 630–631
teller/ holder of secrets	ll. 531–542
treasonous	ll. 723, and 740–745

vain and desirous of praise and fuss	ll. 255–261, and 293–298
adopter of useful character schemata	ll. 587–592
dresses richly	ll. 235–238, 337–355, and 559–62
mad	l. 664
desirous of freedom of action	ll. 309–322, 550–554, 637–640, and 659–663
admittedly imperfect or guilty of sin	ll. 98, 112, 384, 390–394, 611, and 662
rambling speaker ⁵⁹	ll. 585–586, and 673–680
canny/ will not be bested	ll. 311, 361, 404–412, 426, 567–574, 566, 570, and 796–815
complainer	ll. 387, 390 and 443
jealous	ll. 481–482 and 487–488
emotionally manipulative	ll. 201–211, 234 onwards, 379–385, 396, 401–426, and 796–821

The above lists result only from the Wife’s Prologue; further social persons are added by her Tale (if only by inference, for the Wife does not directly define herself in the Tale). As in the case of the literary allusions, it is near impossible for a single reader to take cognitive account of the swarm of character clues that buzz about Alisoun of Bath. Many will be passed over, unnoticed, some may be registered only to be dismissed, a number will be conflated together into categories, and others may emerge only on careful re-reading. Different readers will also identify different social persons, depending on pre-existing understandings.

⁵⁹ Lee Patterson points out that ‘Most commentaries on the Prologue and Tale assume that the Wife has no rhetorical strategy at all: her garrulous ramblings are taken as a process of continual, unmotivated self-disclosure’. Patterson argues that there is method behind the Wife’s evident ramblings. In: ‘Feminine Rhetoric and the Politics of Subjectivity: La Vieille and the Wife of Bath’, in K. Brownlee and S. Huot (ed’s), *Rethinking the Romance of the Rose: Text, Image, Reception*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, p. 319.

Given the impossibility of addressing all the character evocations indicated above, it seems unavoidable that the number of social persons I analyse in any detail be quite limited. The question immediately arises – what is the use of identifying multiple personae if the critic has little choice but to limit focus to just one or two constituent identities? Are we not then inevitably forced back to a traditional single-interpretation focus? Fowler offers a potential solution in her examination of Chaucer's Pardoner: she concentrates her attention upon two central social persons that rub up in ideological conflict against each other, creating a core tension in the Pardoner's portrayal. My solution to discussing the identities of the Wife both borrows and diverges from this. I begin by focusing upon the most obvious of all social persons evoked in association with the Wife of Bath: that of 'wife'. Yet what is at first sight a single social identity is in fact multiple. Further, each wife-associated social person in its turn evokes other such persons, all of which complicate the Wife's central identity as 'wife'. A persona cannot be viewed in isolation from its neighbours. Social persons inform and inflect other social persons.

The Wife as 'Wife'

The most obvious of Alisoun's social identities is that announced by her Chaucerian title: the Wife of Bath is evidently a 'wife'. To underline this point, Chaucer has rendered Alisoun a serial wife – she has wedded five husbands and may well be looking for a sixth (General Prologue, ll. 44–46). *The Jerusalem Tales* is structured in part around Alisoun telling tales to her pilgrim-companions of how she came to wed and lose each of her preceding husbands. 'Wife' is a core aspect of my Alisoun's evolving identity, and each of her marriages sees her try on new wife personae. These multiple facets are grounded in *Canterbury Tales* social persons, for the designation of 'wife' is recipient of a range of inflections within a late medieval context. In Chaucer's usage, the word 'wife' evokes not one but many social persons in itself.

To begin with a sweeping but necessary generalisation, as a fourteenth-century type, a married woman was typically portrayed as tending towards one of two poles – the ideal, and the bad wife. The ideal fourteenth-century wife was 'passive,

submissive and fundamentally silent'.⁶⁰ She bore her husband children, yet subdued her sexual desire and always acted in a chaste manner. She obeyed her husband as a subject does their king, she comforted her husband and softened his harshness,⁶¹ she was thrifty and supported her spouse in business matters in a secondary role, and she was charitable and pious. One could continue to elaborate upon her virtues, but to turn the light upon the stereotype of the bad wife instead is to illuminate the ideal like a photographic negative. The bad wife was anything but silent – she nagged her husband and gossiped indiscreetly.⁶² Rather than being submissive, she attempted to dominate her husband – to which, naturally, her nagging tongue contributed. Her sexual desire was so uncontainable that she was inclined towards adultery. The bad wife spent her husband's money on worldly vanities, and she provoked rather than pacified his ire. Her seemingly pious actions – attending religious plays, processions, and pilgrimages – actually cloaked her wanderings abroad, abandoning her home duties and care of her husband, and likely wandering from the straight-and-narrow in a sexual sense as well.⁶³ Many of these bad-wife traits can be identified in my lists of social persons,⁶⁴ and bad wifehood is certainly evoked by the tales of 'wikked wyves' Jankyn reads Alisoun (l. 685).

This dichotomised schema of good wife – bad wife is particularly pertinent to understanding the Wife of Bath. Chaucer begins his General Prologue description of Alisoun with: 'A good wif was ther of biside Bathe' (l. 445). The question immediately arises: in what way are we to understand that she is 'good'? In case we assume that this is a meaningless honorific – 'good wife' was later to become a straightforward term of address⁶⁵ – Chaucer reasserts the sentiment in a variant manner, telling the reader that, 'She was a worthy womman al hir lyve' (l. 459). Yet

⁶⁰ Hansen, 'The Wife of Bath and the Mark of Adam', p. 400.

⁶¹ A. Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 82 and 85.

⁶² Patterson, 'Feminine Rhetoric', pp. 320–321.

⁶³ Mazo Karras, 'The Wife of Bath', pp. 324–325.

⁶⁴ See pp. 346–352.

⁶⁵ 'goodwife, n.' *OED Online* [website], 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/79987 (accessed 13 December 2018).

Chaucer also has the General Prologue indicate that Alisoun has her faults – she is a wandering woman, many-times married, and otherwise far too sexually active. This is no conventional picture of virtuous medieval womanhood. Likewise, many of the other Canterbury pilgrims are also labelled ‘good’ or in some way upstanding. The Pardoner, the subject of one of Chaucer’s most damning portraits, is introduced as ‘gentil’ (l. 669) and ‘a noble ecclesiaste’ (l. 708). The reader is not to be fooled. The Pardoner’s corruption is plain to see, and his asserted gentility and nobility of character are in this light interpreted as satirical. On the other hand, some General Prologue pilgrims are described as virtuous in a quite non-ironic manner. We do not doubt that the Parson is ‘a good man’ (l. 477) or that the Knight is ‘worthy’ (l. 43). Jill Mann has argued that the *Canterbury Tales’* General Prologue is ‘a satiric representation of all classes of society’ cast in ‘the form of an estates satire’,⁶⁶ but clearly some General Prologue portraits are more satirical than others. The question remains – how ‘good’ is the Wife of Bath? Chaucer’s initial assertion of virtue poses the reader a conundrum, and the remainder of her General Prologue and then the Wife’s Prologue are likely to be read with this in mind. Part of the power of her characterisation lies in the fact that there is no absolute answer. The Wife does not possess the moral rectitude of the Parson, but neither is she so nefarious as the Pardoner. The reader must decide for themselves to what degree this Wife is ‘good’, and they are likely to come up with variant answers.

Yet the good wife – bad wife dichotomy is a very broad – even blunt – categorisation, whether applied to the Wife of Bath or to any other woman. As imagined persons, these types admit many sub-versions. In fact, the closer one looks at *any* social person category, the more unstable that identity becomes. Cognitively, the power of a social person rests in the flash of pre-existing associations it provokes upon identification. More prolonged focus has a dissipating action upon the constitutive characteristics of any social person. Under examination, categories are recognised as provisional, artificial. Category traits blur

⁶⁶ J. Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973, p. 1.

and become interchangeable.⁶⁷ This holds true for all the social persons I propose may be evoked by Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and probably for all social persons in any text or context. Social persons are at base mental schemata,⁶⁸ cognitive strategies for organising understandings about characters. Schemata are open to adjustment,⁶⁹ and some traits are conceived to be more peripheral to a schema than others. David Herman asserts that characterisation in fiction can usefully challenge existing stereotypes by first evoking and then destabilising associations with particular traits.⁷⁰ Chaucer can be read as destabilising straight-forward notions of the 'good wife' through his characterisation of Alisoun. More productively, his portrayal of Alisoun as 'wife' can be seen to consist of many fleetingly evoked sub-types. Many of the social persons I used to characterise my Wife of Bath were derived from my interpretation of such sub-personae in Chaucer. The following sections discuss the most important of these.

Young Wife – Old Husband

A social person of 'wife' as the youthful sexual object of a much older man is clearly indicated in the Wife of Bath's Prologue. Chaucer's Alisoun tells us that, of her five husbands,

... thre of hem were goode, and two were badde.
The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde; (ll. 196–197)

Alisoun reveals later that these three 'good', older husbands came first in her chronology of marriages. Given that Chaucer asserts the Wife to have been 'twelve year' of age when first wed – the youngest legal age for a woman to marry and commence sexual relations in that period⁷¹ – and that these husbands were already

⁶⁷ As Mary Crane notes, cognitive categories are characterised by 'fuzzy boundaries'; there is a 'preeminence of fuzzy categories in human mental functioning'. In: *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory*, Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 13.

⁶⁸ For a cogent summation of character schemata, see: M. Hartner, 'Constructing Literary Character and Perspective: An Approach from Psychology and Blending Theory', in M. Hartner and R. Schneider (ed's), *Blending and the Study of Narrative: Approaches and Applications*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 91–95.

⁶⁹ Schneider, 'Toward a Cognitive Theory', pp. 617–619.

⁷⁰ In Chapter 5 of: *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2013, pp. 193–215.

⁷¹ M. Wynne-Davies, *Tales of the Clerk and the Wife of Bath*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 121.

'olde', the implication is that there was a significant age gap between husband and wife, certainly in the first marriage. Nor does Alisoun enjoy her sexual obligations to this 'old meat'. She reports that:

... wolde I al his lust endure,
And make me a feyned appetit;
And yet in bacon hadde I nevere delit. (ll. 416–418)

In the section this claim concludes, the Wife describes at length her merciless manipulation of her old husbands and her employment of sex as a bargaining point. These two social persons – the young, desirable, but manipulative wife and the old, lecherous husband – are familiar types in medieval literature. What is more, the suggestion of the one social person conjures the presence of the other.

Alisoun's partner-type in this case is a medieval social person frequently associated with older husbands: that of the lecherous older man who weds a desirable young bride. Chaucer himself memorably dramatises this social person in the Merchant's Tale, underlining the Tale's marriage mismatch by naming husband and wife respectively January and May. The literary type of aged lecher generally marks the old husband as a foolish figure, doting on his wife, and making sexual demands that she finds distasteful.⁷² The young wife must, with Alisoun, 'al his lust endure' (l. 416). Such a mismatch is often shown to result in adultery when a younger man more to the young wife's taste approaches. This union of winter and spring was conceived to come about when an older man's lust for an attractive, young, and thus flighty bride overrides his common sense and dignity. As a type, he is likely to also be cast as wealthy, the implication being that his wife wed him for his money. There are certainly hints dropped throughout the Prologue that the Wife married her first three husbands primarily for financial gain. She tells us directly that they were good and rich and old (l. 197), suggesting that they are good at least in part because they are wealthy. Chaucer shows Alisoun exerting what power she can in these marriages, in large part by using the husbands' lust against them – the very

⁷² This type is examined in detail in the fourth chapter of John R. Lehr's dissertation on: 'The Old Man in Fourteenth and Fifteenth-Century English Literature', PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1979.

weakness that stereotypically prompts such unions in the first place. The apparent end of these manipulations is acquisition of financial favours. As Alisoun tells us,

I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,
If that I felte his arm over my syde,
Til he had maad his raunson unto me;
Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee. (ll. 409–412)

A 'ransom' suggests something of monetary value, which Alisoun will accept in swap for cooperation in bed; yet the nature of the ransom is never specified. Her husbands have already given her their 'lond and hir tresoor' (l. 212). Any further material gain seems symbolic of the more important acquisition of Wifely power. That these husbands are foolish is demonstrated by the degree to which Alisoun is able to manipulate them. For example, she claims to wander out at night solely to discover what infidelities her supposedly errant husbands are up to when drunk, a

... thyng of which they nevere agilte hir lyve.
Of wenchis wolde I beren hem on honde,
Whan that for syk unnethes myghte they stonde. (ll. 392–394)

They believe her, she says, and are abjectly apologetic for behaviour they never committed. This is but one of the many wifely manipulations for which these three foolish husbands fall. In such a manner, Chaucer links a social person of foolish old lecher to Alisoun's first three husbands.

Social persons often evoke allied types. The presence of one character type can prompt a reader to expect the appearance of another. The social person of the foolish old lecher husband prompts not only the necessity of his having a wife, but also that the wife be of a particular kind. She was expected to chafe against her marriage, and be a case of adultery simply waiting to happen. The imbalance in age, wealth, status and associated social power created tensions in the wife that had no licit outlet. The ideal wife in such a situation was supposed to honour and obey her old husband, bowing to his superior and age-related dignity, authority, and experience.⁷³ But how is it possible to respect a husband who is transparently

⁷³ This expectation is eloquently expressed in the Prologue to the late fourteenth-century treatise now referred to as *Le Ménagier de Paris*, wherein the aging husband-author speaks of his very young wife's desire to give him 'all heed and to set all care and diligence to keep my peace and my love'. The entire treatise is filled with instructions to help her achieve this laudable desire. E. Power

foolish and malleable? Such a marriage was clearly a fabliau waiting to happen – a circumstance that did not escape medieval notice or literature – thus the assumed likelihood of adultery. Alternatively, it was conceived that such a wife might take even more extreme measures – including murder.⁷⁴ In openly characterising her first three husbands as foolish old lechers, Alisoun also prompts the association of its allied social person with herself – that of dissatisfied young wife who has wed for money, who achieves what agency she can only through socially-unsanctioned means, and is subjected to the unwanted sexual attention of her aged husband.

Having identified young wife and old lecher social types in Chaucer's *Wife's Prologue*, I drew upon these persons in *The Jerusalem Tales*. I wanted to explore how a quest towards what a woman most desires might be shaped by unwanted yet socially-sanctioned husbandly desire. These social persons offered a rich source of tension around my central theme – social pressures to conform to the model of a 'good wife' are not to be underestimated, either then or now. My Alisoun must negotiate what she desires when cast in the role of sexual object for a much older man, a wife-role in which female wrong-doing is anticipated. Do the pressures of my character's first and (to a lesser degree) third marriages cause her to manipulate a foolish old man, squeeze him for his money, take a younger lover, or even to kill? The manner in which I inflected my Alisoun with this social person was straightforward: her character is cast physically (in terms of the story world) in that role, with her first husband playing the old lecher, largely because he wants another son. The casting of such social persons prompts a reader familiar with these tropes, whether in a medieval or more modern sense, to flesh out Alisoun's and her husbands' characters in light of existing character schemata.

Chaucer further complicates this social-person pairing by having the Wife turn this old husband – young wife scenario on its head not once, but twice. Having invoked a social-person pair early in her narrative, she then inverts it towards the end by

(transl.), *The Goodman of Paris (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Treatise on Moral and Domestic Economy by a Citizen of Paris, c. 1393*, 3rd edn., Woodbridge, Suffolk, The Boydell Press, 2006, p. 31.

⁷⁴ For suggestive examples, see: Hamel, 'The Wife of Bath and a Contemporary Murder', pp. 133–134.

revealing that her fifth husband, Jankyn, was twenty years her junior and offering plenty of evidence that she wed him for his sexual appeal. Even at her fourth husband's funeral, Alisoun declares she was eyeing up her fifth:

... me thoughte he hadde a paire
Of legges and of feet so clene and faire
That al myn herte I yaf unto his hold.
He was, I trowe, twenty wynter oold,
And I was fourty, if I shat seye sooth; (ll. 597–601)

Certainly, it was not uncommon for an older widow to marry a young man, he seeking financial security and she potentially acquiring male assistance in trade.⁷⁵ This is a social-person pair with which late-medieval readers would have been familiar, and the older woman who takes a younger male lover remains a familiar and derided type today. That this type evidently inverts the age disparity of Alisoun's first three marriages invites consideration of further social person similarities between the first and the last. Is the Wife also to be viewed as a foolish old lecher in wedding a husband so much younger? Might we suspect Jankyn of really wishing to be rid of his Wife when he knocks her to the ground? Has he wed her primarily for her money? These suppositions have no direct grounding in Chaucer's text, but *may* be prompted by social-person associations encouraged by those clues the *Canterbury Tales* does make available. For example, the Wife notes that she gave Jankyn all her land and possessions upon marrying him and later sorely regretted it (ll. 630–632).⁷⁶ Alisoun further highlights this old wife – young husband inversion in her Tale, presenting us with a knight forced to espouse a woman whose age renders her repulsive to him. Why this enchantress wishes to marry a reformed rapist is never made clear, but we might guess, given the Tale's teller, that it is partly inspired by his youthful allure. His elevated social status too renders him desirable, or so his bedroom bluster would have us believe. More importantly, the inversion in marital age-gaps is of a piece with the inversion of

⁷⁵ B.A. Hanawalt, 'Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England', in S.S. Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1993, p. 149. On the other hand, Caroline Barron suggests that the old wife – young husband pairing had a greater presence in literature than in lived reality. 'Introduction: The Widow's World in Later Medieval London,' in C.M. Barron and A.F. Sutton (ed's), *Medieval London Widows, 1300–1500*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003, p. xxiv.

⁷⁶ This is particularly noteworthy because it was normal legal procedure for a wife's possessions to pass to her husband's control.

male mastery that the Wife declares is what women ultimately desire. The Wife only specifically declares that female sovereignty in marriage and its resulting happily-ever-after is achieved in the case of Jankyn and the knight. Despite her described dominance over her first three husbands, she does not couch it in terms of 'mastery'. The inversion of patriarchal dominance in marriage seems also to require that the husband involved is at a distinct age disadvantage and physically or socially attractive.

I adopt this old wife – young husband pairing in *The Jerusalem Tales* in the most direct manner possible – as did Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*: I make Jankyn the Wife's fifth husband and junior by twenty years. I echo the Chaucerian Wife's admiration of Jankyn's legs in my Jankyn's inordinate fondness for colourful hose in which to show those limbs off. I indicate age- and dominance-related tensions in their relationship through dialogue and physical interactions. By these means, I hope to trigger a range of reader associations with and considerations of what they understand such marriages to involve, whether in medieval or modern times. Further, I intend that a questioning of what Alisoun desires from men – or whether they are able to provide what she desires at all – arise. But I also complicate these old-husband, young-wife and old-wife, young-husband relationships by means of textual cues hinting at additional social persons inflecting Alisoun's marriages – including those I term the wife as (not-)mother and the fairy wife.

Wife as (not-)Mother

In theological terms, the primary purpose of marriage – and certainly of sex within marriage – was procreation.⁷⁷ In fact, the only acceptable reason for intercourse was that of conception. It was not to be indulged in only for pleasure; indeed, any enjoyment of sex was decidedly suspect.⁷⁸ No textual references in the General Prologue, the Wife's Prologue or her Tale even hint at Alisoun having any children. Of all possible wife roles, no version of 'mother' is never attached to her. This

⁷⁷ R. Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto Others*, New York and London, Routledge, 2005, p. 66.

⁷⁸ J.A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 503.

absence of interest in procreation or children only contributes to Alisoun's bad-wife profile in the *Canterbury Tales*: she is quite brazenly concerned with sex for pleasure's sake throughout the Prologue. Despite declaring that:

God bad us for to wexe and multiplie;
That gentil text kan I wel understonde. (ll. 28–29)

and that:

I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age
In the actes and in fruyt of mariage (ll. 13–14)

there is no hint of such marital 'fruit' about Chaucer's Alisoun – only the 'acts'. That she pays no scrap of attention to the sexual act's proper use only underlines the sinful error of her ways (and, it might be assumed, her deliberate misinterpretation of theological authorities). The young wife of a foolish-lecher husband might be understandably uninterested in procreation – unless ensuing pregnancy meant her husband then left her alone – but that did not mean that the aged husband was of the same mind. An inverse image of the wife-as-mother hovers behind Chaucer's Alisoun: in medieval terms, motherhood is her proper role in marriage, and the proper end of her focus on sex, but, as a social person, it is quite glaringly absent from the text.

I developed this stark absence of wife-as-mother in Chaucer's Wife into a social-person aspect of my Alisoun, particularly in regards to her first and fifth husbands. I show her first husband to be vitally interested in Alys becoming a mother and succeeding in his aim, but only at great cost to Alisoun and the loss of the child. (In fact the child, an unwanted girl, does not die but haunts Alys as an unidentified presence and absence throughout the novel.) Alisoun is thus defined in the negative as a mother. To complicate matters, I also have her become 'mother' to the priest step-son she acquires through this first marriage, who is in fact Alisoun's senior. This (not-)mother social personage is further conjured and complicated in the Wife's relationship with Jankyn, her fifth husband. She meets him when he is a boy, lonely and separated from his family, and proceeds to 'mother' him. Later, this attitude colours their marital relationship. To make matters more baroque still, Alisoun also desires to have a child to whom she can bequeath her craft mastery, a goal that proves frustratingly elusive and partially drives her pilgrimage to

Jerusalem. 'Mother' – and its absence – is a social person to evoke extra-textual character associations whatever a reader's contextual background. My evocation of variant social persons of (not-)mother is anchored upon pointedly slight Chaucerian foundations. Through it, I hope to prompt readers to flesh out my Wife in the light of wide ranging conceptions of what a (not-)mother means. More importantly, I intend that this chameleon social personage shed light upon my central fictional theme: the assumption that one of the things any women most desires is to have children, an assumption common to both the fourteenth and twenty-first centuries. By making it Alisoun's declared but deceptive, or at least secondary, reason for travelling to Jerusalem, I intend to complicate the notion of motherhood as an inevitable womanly desire.

The Fairy Wife

While the most obvious social persons to haunt the Wife are those prompted by the General Prologue and the Wife's Prologue, figures from the Wife's Tale too attach themselves to their teller. One such social person is that of the fairy or elf. The fairy, and her alter-ego the Loathly Lady, are also associated with sub-types of the medieval social person of 'wife'.

The Wife of Bath's Tale is framed as a quest-romance.⁷⁹ It is also, if less obviously, a fairy-tale. The Wife commences by setting her Tale 'In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour' (l. 857), when:

Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede. (ll. 859–861)

Her Tale is thus cast in the mode of medieval romance, one set in an Arthurian setting in which knights were not unlikely to stumble upon fairies when questing in the forest. The importance of this opening information is not made evident until the knight, having committed rape and been sentenced to death unless he can discover

⁷⁹ As Lee Patterson points out, the knight of the Tale is actually required to fulfil a *series* of quests – as soon as he has completed one quest, another demands his attention. In 'Feminine Rhetoric', pp. 336–337.

what women most desire, has come to the very last day of his allotted quest, still lacking a satisfactory answer. This is when:

... it happed hym to ryde,
In al this care, under a forest syde,
Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go
Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo;
Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne.
But certainly, er he cam fully there,
Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.
No creature saugh he that bar lyf,
Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf –
A fouler wight ther may no man devyse. (ll. 989–999)

These ladies four-and-twenty, dancing in the forest as fairies are wont (witness the Tale's opening), vanish, leaving in their wake an old and ugly 'wife'. The implication is that this ugly creature is linked in some way with the elven dancers, although the link is never made explicit. Indeed, the knight seems strangely content to trust this 'Loathly Lady's'⁸⁰ authority concerning what women most desire – strange because he has sought and rejected so many potentially valid opinions in his search so far. The reader may well assume that it is the old woman's connection to these supernaturally-vanished dancers from whom the knight had thought to learn 'som wysdom' that persuades him of her reliability. After all, as the Tale's opening lines prompt us, it is common knowledge that magic and fairies are to be encountered in the forests of courtly romance.⁸¹ The knight returns to the court, having obtained the secret from the old woman in return for agreeing to fulfil whatever she first request – which turns out to be a proposal of marriage. Upon their wedding night, the knight is anything but eager to get into bed, 'So wo was hym, his wyf looked so foule' (l. 1082). In response, his ugly old bride gives him a lengthy lecture on 'gentillesse', and finishes by offering the bewildered husband a seemingly impossible choice. He may have her remain:

... foul and old til that I deye,

⁸⁰ The wise and magical 'Loathly Lady' is in itself a particular character type, and is referred to as such in literary critique. Edward Vasta points out that this entity crops up in Greek mythology, Irish legend, and French medieval romance before making her appearance in the *Canterbury Tales*. In: 'Chaucer, Gower, and the Unknown Minstrel: The Literary Liberation of the Loathly Lady', *Exemplaria*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1995, pp. 395–397.

⁸¹ C. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden, Woodbridge, Suffolk*, D.S. Brewer, 1993, p. 205.

And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
And nevere yow displese in al my lyf,
Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair, (ll. 1220–1223)

and thus run the risk of cuckoldry. Wisely, given the quest-answer that what women most desire is sovereignty in marriage, the knight lets his new wife make the final choice. He is rewarded for granting his wife mastery over her own shape when she declares she will be ‘bothe fair and good’ (l. 1241), which is to say, both beautiful and faithful. He draws aside the bed-curtain to find that his old, ugly wife has been replaced by one so lovely that:

His herte bathed in a bath of blisse.
A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,
And she obeyed hym in every thyng
That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng. (ll. 1253–1256)

This ensuing bliss taps into the general medieval-romance ‘understanding that, as far as erotic wish-fulfilment goes, fairy mistresses can provide the highest form of gratification.’⁸² Naturally, we are told they live happily ever after. Alisoun never states that the knight’s bride is a fairy, yet the old woman’s supernatural ability to change form in such a dramatic and permanent way, in conjunction with references to fairies, elves, and incubi at key points in the Tale, strongly suggest that the knight has wed a fairy wife.

While one might accept an implied fairy presence in the Wife’s story, the objection could be raised that, so far as social persons go, linking the earthy, forty-something teller of the Tale with her magically-beautiful female protagonist is a stretch too far. One cannot claim that all characters within a story are necessarily reflected-selves of the teller, even when that teller too is a carefully-crafted fiction. In this case, as many critics point out,⁸³ there is an evident symmetry between the Prologue description of the Wife’s marriage to Jankyn and that of the knight and fairy’s marriage in her Tale. That one ‘so loothly, and so oold’ (l. 1100) can transform herself into a youthful beauty and thus win the love of her (initially) much younger

⁸² J. Wade, *Fairies in Medieval Romance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 112.

⁸³ Noted by McTaggart, ‘What Women Want?’, p. 42. See also: Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer*, pp. 149 and 157; Lindley, ‘Vanysshed was this daunce’, p. 16; Walzem, ‘Peynted by the Lion’, pp. 52–58; Vasta, ‘Chaucer, Gower, and the Unknown Minstrel’, p. 406; and Wurtele, ‘Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’, p. 119.

husband sounds a lot like the wish-fulfilment of an aging Alisoun whose last husband was twenty years her junior. More tellingly, the happy ending to both Alisoun's and the Loathly Lady's marriage is achieved when the husband freely grants her sovereignty. To take a larger view, H. Marshall Leicester makes a cogent point in proposing that Alisoun 'offers the tale as a counter-exemplum to set in opposition to those in Janekyn's book of wicked wives and the male misogynist tradition.'⁸⁴ To Jankyn's litany of wifely horror stories towards the end of the Prologue we might contrast the fairy's lecture on gentillesse at the end of the Tale – one points out wifely errors, the other a husband's misconceptions. The literary and folkloric social person of the fairy attaches to the Wife of Bath through the parallels between the teller and her heroine.

A further objection might be raised that the social person identity of the 'fairy' is diluted and mixed in Chaucer's text with the identities of 'elf' and even 'incubus'. At the opening of the Tale, the Wife mentions 'fayerye' in one line (l. 859), only to mention the 'elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,' in the next (l. 860). The same confusion occurs again when Alisoun explains that it is the ubiquitous presence of wandering friars – 'limiters' because of their delimited preaching territory – that have driven the fairies away. Their presence

... maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.
For ther as wont to walken was an elf
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself (ll. 872–874)

The confusion in terms only increases when Alisoun explains of the limiter that:

In every bussh or under every tree
Ther is noon oother incubus but he (ll. 879–880)

Are we dealing with three different varieties of social person – fairy, elf and incubus – or one? James Wade proposes that, in medieval literature at least, 'fairy' was a term interchangeable with a range of supernatural beings who were neither angelic or demonic, good or bad, but possessing a 'tendency to behave arbitrarily or illogically'.⁸⁵ These alternative terms, he says, include: elf, incubus, lamia, nymph,

⁸⁴ H.M. Leicester, 'Of a Fire in the Dark: Public and Private Feminism in the Wife of Bath's Tale', *Women's Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1/2, 1984, p. 159.

⁸⁵ Wade, *Fairies*, p. 4.

and *fata*.⁸⁶ (Notably, Wade's prime evidence for adding 'incubus' to the list is this very passage of Chaucer's. In general usage, the word 'incubus' had distinctly demonic associations.) Wade goes on to explain that these creatures' 'ambiguous nature resisted any concrete lexical markers', and that 'the ambiguous supernatural took on a range of connotations and diverse associations over the period'.⁸⁷ This is a rather convenient argument for the conflation of a range of supernatural beings under the umbrella of 'fairy', given that Wade's monograph focuses on fairies, yet such categorisation does enable connections and comparisons that might not otherwise be made. My solution to the problem as it applies to the Wife's Tale is that each noun *can* prompt separate social persons with their own nebulae of traits, but that their power to do so will depend very much on the individual reader, the notice they take of these stray nouns, and the reader's operative knowledge base. A modern reader, for example, may well assume elves (considered in the light of Tolkien and subsequent fantasy-genre elves, perhaps) are entirely different in form and nature to fairies (as informed by Victorian notions of tiny winged garden-dwellers). In my fiction, I largely accept Wade's assertion that 'fairy' and 'elf' may be understood as synonyms, as the wording of the Tale implies as much. 'Incubus', however, I do not conflate into the same 'fairy' type. There is too much of the demonic about this figure: fairies and elves are, as Wade points out, ambiguous creatures. The incubus, however, is always associated with evil.

As Wade points out, fairies have the 'tendency to show up unexpectedly and behave in ways that are neither logical nor predictable'.⁸⁸ Certainly, the knight of the Tale does not anticipate either the old woman's marriage proposal or her magical transformation, but unpredictability also evokes other female-related social persons. The medieval-misogynist tenet that womankind lacked in reason and stability springs to mind.⁸⁹ Perhaps it is no coincidence that most fairies of romance are also female, yet this changeability is not presented as a feminine failing in medieval fairies, but is primarily indicative of their otherworldliness. Alisoun's

⁸⁶ Wade, pp. 4–5.

⁸⁷ Wade, p. 5.

⁸⁸ Wade, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Blamires, *The Case for Women*, pp. 126-127.

mercuriality thus feeds off two social persons – that of otherworldly fairy and of a very this-worldly woman. These identities are both complementary (in projected aspects of femininity and sexuality), and also create a certain tension when present within the same character. In the *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife's fairy self-styling is likely to be interpreted as mere wishful thinking. It simply underlines her decidedly earthy nature: this foul-mouthed, forty-something tradeswoman is clearly no magical fairy bride. Yet the coexisting persons of otherworldly and this-worldly woman also create a tension within, or perhaps simply an underlying sadness to, Alisoun's character. The identities of the 'fairy-wife' and foul old wife – the Loathly Lady – intertwine in the Wife's Tale. They also, by virtue of their parallels with the Wife herself, attach as sub-types of the 'wife' in Alisoun's character. The Loathly Lady of the Wife's Tale is a supernatural shapeshifter, a recognisable literary persona for whom scholars trace a long lineage.⁹⁰ Medieval readers may well have recognised this literary person in the knight's old wife, but modern readers are unlikely to do so without scholarly assistance. This does not mean, however, that I as an author cannot evoke her presence in my fiction.

My seeding of a social personage of fairy-wife is sprinkled throughout *The Jerusalem Tales* by means of various character-cues, many of them easily overlooked. Wade notes that very often those women he identifies as 'fairies' in medieval romances are, as in the Wife's Tale, never explicitly identified as such.⁹¹ Nevertheless, they display abilities beyond the human that are not cast as witchcraft. Wade analyses this lack of explicit definition in terms of a 'functional irresolvability' that is employed to 'provoke wonder and encourage speculation, ultimately pushing the audience to imaginative engagement.'⁹² In a similar vein, I suggest my central character's cloth-making abilities verge upon the supernatural. She has 'fairy fingers' that can spin yarn near as thin as cobweb.⁹³ In a concession to modern notions that fairies are very small – a trait absent from medieval romance – I portray my Wife as being very much below average height. Her fingers too are

⁹⁰ Vasta, 'Chaucer, Gower, and the Unknown Minstrel', pp. 395–398.

⁹¹ Wade, *Fairies*, p. 26.

⁹² Wade, p. 26.

⁹³ See pp. 99–100 of this thesis.

correspondingly tiny, which in part explains her skill at spinning – and attracts the attention of her first husband. Her brother instinctively treats her as an uncanny being. On the other hand, as innumerable medieval romances show, the fairy is also uncannily attractive to men.⁹⁴ Something about a fairy’s appearance promises the very heights of sexual pleasure. So too, my Alisoun speculates that it is her tininess that so evidently fascinates men. Likewise, fairies have the ‘tendency to show up unexpectedly and behave in ways that are neither logical nor predictable’.⁹⁵ My Alisoun’s unpredictability and mercuriality feeds off the evocation of two social persons – that of otherworldly fairy and that of a very this-worldly woman. Further, I colour Jankyn’s view of his much older Wife with shades of the Chaucerian Loathly Lady. From Jankyn’s perspective, Alisoun shape-shifts between poles of attraction and revulsion, between a loved Wife who near-magically transforms his life and a manipulative, controlling source of social embarrassment. Underpinning this all, I hope to portray a fundamental shapeshifting in Alisoun’s character throughout *The Jerusalem Tales*, to suggest that what a woman most desires alters over time and circumstances, with concurrent alterations in her dominant personae.

Sam and Delilah

As indicated in my lists of character schemata conjured about the *Canterbury Tales* Wife, a significant number of these are presented in the form of literary allusion. For example, the Wife’s Prologue sees her fifth husband, Jankyn, make pointed reference to the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. In the Wife’s account, Jankyn’s mention of Delilah follows hot on the heels of Eve in the line of famous women who have betrayed and undermined ‘al mankynde’ (l. 720). The Wife says that Jankyn:

... redde he me how Sampson losce his heres:
 Slepynge, his lemman kitte it with hir sheres;
 Thurgh which treson loste he bothe his yen. (ll. 721–723)

Delilah is not mentioned by name, but she is surely present as Samson’s hair-cutting, strength-stealing ‘lemman’. In Chaucer, this social person of Delilah is but one among Jankyn’s long list of wicked wives, despite being clearly not married to

⁹⁴ Wade, *Fairies*, p. 14.

⁹⁵ Wade, p. 16.

Samson but his mistress in both the Bible and in Jankyn's account. Chaucer's glancing connection of the Wife to Delilah – through Jankyn's implying she is a 'Delilah' – prompts a host of potential reader associations with the biblical figure. These three lines of verse connect Delilah-characteristics of beauty, temptation, lust, and betrayal with the Wife, traits which a reader remembers led to the blinding, mockery, stripping of power, and eventual death of the hero, Samson. Delilah is, of course, only one of many such allusions piled up about Alisoun by her learned clerk-husband. Jankyn presents an opposing discourse to the listings of virtuous exemplars which Alcuin Blamires identifies as the medieval 'case for women'⁹⁶ and Chaucer offers in his *Legend of Good Women*.

I wove this admittedly minor character schema of Delilah into my fictional depiction of Alisoun's second marriage. The insertion of details such as that Alisoun's second husband is named 'Samson' and that he is very nearly blind is designed to work in conjunction with the reader's knowledge that this second husband died in mysterious circumstance to inflect further aspects of the biblical Delilah onto Alisoun. Did Alisoun bring about the death of Husband Sam? Like Delilah, she certainly has the motive to do so. In the biblical story it is only that Delilah is on the wrong side that renders her treasonous. If, as in the case of Judith's sexually-facilitated murder of Holofernes, she was shown to be defending the people of Israel by her actions, her defeat of Samson would have rendered her a holy heroine. The Bible positions us to condemn Delilah, but I position the reader to side with Alisoun. Both are implicated in 'treason': in medieval English law, the death of a husband at a wife's hands was termed 'petty treason'.⁹⁷ On the grand scale, treason involves killing a king. The husband was as a king to his wife. Delilah's cutting of Samson's hair is equated to 'treson' in Chaucer's wording because it led to the betrayal and death of the man to whom she was sexually subject, even though never officially married. Is Alisoun similarly guilty of treason? Jankyn's example, through which Chaucer references a venerable clerkly tradition of misogyny,

⁹⁶ Blamires, *The Case for Women*, pp. 175–198.

⁹⁷ W.S. Holdsworth, *A History of English Law*, vol. III (1066–1485), London, Methuen, 1922, p. 288.

certainly implies that *all* women are treasonous. Through women, and beginning with Eve,

Was al mankynde broght to wrecchednesse,
For which that Jhesu Crist hymself was slayn (ll. 716–717)

This secondary character schema of Delilah is a type of ‘wife’, at least in Jankyn’s presentation of her. The Delilah figure complicates and inflects the central identity of ‘wife’ within the larger character constellation. She is also a potent character schema in herself. By means of sprinkling in a few clues pointing towards a minor character schema, I follow Chaucer in increasing the complexity of a given character constellation, offering the reader prompts towards fresh interpretations and a greater felt depth to a nominally singular character.

Re-interpreting Chaucerian Social Persons

I have focused my social-person analysis and adaptation of the *Canterbury Tales’* Wife thus far upon a handful of wife-identities evoked in association with Alisoun. In so doing, I have predominantly adhered to Fowler’s historicist methodology. I could continue this examination of the many personae I drew from analysis of Chaucer in order to characterise my Wife. I might delineate, for example, ‘wife as the sexual property of a man’, or the tension between Alisoun as a wandering woman (with negative connotations) and as a pilgrim (positively connoted). While these personae are certainly important in my fictional reinterpretation of the Wife, I chose the wifely identities focused on above as representative examples of my method of turning Fowlerian literary analysis to fictional creation. My interpretation of Alisoun does not limit itself, however, either to purely historicist analysis or to social persons of ‘wife’.

Historical fiction reinterprets the past in terms of present preoccupations. My characterisation of the Wife of Bath was founded upon social-person analysis of Chaucer’s text in the academic mode. I then read extensively amongst the secondary literature, which expanded and refined the social-person possibilities. This primary and secondary source reading prompted a rich range of story and character ideas. However, I did not wish to simply replicate or explain Chaucer’s

Wife through fiction, but to *re-interpret* her in terms that have resonance today, and particularly in the light of 'what women most desire'. Historical fiction is never simply a recreation or reflection of the past – it recasts the past for contemporary purposes and sensibilities. The personae who gained prominence in my interpretation needed to align with my larger thematic purposes, aims that may well diverge from Chaucer's. Guided by my social-persons analysis, I developed two central themes to Alisoun's character and the novel's structure, those of wifhood and cloth-production, and the search for fulfilment within both. I planned the development of these two themes to echo the conception common to contemporary psychology and conventions of realist fiction that characters develop over time and with experience, rather than reflect the static snap-shot character delineations offered by medieval estates satires. Following Chaucer, I emphasised Alisoun's role as 'wife', but I planned to depict each of her attachments to men as an experiment in different modes of wifhood, a many-faceted social personhood that evolves and alters through necessity and experience. In this, I draw upon central themes in the *Canterbury Tales* portrayal. In the parallel cloth-production theme, however, I expand considerably upon a minor aspect of Chaucer's depiction.

Cloth-Maker

While the *Canterbury Tales* makes only brief mention of the Wife of Bath's cloth-worker activities, this handful of words has attracted inordinate scholarly attention.⁹⁸ They attracted my attention too, and particularly for their potential in answering the question: what do women most desire? Alisoun's involvements in the medieval wool industry became a significant thematic thread in *The Jerusalem Tales*.

⁹⁸ Ladd too notes the 'thin' context of Alisoun's clothier status, but defends the attention paid to this scant evidence both historically and in his article by linking 'the Wife's economic and textual identities' with her 'mercantile identity'. In: 'Selling Alys', p. 143. Studies discussing the Wife as clothier include: M. Carruthers, 'The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions', *PMLA*, vol. 94, no. 2, 1979, pp. 209–210; P.A. Knapp, 'Alisoun Weaves a Text', *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 3, 1986, pp. 387–410; L. Patterson, *Putting the Wife in her Place*, pp. 24–25; and D.W. Robertson, "'And for My Land Thus Hastow Mordred Me?": Land Tenure, the Cloth Industry, and the Wife of Bath', *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1980, pp. 403–420.

Perhaps readers notice Alisoun's cloth-making because it is one of the first 'facts' about the Wife a reader of the *Canterbury Tales* encounters.⁹⁹ The first reference to cloth-making Chaucer provides is in the third and fourth lines of the Wife's section of the General Prologue. They inform us that:

Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt,
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt. (ll. 447–448)

Ypres and Ghent were cities of the industrial heartland of northern Europe. They produced some of the finest and most valuable cloth to be had.¹⁰⁰ The wool they favoured, however, was sourced from England,¹⁰¹ and Edward III had raised the tax on raw wool exports to fund his war against France.¹⁰² With export demand thus dampened, England too was slowly becoming renowned for its cloth production in the later fourteenth century.¹⁰³ It is therefore entirely feasible that by 1378, the year in which my novel is set, an English cloth-maker could begin to rival those of Flanders. Ruth Mazo Karras objects that, as Bath was not at the forefront of medieval English cloth production, Chaucer is only satirically suggesting through this phrase that the Wife had an inflated self-opinion.¹⁰⁴ Further, Mazo Karras suggests that, as women of this period were seldom at the forefront of cloth production, then Chaucer cannot have intended his readers to interpret the Dame in this way.¹⁰⁵ She has a point. Added to this, the above lines from the General Prologue provide the only direct reference in all of Chaucer's Wifely material to her cloth-making. It

⁹⁹ As D.N. Rapp and P. Kendeou point out, readers are particularly influenced by initial character clues, even to the point of ignoring later inconsistencies. 'Noticing and Revising Discrepancies as Texts Unfold', *Discourse Processes*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2009, pp. 2–3.

¹⁰⁰ E. Power, *The Wool Trade in English Medieval History, Being the Ford Lectures*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1941, pp. 8–11.

¹⁰¹ J.H. Munroe, 'Medieval Woollens: Textiles, Textile Technology and Industrial Organisation, c. 800–1500', in D. Jenkins (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 186; and Power, *The Wool Trade*, p. 13.

¹⁰² Munroe, 'Medieval Woollens: The Western European Woollen Industries and their Struggles for International Markets, c. 1000–1500', in D. Jenkins (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 279. I have greatly simplified the matter here. Munroe discusses the fraught topic of the 'victory' of English woollens in detail in: 'Medieval Woollens: The Western European Woollen Industries', pp. 269–273.

¹⁰³ E. Quinton and J. Oldland, 'London Merchants' Cloth Exports, 1350–1500', *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol. 7, 2011, pp. 122–123.

¹⁰⁴ Mazo Karras, 'The Wife of Bath', pp. 321–322.

¹⁰⁵ Mazo Karras, pp. 321–322.

would seem that Wife-as-cloth-maker is but a weakly-evoked social person. How then do I justify making it a central feature of my fictional Alisoun's character?

While cloth production in late-medieval England was an industry controlled by men, as Mazo Karras rightly asserts, it is also indubitable that, in Chaucer's portrayal, Alisoun makes it her mission to challenge the mastery of men. Why should this not apply in her approach to the wool trades as well as in marriage? Marriage provided the only real path for women into guild-regulated trades,¹⁰⁶ and the Wife's multiple marriages are certainly suggestive of underlying mercenary motives. Such motives may extend beyond the inheritance of land and money. The Wife of Bath might as easily be bent on following the woman's traditional route into craft mastery – by marrying master craftsmen. Reasoning thus, I have fictionally framed Dame Alys's marriages as a progression towards mastery in various forms of cloth-production, a framing that is entirely within the boundaries of late fourteenth-century historical conditions. Thanks to a poll tax of 1379, we know that Bath numbered a significant number of weavers, fullers, dyers and other cloth workers among its populace.¹⁰⁷ Secondly, Bath was located at the edge of the Cotswolds,¹⁰⁸ an area second only to the Welsh Marches for the production of highly valued wool.¹⁰⁹ Thirdly, it possessed a fulling mill immediately adjacent the town, thus facilitating the felting process necessary to turning woven cloth into broadcloth.¹¹⁰ The borough of Bath may not have been a major force in broadcloth production,¹¹¹ but that does not mean that it possessed no clothworkers or clothiers. Why shouldn't Chaucer's fictional Wife of Bath number among them? The double-entendre the word 'bath' evokes – the

¹⁰⁶ S. Ogilvie, 'The Economics of Guilds', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2014, p. 172.

¹⁰⁷ E. Green, 'A Bath Poll Tax, 2, Richard II', *Proceedings of the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1888, pp. 300–313.

¹⁰⁸ As Barry Cuncliffe notes, 'medieval Bath, like so many Cotswold towns, owed its prosperity to the wool trade'; in: *The City of Bath*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1986, p. 89.

¹⁰⁹ H. Hoshino, 'The Rise of the Florentine Woollen Industry in the Fourteenth Century', in N.B. Harte and K.G. Ponting (ed's), *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe: Essays in Memory of Professor E.M. Carus-Wilson*, London, Heinemann, 1983, p. 194; and J.H. Munroe, 'Medieval Woollens: Textiles', p. 196.

¹¹⁰ Cuncliffe, *The City of Bath*, p. 90.

¹¹¹ Nor was it a minor force. As Munroe points out, Bath was situated in what was, by the later 1300s, 'England's leading cloth-producing region'. In: 'Medieval Woollens: The Western European Woollen Industries', p. 237.

town named after its hot-spring baths, and the generic medieval bath-house wherein one finds women of ill-repute – proved irresistible to Chaucer.¹¹² It is the perfect place to locate the sexually-suspect Wife of Bath, yet it does not exclude the possibility that she is also a cloth-maker. In light of the objection that few women achieved prominence in the cloth trade, my fiction shows the Wife marrying her way into the consummate mastery of cloth. Her pre-eminence is the result of her manipulation of men.

In *The Jerusalem Tales*, I cast Alisoun as not merely a clothier (a cloth merchant), but as adopting the personae of ‘master’ of all stages of broadcloth production – sheep raising, sorting the shorn wool, spinning, weaving, fulling and tentering, dyeing, and finally as cloth merchant. The only way an un-apprenticed woman is able to achieve mastery within these male-dominated and guild-regulated professions is by marrying into them. Thus the back-story plot of my novel, which the Wife tells in increments as she travels towards Jerusalem, is not only her history in men but simultaneously her history of craft attainment. From each of the men to whom she legally ‘belongs’ for a period, Alisoun acquires an element in her mastery over cloth-production. Even her father – for women were the property of their fathers before marriage¹¹³ – is influential in guiding Alisoun’s mastery of the raw product, wool. I have the Wife relate tales of her progression through man-mastery and cloth-mastery, each stage of which involves different sub-persons of ‘wife’ and a concurrent occupational identity (weaver, fuller, dyer, and finally clothier). Only her fifth husband has nothing to offer her by way of cloth-mastery. Instead, this marriage shows her trying to achieve her fairy-tale ending, to collate all previous attempts at mastery into the one ultimately desirable whole.

Scarlet woman

Another cogent reason for paying attention to Alisoun’s connection to cloth is revealed by Laura F. Hodges’ discussion of the Wife’s dress. One of the many stages

¹¹² A point argued persuasively by Hope Phyllis Weissman in ‘Why Chaucer’s Wife is from Bath’.

¹¹³ M. Hallissy, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer’s Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct*, Westport, Conn. and London, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 43–47.

wool passed through in its journey towards marketable broadcloth was that of dyeing. In this regard, Hodges points out a little-recognised divergence between medieval and modern terminology with direct implications for the Wife: in the fourteenth century, the word 'scarlet' referred not primarily to colour, but to a specific and very expensive dye.¹¹⁴ Madder could produce a passable red dye, but only the 'grain' derived from *Coccidae* insects could turn cloth scarlet.¹¹⁵ That the General Prologue declares the Wife is an urban cloth-maker of superlative skill is implicitly linked to 'scarlet'. The two lines that indicate:

Of clooth makyng she hadde swich an haunt,
She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt. (ll. 447–448)

are followed shortly after by an emphatic linking of the colour red to the Wife's person:

Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed,
Ful streite yteyd and shoes ful moyste and newe.
Boold was hir face and fair and reed of hewe. (ll. 456–458)

The Wife's preference for scarlet garb is reinforced in her Prologue when she declares she was in the habit of gadding abroad:

To vigilies and to processions,
To prechyng eek, and to thise pilgrimages,
To pleyes of myracles, and to mariages,
And wered upon my gaye scarlet gytes.
Thise wormes, ne thise motthes, ne thise mytes,
Upon my peril, frete hem never a deel;
And wostow why? For they were used weel. (ll. 556–562)

The Dame declares that she wore these showy 'gaye scarlet' gowns so frequently that they were in no danger of being devoured by moths when in storage. The implication is that, at least in this period in her life, the Wife was a habitual wearer of costly scarlet cloth. Reflecting this textual rubicundity, the image of the Wife in the famous Ellesmere manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* portrays her in a vibrant red gown.¹¹⁶ From these textual and paratextual clues was born my decision to

¹¹⁴ L.F. Hodges, 'The Wife of Bath's Costumes: Reading the Subtexts', *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1993, pp. 364–365.

¹¹⁵ It was called 'grain' because, when collected in quantities for dye, the dried scale insects had the appearance of grains.

¹¹⁶ *Huntingdon Digital Library*, [website], 'The Ellesmere Chaucer', 2011, f. 72 r, <http://hdl.huntington.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15150coll7/id/2838/rec/8>, (accessed 3 Feb. 2017).

inflect the Wife of Bath with the social person of a Scarlet Woman. My Alisoun not only habitually ventures abroad in prohibitively costly scarlet, but the gowns she wears are a product of her own cloth-making and dyeing practice. Thus she advertises her wares: she displays her cloth mastery on her person. The Wife is visibly a Scarlet Woman, an identity through which I invoke a tangle of connected social persons, each of which address what a woman most desires.

It is all very well to list possible social persons within a text, but the meanings made in readers' minds in association with such ideas, should they even notice those cues, vary in accordance with a reader's background – which in turn varies with their historical context. The word 'scarlet' is a case in point, and my novel plays with both modern and medieval understandings of the word. 'Scarlet' as used by Chaucer in the late fourteenth century was not an adjective automatically understood as a synonym for the colour red. After c. 1100, variants of the Latin noun *scarletus* are used in medieval languages across Europe to denote a specific *fabric* rather than colour.¹¹⁷ Scarlet was fine woollen cloth, felted to a soft denseness, and almost always created of English fleece – that is, high quality broadcloth.¹¹⁸ It was fabric of significant value, and as such was frequently tinted with the best and most expensive of dyes.¹¹⁹ In the later-medieval Europe the most sought-after dye was 'grain', derived from scale insects of the *Coccidae* family, and the source of a powerful red hue.¹²⁰ Because the cloth known as 'scarlet' was so frequently dyed red by means of *Coccidae*, over the centuries a rich red shade became synonymous with the fabric.¹²¹ Later, in early-modern English translations of the Bible, that figure of worldly temptation of 'Revelations', the Whore of Babylon, is described as bedecked not only in jewels, but also the most valuable dye of ancient times – purple – and the most expensive of tints in the Middle Ages, scarlet:

¹¹⁷ J.H. Munroe, 'The Medieval Scarlet and the Economics of Sartorial Splendour', in N.B. Harte and K.G. Ponting (ed's), *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe: Essays in Memory of Professor E.M. Carus-Wilson*, London, Heinemann, 1983, p. 19.

¹¹⁸ Munroe, 'Medieval Woollens: Textiles', p. 216.

¹¹⁹ Hodges, 'The Wife of Bath's Costumes', p. 365.

¹²⁰ F. Curta, 'Colour Perception, Dyestuffs, and Colour Terms in Twelfth-Century French Literature', *Medium Aevum*, vol. 73, no. 1, 2004, p. 47.

¹²¹ Munroe, 'Medieval Woollens: Textiles', p. 213.

I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast ...
And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked
with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her
hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication:

And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE
GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

(Revelations, 17: 3–5)¹²²

Thus the figure of a ‘scarlet woman’ entered the modern English language with all her attendant connotations of feminine vice. Yet in the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible used in medieval Western Europe, the Latin term in this passage was *coccineus* [*bestiam coccineam*, scarlet-coloured beast] or *coccinus* [*purpura et coccino*, with purple and scarlet].¹²³ Variants of *coccina* were used in classical-era Latin specifically to denote kermes-dyed products.¹²⁴ *Scarletus* entered Latin and other European languages after c. 1100. The woman garbed in *coccina* in the Vulgate only became a ‘scarlet woman’ in common parlance once vernacular translations of the Bible displaced the Latin Vulgate. The first such usage the *Oxford English Dictionary* records is Spenser’s ‘scarlot whore’ in the *Faerie Queene* in 1590.¹²⁵ Thereafter, the terms ‘Scarlet whore’ and even ‘scarlet lady’ crop up in scattered use, but tend to refer quite directly to the Babylonian figure of ‘Revelations’ or even to the Catholic Pope. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that it was really only in the nineteenth century that a more general conception of the ‘scarlet woman’ as a ‘notoriously immoral woman’ truly emerged.¹²⁶ It is thanks primarily to the Victorians that ‘scarlet’ evokes the persona of a bad woman today. This figure – with its older associations of biblical apocalypse, prostitution, and gaudy, luxurious clothing – was *not* current among Chaucer’s contemporaries.

It is implausible that Chaucer intended that an identity of ‘scarlet woman’ (in her nineteenth-century cultural garb) be identified with Alisoun of Bath; however, in re-

¹²² *King James Bible Online*, [website], 2017, <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>, (accessed 22 November 2017).

¹²³ A.M. Kinney (ed.), *The Vulgate Bible: The New Testament*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 1380.

¹²⁴ Munroe, ‘The Medieval Scarlet’, p. 15.

¹²⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [website], ‘scarlet, n. and adj.’, 2017, www.oed.com/view/Entry/172079, (accessed 22 November 2017).

¹²⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

interpreting the Wife, I am not constrained to a solely fourteenth-century context. Whether explicitly or implicitly, historical fiction engages contemporary concerns and tropes, casting the present into dialogue with historically-grounded narrative and research. In her scarlet guises, I bestow the Wife with both medieval and more recent traits. Chaucer's references to 'scarlet reed', in combination with Dame Alys's own much-married state and the blatantly sexual assertions of her Prologue, prompted in my own reader-perception a connection to the immoral scarlet woman of nineteenth-century and later imagination. I deliberately play upon the multiple valencies of scarlet in my fiction – dye, cloth, flashy dresser, whoreish enemy of the Church, and immoral woman. My protagonist's primary reason for travelling to Jerusalem is grounded in the medieval meaning of scarlet: she wishes to source an ongoing supply of the dye-beetles harvested from the holy mountain Ararat, a lesser-known species of *Coccidae*.¹²⁷ It appears that scarlet – and all it represents – is what this woman most desires. So I scatter references to scarlet throughout my writing in relation to the Dame. I seed hints that my Alisoun is a 'scarlet woman' through references to these *Coccidae*, to her dye practice, to her habitual costuming in scarlet, and, of course, by portrayal of Alys as a sexual and sinful female creature – one who lures men to their ruin. So too, I sprinkle in potential connections between Alys and the Babylonian figure of Revelations: the *Canterbury Tales* Wife verges on heresy in her misinterpretation of biblical material,¹²⁸ and Chaucer hints that she twists pilgrimages and other holy activities to disturbingly worldly ends. My novel picks up on these Revelations-inflected scarlet traits. The resulting 'scarlet woman' is a cross-temporal cluster of social persons, drawing upon Chaucer's mention of 'scarlet' and 'reed' in relation to one already marked as a cloth-worker, upon the specific context of the fourteenth-century woollen industry, and upon the post-Chaucerian and biblically-inspired figure of feminine vice. What was at best a minor identity in Chaucer's portrayal is turned in my fiction into an assemblage of social persons within the Wife of Bath's character.

¹²⁷ J.H. Hofenk de Graaff and W.G.T. Roelofs, 'Dyestuffs along the Silk Road: Identification and Interpretation of Dyestuffs from Early Medieval Textiles', in R. Schorta (ed.), *Central Asian Textiles and their Contexts in the Early Middle Ages*, Riggisberg, Abegg-Stiftung, 2006, pp. 40–42.

¹²⁸ A point noted by: Heinzelman, 'Termes queinte of law', p. 12.

Social Persons in Creative Practice

This chapter has demonstrated an approach by which an initial social-person analysis of a literary character may be used as a basis for re-creating and re-interpreting that character in novel form. My process commenced with a focus upon the *Canterbury Tales*. That is, before beginning a first draft or even formulating a plan for it, I analysed Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath in terms of social persons. I conducted a close analysis of the Wife's portion of the General Prologue, the Wife's Prologue, and her Tale. The result was a voluminous profile of social persons, which only became larger when I took the scholarly literature into account. While the result was a bewilderingly large and diverse list of possibilities, certain social persons struck me as particularly dominant in Alisoun's character. 'Wife' in all its variant guises is perhaps the most obvious of these.

My analysis of the primary texts and consideration of wide range of secondary analysis also prompted the development of my own interpretive aims. The Tale's question – 'What do women most desire?' – is as pertinent today as in Chaucer's time, but also seems basically flawed. Desires change as people's characters change, even altering from moment to moment. Nor is a desire easily defined or pinned down. Is it possible to identify what one person most desires at any stage of their life, let alone define an entire gender so? And even if one could, does this achievement of desire really lead to a happily-ever-after as both the Wife's Prologue and Tale assert? This was a theme that seemed to me worth interrogating over the length of a novel and by means of a complex, mercurial character.

In order to do this, I designed a backstory plot that would show Alisoun adopting various social personae over altering life circumstances but also in response to her developing notions of what she most desires. Whilst on pilgrimage, the Wife relates tales of her past, each stage of which has involved variant persons of 'wife' and occupational identity. Presented through the Wife's narration, these past social persons seem relatively clear-cut. In the real-time of the plot, however, Alisoun's social-person identities are much more tangled, and her desires are similarly

chaotic. I complicate this by having each point-of-view character see the Dame of Bath through a different social-person lens, reflecting in turn their own personal biases and desires. Alisoun compounds this by keeping her companions off-balance in order to conceal her true purposes for pilgrimage. The accumulation of backstory social persons (none of which Alisoun ever truly shakes off), different characters' attribution of social persons to her, and Alisoun's own obfuscation is designed to render my Wife a complex and intriguing character. This complexity rests upon my referencing a range of social persons by means of textual clues, all of which derive in some way from my Fowlerian analysis of Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

Once I had analysed the primary text, read widely in the secondary literature, and plotted the thematic and social-person structure of the novel, the subsequent emergence of both major and minor social persons in the creative writing process frequently surprised me. Various hints to social persons appeared without conscious prompting as I wrote. The prior analysis and planning had furnished me with the ideas; subsequently the textual clues emerged in the drafting, seemingly of their own accord – but only because the groundwork had already been laid. Whether or not any of these clues lead a reader to imaginatively construct the same social person as I intend is irrelevant. Reader-response theory holds that each reader interprets a text differently. Cognitive literary critics agree, and would add that much construction of textual character is undertaken sub-consciously.¹²⁹ A reader's brain simply cannot encompass all the identity possibilities made available by textual clues, and so will tend to pay attention to a select few. The social persons they perceive will inevitably differ from mine, whether only in trait-makeup or in overall identity. What I hope to achieve by constructing a character by means of multiple social persons is not recognition of specific entities, but an overall felt complexity – a roundness of character, in E.M. Forster's terms. Fowler asserts that the association of multiple social persons with a single literary figure 'causes us to

¹²⁹ Critics refer to 'top-down processing' of characters, whereby pre-existing character schemata or 'mental models' are subconsciously aligned with textual clues. See Marcus Hartner's summary of the generally agreed-upon cognitive processes of character recognition, in: 'Constructing Literary Character', pp. 89–91.

feel a density in the character'.¹³⁰ This is because, while individual '[s]ocial persons are, by definition, simple and thin; positioned among a number of them, a character takes on complexity and weight'.¹³¹ In adopting Fowler's method to creative practice, I aim to endow my central character with precisely this 'complexity and weight'. I hope that this roundness offers multiple avenues of interpretation to readers – a smorgasbord of possible connections and variations.

I began this exegesis wondering why I and so many others find Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath compelling and what makes her the subject of so much academic debate. A social persons analysis provides one answer: in Chaucer's hands, Alisoun's portrayal evokes a compelling and at times conflicting complexity of social persons. She is multiplicitous and so impossible to pin down, which only challenges scholars to explicate her. Nor is the Wife alone in this character complexity – many of the *Canterbury Tales* pilgrims present similarly slippery and multiple character-profiles. Fowler herself demonstrates this, and the persuasiveness of her approach, on the Pardoner. It is no great step for me to follow Fowler in applying social-persons analysis in an academic mode to the Wife of Bath. I took a greater step in transferring the results of such scholarly analysis to the (re)creation via fiction of a literary character. This chapter indicates my manner of employing social-persons theory and analysis as a foundation for reinterpreting a complex character. While my approach began in historicist mode, following Fowler, the social-person reconstructions of the Wife in my novel operate both within and beyond a late fourteenth-century context. A historical-fiction writer – indeed any writer – inevitably reflects contemporary social currents in their writing. I cannot recreate the Wife in wholly historically-faithful terms, and nor would I want to. If a reader wants authentic fourteenth-century literature, they may read the *Canterbury Tales*. Contra John Frow, I hold that a social-persons methodology is applicable well beyond the analysis of medieval and early-modern literature. I hope I have shown that it can also fuel the reinterpretation of such character in modern historical fiction. In fact, I suspect that Fowler's theory may be more broadly applied to the

¹³⁰ Fowler, *Literary Character*, p. 9.

¹³¹ Fowler, p. 9.

depiction of character, not only to adaptations such as mine, but also to any textual enterprise that aims at the creation of 'rounded' character, be it biography, contemporary fiction, or fictions based upon real historical individuals. In Part Two, for example, I argue that a social-persons complexity of character can counter the insidious implications of portraying sexual violence against women in historical fiction. That is, the layering of multiple social persons within a single entity not only promotes character depth, but can also productively complicate ethically-fraught issues in which the character is entangled.

Part Two: Sexual Violence and the Wife

Outright complexity is only the most obvious characterisation challenge facing an adaptor of the *Wife of Bath*. While social-person analysis of a medieval text can facilitate the creation of a multi-faceted character, the social persons thus evoked in historical fiction are also shaped by contemporary genre conventions and cultural assumptions. All genres are characterised by conventions – that is how we identify them as such. I suggest that the primary convention of modern historical fiction is evident historicity: it must feature readily-recognised markers of pastness, while at the same time avoiding obvious anachronism. That is, historical fiction has to be ‘historical’, but in ways that a reader *comprehends* as historical. This primary convention of recognisably authentic history inevitably ties in with current conceptions of the past, which in turn reflect and respond to wider cultural currents.

Whatever the academic explorations into medieval lived experience, in contemporary Western culture at large the Middle Ages are synonymous with violence. The expectation of barbarism feeds into a troubling theme prevalent in medieval-set historical fiction – an emphasis on sexual violence against women. Sexualised brutality is accepted as part of the historical reality of the setting, so much so that its absence might be considered anachronistic or at least the product of rose-coloured glasses. Indication of such aggression has become a conventional feature of medieval-set fiction, and historical novels of the *Wife of Bath* are no exception. In fact, an adaptation of *Dame Alisoun* cannot avoid tackling themes of sexual violence against women even if its author wished it, for acts of such violence are vital to both plot and theme in Chaucer’s *Wife* narratives. While many other challenges in adapting Chaucer’s *Wife* to modern fiction are also impacted by an application of social persons and might have been discussed – for example, the use of Middle English in dialogue¹³² – the tangled implications of representing sexual violence particularly exercised me in rewriting *Alisoun*. The ability to negotiate

¹³² See Appendix B for an outline of my use of Chaucerian vocabulary.

thematic ethical quandaries is but one of the advantages to employing social persons in crafting fictional character, but it is a vital one.

Part Two opens with a brief summation of critical approaches to historical fiction as they relate to this thesis. I then move to a sub-species of the genre – that set in the European Middle Ages – to assert that sexual violence against women has achieved conventional status in recent medieval-set historical fiction. I illustrate my point by resort to three novels published in the last two decades: *Azincourt*, *The Thrall's Tale*, and *Bitter Greens*. Undeniably, sexual aggression *did* occur in the Middle Ages, but I argue that historicity is not the real reason why it has become a trope of medievalist fiction and fundamental influence upon female characters within it. Instead, popular assumptions about medieval barbarity cater to modern cultural currents and fuel the emphasis on past misogynist violence. The result seesaws between postfeminist complacency (New Traditionalism-style)¹³³ over current standards of female emancipation and a voyeuristic pain-pleasure in observing a brutality safely set in the past. In short, the sexual violence is Othered and conventionalised and I find the implications troubling. Yet when it comes to adapting the Wife of Bath, as I go on to discuss, a novelist cannot avoid confronting the issue of sexual violence: it plays a pivotal role in the Chaucerian Wife's narratives. That said, the *Canterbury Tales* descriptions of these narrative turning points significantly under-dramatise their sexually-violent content. More importantly, sexual violence against women in Chaucer's Wife narratives is integral to the larger thematic point. In light of this, I move to explore the ways in which four existing historical-novel adaptations of the Wife of Bath have adapted medieval material in the light of modern convention. Vera Chapman's *The Wife of Bath* (1978), Peter Ackroyd's *Clerkenwell Tales* (2004), Karen Brooks's *The Brewer's Tale* (2014), and Gregory Norminton's *Ship of Fools* (2001) are the only historical-novel adaptations of the Wife I have discovered. Each emphasises violence to a much greater degree than Chaucer, with implications ranging from objectifying female

¹³³ While the term 'postfeminism' covers a variety of concepts and approaches, I employ 'postfeminist' here in the New Traditionalism sense, that is as a 'media-driven backlash characterised by a rejection of feminist goals'. S. Genz and B.A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, p. 51.

characters as sexual victims to the fostering of New Traditionalist postfeminist complacency. In the light of these worrying implications, I needed to formulate my own approach in creative practice with care.

In brief, my strategies regarding the depiction of sexual violence in an adaptation of the Chaucerian Wife are three-fold. The first is awareness of the prevailing convention and its problematic implications. Second, I put the lessons I gleaned from this awareness into practice: sexual violence does *not* pervade and define my medieval setting. In particular, I aimed to avoid portraying Alisoun as fundamentally shaped by sexual brutality. In echo of Chaucer, I also try to ensure that any such violence is thematically significant rather than simply generating interest and plot-driving conflict. Third, I invoke a number of social person positions in *The Jerusalem Tales*, each offering a variant narrative on gendered brutality. The final section of this chapter outlines my strategy in these regards. Sexual violence against women is a direct inversion of 'what women most desire'. That is why it is present in Chaucer's Wifely narratives, in however understated a manner, and that is why I cannot simply omit it from *The Jerusalem Tales*. As both an ideologically-fraught trope of medievalist historical fiction and a necessary element of Chaucer's Wife narratives, sexual violence is a topic that adaptations of the Wife of Bath must address.

Historical Fiction: Caught Between Past and Present

The term 'historical fiction' covers an enormous variety of texts. Jerome de Groot's recent study on the topic encompasses 'film, television and novels concerned with the past'.¹³⁴ I focus more narrowly on full-length historical novels, yet even this subsection of the genre covers enormous variation. Works range from easy-reading adventures in the Wild West and romances in Regency England, to novels blending surrealism with historical realism, adaptations of historical literature, and historiographic metafiction. Very little unites this diverse field except that the action of each novel occurs predominantly within an identifiable historical setting (critics

¹³⁴ *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*, London and New York, Routledge, 2016, p. 2.

are divided on just how far back in time this needs to be). I assert that a second and related feature unites the vast majority of modern historical novels: they must be well-supplied with markers of evident historicity. These markers of pastness must be readily recognised as such by readers: to borrow a term from fantasy fiction, a novel's historical 'world building' rests on the provision of many small but specific and congruous details. Or, in echo of non-fiction history, such details provide the material 'evidence' that supports the larger historical argument. A reader will not believe in a novel's historical world unless it bears hallmarks of accepted historicity.

The effort the authors of historical novels go to to persuade readers of the authenticity of their settings points to an ever-present tension between pastness and present in historical fiction. As Jerome de Groot notes,

An historical novel is always a slightly more inflected form than most other types of fiction, the reader of such a work slightly more self-aware of the artificiality of the writing and the strangeness of engaging with imaginary work which strives to explain something that is other than one's contemporary knowledge and experience: the past.¹³⁵

A reader's familiarity with the genre's conventions – and their reading-matter's adherence to such conventions – helps to mask this awareness of artificiality. De Groot notes the fondness of historical novels for paratextual forms of 'evidence' – the author's note, maps, quotations from primary sources, a bibliography, occasionally even footnotes.¹³⁶ In part, these paratexts echo and authorise themselves via non-fiction histories – yes, we are properly historical, they intimate. Gillian Polack's interviews with historical novelists demonstrates just how seriously many writers take historical research and fidelity to the past.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, historical novels are inevitably shaped by the contexts in which they are written and published.

¹³⁵ *The Historical Novel*, Florence, Taylor and Francis, 2009, p. 4.

¹³⁶ *The Historical Novel*, pp. 6–7, 9, 15–16 and 63.

¹³⁷ 'Conceptualising the Past: How Fiction Writers Talk About the Middle Ages', *Working Papers on the Web*, vol. 9, 2006, <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/historicising/Polack.htm> (accessed 23 October 2018).

The understanding that historical fiction reinterprets the past in terms of present preoccupations has guided much of the scholarly analysis of the genre in recent decades.¹³⁸ In part, this is because anglophone literary critique over the last half-century has been strongly informed by Cultural Studies, prompting critics to view cultural artefacts (such as novels) as lenses through which to examine the culture which produced them.¹³⁹ From this angle, my assertion that historical fiction reinterprets the past in terms of present preoccupations simply reiterates a central Cultural Studies tenet: that all cultural artefacts are profoundly shaped by the culture that produces them. The writing of historical narrative – whether in the mode of fiction or non-fiction – is prompted by contemporary motivations, and is shaped, however unconsciously, by the author's social context.

Georg Lukács, as most influential commentator on the historical novel of the twentieth century, cemented the critical association between historical fictions and the society from which they sprang. His study of *The Historical Novel* is grounded upon the Marxist-informed connection he drew between societal forces and their cultural products. In his analysis, the historical novel developed its true form in reaction to revolutionary changes in European politics in the early nineteenth century,¹⁴⁰ and has continued to evolve under demonstrable economic and political pressures.¹⁴¹ Although more recent commentators may contest aspects of Lukács' argument,¹⁴² his fundamental principle that the historical novel should be read in the light of the society that produced it remains dominant.

¹³⁸ For example: J. Adams, 'Marketing the Medieval: The Quest for Authentic History in Michael Crichton's *Timeline*', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2003, pp. 704–723; H. Hughes, *The Historical Romance, 1890-1990*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993; and D. Wallace, Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

¹³⁹ G. Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory*, Williston, Wiley, 2007, p. 77.

¹⁴⁰ G. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. H. and S. Mitchell, London, Merlin Press, 1962, p. 19.

¹⁴¹ For example, p. 332.

¹⁴² For example: P. Anderson, 'From Progress to Catastrophe', *London Review of Books*, vol. 33, no. 15, July 2011, p. 27; de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, pp. 11–14; and R. Maxwell, *The Historical Novel in Europe, 1650-1950*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p.1.

But should the interpretation of the past in terms of present preoccupations be taken as a given? Historians now largely accept that their research and writings cannot avoid the influence of authorial subjectivity, and that this subjectivity is coloured by the contemporary milieu.¹⁴³ Hayden White went so far as to assert that, as a form of narrative, historical explanations were closely aligned to fictions.¹⁴⁴ Gillian Pollack's interviews suggest that many such novelists rely primarily upon works of history, only supplementing them with resort to primary sources.¹⁴⁵ Even if an historical novelist drew the bulk of their research from primary historical sources, the resulting work of 'history' would surely partake of as much subjectivity as a history labelled asserted to be 'non-fiction'. The novelist, like the historian, is constrained by expectations of genre - although the conventions differ. Christopher Kremmer sums the situation up elegantly:

History is not imaginary, but it is imagined. Real things really happened, but the ways in which we represent them – literally, re-present them – in narrative form, using a combination of facts and our historical imaginations, can only ever achieve a partial, incomplete and distorted version of the past. Our histories – fictional and non fictional – are hybrid creations comprising evidence, speculation and invention.¹⁴⁶

A Convention of Medieval-Set Historical Fiction

Sexual violence against women has achieved conventional status in recent medieval-set historical fiction. And why not? Everybody knows that the medieval era was characterised by violence, and lots of it – torture, witch-burning, sword-swinging, self-torment in the name of religion, and the list goes on. If the primary characteristic of historical fiction is its evident historicity, then of course a historical condition prevalent in the period ought to be so reflected. Not to do so would be

¹⁴³For example, see: F. Ankersmit, *Meaning Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2012, pp. 220–225; and E.H. Carr, *What Is History?: The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge, January–March 1961*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1986, pp. 6–7, 19, and 23–24

¹⁴⁴ *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, pp. 5–7.

¹⁴⁵ 'Conceptualising the Past', 2006.

¹⁴⁶ 'From Dialectics to Dialogue: Bakhtin, White and the 'Moorings' of Fiction and History', *TEXT*, vol. 28, 2015, p. 2.

anachronistic. If one adds generalised and widespread violence to a context in which women were legally, theologically, and even medically inferior to and thus subject to men, then it seems self-evident that medieval women would have been continually threatened by sexual brutality. While there is certainly evidence that lawlessness was considered a serious problem in various medieval contexts,¹⁴⁷ I agree with Albrecht Classen that we cannot assume that our modern world is less violent than in the medieval past in any absolute sense, although the means and geographical foci may have altered.¹⁴⁸ Quantitative comparison of past and present sexual violence is quite impracticable. For example, we have scant documentary evidence for medieval sexual violence against women in categories such as domestic abuse, a form of violence pertinent to the Wife's Prologue, largely because it was seldom prosecuted in court;¹⁴⁹ even in the twenty-first century, underreporting of sexual violence continues to bedevil quantification.¹⁵⁰

Unfortunately, as Gillian Polack points out, 'The popular understanding of the Middle Ages rests far more on modern Medievalism than on modern historical narratives.'¹⁵¹ That this was a physically brutal age is one of the dominant, perhaps *the* dominant popular conception of the Middle Ages operating in Western culture today. Umberto Eco famously outlined, with whatever degree of seriousness, 'Ten Little Middle Ages' – an assortment of modern modes of viewing and appropriating the thousand years of history in Europe between, at one end, the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and, at the other, the Reformation and Renaissance. The third mode on Eco's list is 'The Middle Ages as a *barbaric* age, a land of elementary

¹⁴⁷ See for example John Bellamy's summary of the evidence for widespread criminal violence in: *Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 1–10.

¹⁴⁸ A. Classen, *Sexual Violence and Rape in the Middle Ages: A Critical Discourse in Premodern German and European Literature*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2011, p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ E. Salisbury, G. Donavin, and M. Llewelyn Price, 'Introduction', in E. Salisbury, G. Donavin, and M. Llewelyn Price (ed's), *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2002, pp. 9–12.

¹⁵⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia 2018*, Canberra, AIHW, 2018, p. 5. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/behaviours-risk-factors/domestic-violence/overview> (accessed 1 December 2018).

¹⁵¹ 'Novelists and their History', *Rethinking History*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2014, p. 535.

and outlaw feelings.¹⁵² Eco here defines ‘a shaggy medievalism’ characterised by ‘virile, brute force’.¹⁵³ Unsatisfied with Eco’s ten rather jumbled and inconsistent categories,¹⁵⁴ David Matthews whittles the list down to two primary medievalisms: the gothic-grotesque and the romantic-chivalric.¹⁵⁵ In the former, violence is key. Matthews asserts this to be:

a *gothic or grotesque* Middle Ages, entailing the assumption that anything medieval will involve threat, violence and warped sexuality (conversely, and somewhat self-fulfillingly, this view assumes that where the threat of sexual violence is made, something medieval is going on).¹⁵⁶

There are clear similarities between Eco’s ‘barbaric’ Middle Ages and Matthews’ gothic-grotesque: Eco points to ‘force’ of feeling and action, while Matthews more directly indicates violence. Eco, translated in 1986, hints at sexual undertones by referencing ‘virile, brute force’, while Matthews in 2015 clearly flags a gothic-grotesque defined by ‘violence and warped sexuality’. If anything, the differing emphases of these theorists of medievalism suggest a recent increase in the portrayal of the medieval as violent, and often sexually so.¹⁵⁷

Certainly, it is undeniable that violence *did* occur in the Middle Ages. Yet, as Matthews points out, the persecution of witches is primarily an early modern phenomenon and torture was illegal throughout much of medieval Europe;¹⁵⁸ further, the Roman Empire that preceded the Middle Ages was the product of brutal military domination and the modern period that succeeded it was no model of passivity. Why then are the Middle Ages singled out as especially horrific in this

¹⁵² U. Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. W. Weaver, London, Picador, 1987, p. 69.

¹⁵³ Eco, p. 69.

¹⁵⁴ D. Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2015, pp. 18–19. Others have also pointed out the jumbled, if still useful, nature of Eco’s taxonomy; for example: W.F. Woods, ‘Seeking the Human Image in *The Advocate*’, *Studies in Medievalism*, vol. 7, 2002, p. 55.

¹⁵⁵ Alain Corbellari echoes Matthews’ binary division, asserting that modern notions of the Middle Ages vacillate ‘between light and dark’, ‘rose-tinted’ and ‘shadowed’. In: ‘Is Medievalism Reactionary?: From between the World Wars to the Twenty-first Century: On the Notion of Progress in our Perception of the Middle Ages’, *Studies in Medievalism*, vol. 18, 2009, p. 103.

¹⁵⁶ Matthews, *Medievalism*, p. 15.

¹⁵⁷ Amy Kaufman describes a prevalent fantasy of the medieval as attractive, although ‘full of pain, fear, suffering, evil, and self-indulgent gender discrimination’. In: ‘Medieval unmoored’, *Studies in Medievalism*, vol. 19, 2010, p. 6.

¹⁵⁸ *Medievalism*, p. 13.

regard? Oddly enough, intellectual shortcomings are seen to be the primary problem. The popular image of this period is of 'primitive, violent, tribal, barbaric, and irrational actions, tyrannical systems of government, and uncivilized ways of living'.¹⁵⁹ The Middle Ages was invented in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in distinction to the contemporary rebirth of classical learning and intellectual, moral, and religious Enlightenment.¹⁶⁰ That stretch of European history which separated Rome and the Renaissance is by contrast seen as an age of animalistic urges. Of course in such a context sexual violence is conceived to be rampant. It is practically symbolic of the period.

Unquestionably, women were subjugated throughout Europe in the Middle Ages. For example, the physical correction of wives was sanctioned by many ecclesiastics as a reasonable means of controlling unruly womanhood.¹⁶¹ But the more fundamental question I am addressing is – why is the 'gothic-grotesque' in the form of sexual violence against women reiterated so conventionally in modern fiction of this setting? Are we still defining ourselves against a barbaric Middle Ages, perhaps congratulating ourselves on how far female emancipation has advanced by portraying the imagined depths of past feminine abjection? Or is it as simple as sex sells, and violent sex sells better still, especially when it is offered at the safe distance of fiction set centuries ago, in what is very nearly a fantasy setting? Marilyn Desmond notes the popularity of 'medieval' scripts in sadomasochistic enactments:¹⁶² in a sadomasochistic context, in which erotic charge is paramount, the Middle Ages are chosen for their perceived violence, sexual kinkiness, and barbaric Otherness. I propose that a similar urge underlies much of the sexual violence against women in recent medievalist fiction. Indeed, sexual violence is fundamental to the portrayal of the Wife of Bath in each of the four novels I have encountered that adapt her into historical fiction. The motivation for this portrayal is not solely to be found in the sexual violence present in Chaucer. Not only is

¹⁵⁹ T. Pugh and A.J. Weisl, *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 141.

¹⁶⁰ Matthews, *Medievalism*, pp. 20–21.

¹⁶¹ Salisbury, Donavin, and Llewelyn Price, 'Introduction', pp. 6–9.

¹⁶² *Ovid's Art*, p. 5.

violence of a gothic-grotesque cast integral to contemporary imaginings of the Middle Ages – as Eco and Matthews assert – but recent historical fictions conventionally characterise medieval females as victims of sexual brutality or in some way defined by it. Before turning to the four Wife of Bath novels, I illustrate this tendency by reference to three historical novels disparate in chronological and geographical setting but united in the portrayal of medieval womanhood as subject to barbaric sexual violence.

Azincourt

Bernard Cornwell is an immensely successful and influential author of historical fiction. He achieved fame with his nineteenth-century-set Sharpe series, but has since written many medieval-set fictions. Cornwell casts nearly all of his novels in military contexts; unsurprisingly, they frequently portray quite visceral violence, although most often against men. Violence against women occurs too, and, when it does, it is almost always of a sexual nature. The very catalyst for the (male) hero's experience of war in *Azincourt*, Cornwell's novel of Henry V's famous 1415 victory in France, is an act of horrific sexual brutality against a woman. In the 'Prologue', archer Nicholas Hook is one of the soldiers ordered to assist with the execution of Lollard heretics in London. In putting a noose around the neck of a saintly old man, Nick discovers that the old man too was an archer. The condemned man begs Nick to save his similarly-condemned granddaughter. Unfortunately for her, the granddaughter is angelically beautiful, so catching the eye of the priest in Nick's company. The priest, Sir Martin, takes the girl to the stable to 'pray' with her, and Nick realises it is his heavenly duty to save the girl from the lascivious priest. He punches Sir Martin, but is apprehended before he can do more.

Nick Hook was suddenly drained. He had hit a priest, a well-born priest, a man of the gentry, Lord Slayton's own kin. The Perrill brothers were mocking him, but Hook did not hear their words, instead he heard Sarah's smock being torn and heard her scream and heard the scream stifled and he heard the rustling of straw and he heard Sir Martin grunting and Sarah whimpering, and Hook ... knew that he was failing God.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ B. Cornwell, *Azincourt*, London, Harper Collins, 2009, p. 26.

Worse is to follow. Sir Martin emerges from the stable:

‘There,’ he said, ‘that didn’t take long. You want her, Tom?’ He spoke to the older Perrill brother, ‘she’s yours if you want her. Juicy little thing she is, too! Just slit her throat when you’re done.’¹⁶⁴

There is nothing Nick can do, and this event sets the plot trajectory of the novel in motion. Sarah herself never says a word. She is simply a beautiful, innocent female object presented to spur men – and the plot – into action. As a result of hitting Sir Martin, Nick is outlawed and ends up fighting in France, eventually at Agincourt. He also feels cursed by God for failing to save Sarah. This prompts him to save another girl threatened with rape and probable death later on, who then becomes his lover. At the end of the novel, Nick’s now-wife is threatened by the same rapist priest, but manages to kill him. Sexual violence thus bookends the plot, with the death of the evil priest helping to provide a ‘satisfying’ resolution.

While Cornwell does not describe what occurs to Sarah in detail, quite enough material is provided that the reader imagines the abuse clearly. Of course, the reader is positioned to condemn Sir Martin and sympathise with Sarah and Nick. These are violent medieval times, we understand. War is in the air. In an age of unreasoning obedience to orthodox Catholicism, doubtless a well-born priest could get away with rape and murder. Cornwell portrays sexual violence in the mode of gritty historical reality. This is how it was. We are to condemn this medieval barbarity from the safety of civilized modernity. But *Azincourt* is entertainment, not a work of social activism. We cannot change the abuses of a long-distant past, even if they did occur as Cornwell presents; instead, viewing such violence as safely contained by an Othered Middle Ages intimates that such things do *not* happen today.

What then is the function of sexual brutality against women in such an historical novel, and particularly when used as a key inciting (and concluding) moment in its plot? Might not Hook have been spurred to Agincourt action without a wordless angel’s rape and murder? In part, such scenes cast Nick as a kind of lower-class

¹⁶⁴ Cornwell, p. 27.

knight whose purpose it is to rescue damsels in distress. He is thus a true medieval hero. More insidiously, I suggest, this sort of conventionalised scene packages sexualised violence against women as entertainment, while allowing the reader the moral comfort of condemnation and distancing the author from any evident charge of misogyny or indulgence in sadism. *Azincourt* offers a good example of a phenomenon that has become conventional. The rape of women (or at least its ever-present threat) is habitually portrayed in medieval-set historical fiction. Precisely because sexual violence has become a conventional trope, authors such as Cornwell are likely to reproduce the trope as a historical norm without consideration of underlying implications. Female authors too reproduce these tropes, and frequently within novels that present female characters first abused and then empowered as a result. Kate Forsyth's and Judith Lindbergh's historical novels, located at opposite ends of the medieval geographical and temporal spectrum, offer two such examples.

The Thrall's Tale

Judith Lindbergh's *The Thrall's Tale* is set at the close of the tenth century in newly-settled Greenland. Its female protagonist, Katla, is a slave – a 'thrall' – who is sexually victimised by her master's eldest son, Torvald. Reader-sympathy quickly settles upon Katla as the first-person narrator, while Lindbergh's opening description of Torvald is evidently designed to cast him as a villain:

He grips my chin with such a force I have to look at him: at his slack, grizzled cheeks and his weak, small mouth with its breath smelling thick and putrid. Torvald holds me, smiling. I am not sure what he wants, if he might bite my face or try to kiss me.¹⁶⁵

Torvald's actions match his ugly appearance and foul smell (a barbaric Middle Ages generally smells bad); the threat of sexual violence is announced loud and clear. Sure enough, despite her master's protection, Torvald, jealous that Katla has looked at another man, declares that he will ensure no one ever wants her again. A horrific rape scene follows in which Katla is struck repeatedly about the head and swallows

¹⁶⁵ J. Lindbergh, *The Thrall's Tale*, Sydney, Bantam, 2006, p. 13.

one of her own teeth. Torvald then bites off one of Katla's nipples and rapes her brutally.¹⁶⁶ As a result, Katla is irreparably scarred, mentally and physically, and worse – she bears Torvald's child. The description of violent rape is horribly detailed and Katla's despair pervades much of the novel.

Of all medieval peoples, those we now call the 'Vikings' are typically cast as the most violent and barbarically virile.¹⁶⁷ *The Thrall's Tale* is based upon the Old Norse texts known as *Eirik's Saga* and *Grænlandinga Saga* which describe the colonisation of Greenland by Icelanders and their accidental discovery of North America. These are medieval adventurers beyond the bounds of civilization. Torvald is depicted as the very worst of their type – a Viking utterly animalistic in violence and sexuality, unredeemed by any good quality. He is a representative of a pagan culture yet to be 'civilized' by Christianity. Other Norsemen in the novel are depicted in less extreme shades than Torvald – his father, Katla's master for one. Yet modern readers find Torvald's extreme and sadistic sexuality believable *because* we understand him to be a Viking, a barbaric violator of Christian Europe. His purpose in the story is to portray the worst aspects of the pagan Northmen, depravity which the coming of Christianity will temper. His violence towards Katla drives the story and shapes the heroine's character and even her body. The Viking violator of women is a conventionalised type – a stereotype – and Torvald has very little character dimension beyond his pervasive ugliness. Katla is the powerless female object this Viking wreaks his virility upon, and it scars her for life. I must admit to feeling very uncomfortable when I read *The Thrall's Tale*, not only during the description of Katla's rape but also in the bleakness that follows. What, I asked myself, was the purpose of this dwelling upon sexual sadism and its enduring power? What larger purpose justifies the presentation of such horror? I find only two apparent reasons for this violence: character or plot development (in the absence of Torvald's abuse, there would be little story or dramatic change in Katla's character), and historical

¹⁶⁶ Lindbergh, p. 55.

¹⁶⁷ Erika Ruth Sigurdson's article on 'Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction' convincingly establishes the popular-culture association of Vikings and 'rape'. *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 86, no. 3, 2014, pp. 249–267.

realism. Regarding the latter, Lindbergh goes to great research lengths to recreate an authentic Viking Age world, including travelling to remote Greenland.¹⁶⁸ *The Thrall's Tale* is impressively furnished with period details. Female helplessness in the face of horrific sexual violence is of a piece with this warts-and-all realism.¹⁶⁹ The underlying cultural assumption is that this was the fundamental medieval female experience, and one that Lindbergh certainly doesn't shy away from. *This* is how the Middle Ages was, particularly if one was an attractive female in the company of Vikings.

Bitter Greens

Kate Forsyth's *Bitter Greens* is an intricate and multi-stranded novel set over two centuries. The act of horrific sexual violence that sets the narrative in motion, however, occurs at the very end of the Middle Ages, in Venice. It is a truly 'medieval' start to a historical novel set primarily in the early modern period.

Bitter Greens retells the fairy story of Rapunzel, the long-haired maiden locked in a tower by a witch after her father steals the eponymous bitter greens from the witch's garden. In Forsyth's version, the witch was not born evil – she was driven to it by horrific experience. As a girl, Selena Leonelli lay hidden under the bed upon which her beloved mother was raped by 39 men in an incredibly sadistic act of revenge:

'You may have her when I am finished,' Zusto da Grittoni said. I heard my mother gasp as her clothes were torn away, then a moist thwacking sound as the bed rocked and squeaked. I shrank back, making myself as small as possible. 'You're all wet and ready for me. Or is that the juices of your lover? Should I thank him for preparing the way for me? I would ... if he was not already dead.'

My mother gave a guttural cry. The bed rattled as she tried to fight him off. A slap, a cry of pain, and Zusto da Grittoni ... slapped her again, calling her terrible names ... each word punctuated by a blow. It seemed to go on forever.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Lindbergh, *The Thrall's Tale*, p. 453.

¹⁶⁹ Sigurdson points out that such violence is used to add 'authenticity' to modern depictions of Vikings: 'rape is used as a historicizing device; it signals that we are in "brutal and mysterious" times.' 'Violence and Historical Authenticity', p. 252.

¹⁷⁰ K. Forsyth, *Bitter Greens*, Sydney, Vintage, 2012, p. 214.

The rape goes on for another page and a half in this vein, full of detail, pain, and helplessness. Yet the man who sets this revenge in motion is not a husband or a lover, but merely a regular client of Selena's prostitute mother. The gang-rape is quite scantily motivated – the reader has no idea what makes Zusto so villainous or why he takes the defection of a prostitute so seriously. If Zusto da Grittoni echoes a medieval stereotype, it is of Italianate sophistication, nearly the opposite of an earthy early-medieval Viking. What they both share, spanning the spectrum of medieval geography and chronology, is barbarity (if of different brands) and an urge for extreme sexual violence. Zusto's purpose in the narrative seems solely to drive Selena to witchcraft. He makes no further appearance in the plot, and is disposed of in a sentence: 'By the end of winter, when the streets of Venice were flooded with icy water, Zusto da Grittoni had hanged himself from his bedposts.'¹⁷¹ Tortured by the nightmares she sends him, Da Grittoni becomes the new witch's first victim – but he is certainly not her last. Extreme sexual violence here is used as an extreme shaper of female character.

In each of these novels – *Azincourt*, *The Thrall's Tale*, and *Bitter Greens* – extreme violence of a sexual nature is perpetrated on a female character as a key driver of narrative and character development. I picked these three examples for their diverse settings across time and place, but also for their divergence in other ways. *Azincourt* is a novel about war viewed through a male protagonist. Its readers are largely, if not exclusively, male. *The Thrall's Tale* and *Bitter Greens* are both narrated by and are largely about female protagonists, and their cover images declare their gynocentric content, both featuring women surrounded by feminised trappings (whereas the cover of my edition of *Azincourt* displays weaponry). A largely female readership is implied. *Azincourt* and *The Thrall's Tale* are based upon specific historical events, and are very much in the classical mode of the historical novel as delineated by George Lukács – fictional central characters and real secondary figures dramatising a momentous event in history.¹⁷² *Bitter Greens*, on the other hand, contains elements of fantasy appropriate to a re-imagining of a famous fairy-

¹⁷¹ Forsyth, p. 225.

¹⁷² A. Heller, 'The Contemporary Historical Novel', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 106, no. 1, 2011, p. 90.

tale, but combines this with detailed historical research and real historical figures as secondary characters (the artist Titian, members of the Sun King's court). What unites these novels is their recent publication, impressively-detailed historical research, and employment of extreme sexual violence as key narrative and character turning-points. This sexual violence, nestled within evidently well-researched texts, is presented as simply another instance of historical realism, an impression that chimes with current reader assumptions about the nature of the Middle Ages. In social-person terms, relatively few textual cues are needed to conjure a social-person type already associated with the genre and context. The result is circular – a pre-existing notion of the sexually objectified and abused medieval female is reinforced by its reiteration in evidently-researched historical fictions. As Jerome de Groot so aptly puts it, historical fictions of all stripes 'contribute to the historical imaginary that they enable and resource.'¹⁷³ Fiction supports the 'historical imaginary' which then supports the credibility of the fiction: in this case, readers are likely to simply accept the detailed sexual abuse as unavoidable historical fact. This violence is then used to explain female character actions and traits: medieval women are thus represented as fundamentally shaped by a sexual violence they cannot (narratively) escape.

Sexual Violence in Chaucer

In the light of this tendency for historical fictions of the Middle Ages to dwell upon sexual violence against women – with dubious results – it would seem desirable to avoid the presentation or at least the emphasis of such material in fiction. In choosing to adapt the Wife of Bath, however, I cannot avoid confronting potentially prurient and certainly troubled content, for sexual violence against women plays an integral if understated role in Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath and her Tale.

In the *Canterbury Tales*, the undercurrent of sexual violence begins with the Wife's first marriage. Only a few lines into the Prologue, Alisoun announces that her first marriage occurred at the age of twelve. We soon find out that this was to a much

¹⁷³ *Remaking History*, p. 2.

older man for whom she felt no desire. While marriage at twelve is unacceptable in Western societies today, female marriage and the commencement of sexual relations at twelve *was* legal in medieval England, if only just. Twelve was the minimum legal age for a female to begin full marital relations, while a male had to wait until he was fourteen.¹⁷⁴ So too, marriage to a much older man was not against the law, but add both circumstances together and the situation nudged the limits of moral acceptability, even, I would argue, for Chaucer's contemporaries. After all, Chaucer does not have the Wife assert her age for no purpose. The only other time specific ages are mentioned in the Wife's narration is in the context of her fifth marriage, in which the disparity in marital years is again of prime importance.

Rape within marriage was unintelligible as a crime in this era – it was a wife *and* a husband's duty to render the marital debt,¹⁷⁵ as the Wife herself points out. Yet clearly both the young Wife of the Prologue and the Knight of the Tale feel strong distaste at being forced into unwanted sexual relations. The Knight is so reluctant to get into bed on his wedding night that his old wife must lecture him at length and finally transform into a young woman. Potentially too, in light of the evident mirroring of Jankyn's espousal of a much older Wife in the Knight's marriage to an ugly old woman, the rape of the maiden that opens the Tale is also designed, if subtly, to mirror the Wife of Bath's initial experience of marriage. In the Wife's Tale, we are told that the Knight is riding from the river when:

He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biforn,
Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,
By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed (ll. 886–888)

This refting of maidenhead is precisely what is supposed to occur in a first marriage, although ideally without the element of force. In the Tale, this action is the catalyst for the Knight's quest and marriage to the Loathly Lady. It is also placed at a similar early juncture in the Tale to the Wife's first marriage in her Prologue. In fact, both acts of sexual violence are crucial to the future actions and plot development of the

¹⁷⁴ Patterson, *Putting the Wife in her Place*, p. 25.

¹⁷⁵ Desmond, *Ovid's Art*, p. 130.

Prologue and Tale, yet in both cases the nature and effects of the sexual violence are distinctly understated.

In fact, Chaucer's descriptions of sexual violence are so brief and de-emphasised in the Wife's Prologue and Tale that one has to pay close attention to realise this is what is being described. Given the Wife's delight elsewhere in innuendo and outright sexual reference, this is all the more notable. The Knight's crime, cited above, is really the only explicit description of sexual violence throughout the Wife's narrative, and even that is brushed over as quickly as is feasible, given its key importance to the plot. This is the more surprising as the rape is one of Chaucer's significant additions to the stories he adapted for the Tale¹⁷⁶ (namely, *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine*, and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*).¹⁷⁷ Evidently, Chaucer felt that this instance of sexual violence was necessary to his own adaptive aims: the act of rape was chosen deliberately, for it represents a bleak negation of 'what women desire'. In modern fiction, crucial narrative turning-points tend to be dwelt upon – the novelist offers detailed description at this juncture and indications of character feeling. Not so in Chaucer – three lines are all we are given of the rape. We have no idea what prompted the Knight to 'reft' the maiden's virginity, or how either of the parties felt about it. Certainly, the conventions defining this sort of medieval poetry were different to those of modern historical fiction. Explicit sexual detail or even dwelling in a non-explicit manner upon such matters is not to be expected of courtly romance, the genre in which the Wife's Tale is cast. The Wife's Prologue, however, is no courtly tale. By all indications, the Wife herself lacks the rank to feature as such a heroine; besides, her tone too is far too earthy, sexually-laden, and peppered with oaths. The Prologue borrows from many medieval genres, but the Wife's voice would seem most attuned to fabliaux, comedies of lower-class sexual antics. Yet fabliaux do not generally focus upon sexual violence but rather consensual

¹⁷⁶ H. Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 159.

¹⁷⁷ First identified by: G. Maynadier, *The Wife of Bath's Tale: Its Sources and Analogues*, London, Nutt, 1901.

misdemeanours.¹⁷⁸ Yet despite the minimal description of the actions themselves, sexual violence against women undeniably underpins the Wife's Prologue and Tale. It is thematically necessary as the antithesis to what women most desire.

In the scene in which violence is described in greatest detail in the Wife's narration, the sexual dimensions are understated but definitely present. Towards the end of the Prologue, Alisoun's fifth husband, Jankyn, pains his Wife beyond all endurance by his incessant reading aloud from the 'Book of Wikked Wyves'. As a result, Alisoun tells us:

And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun.
And he up stirte as dooth a wood leoun,
And with his fest he smoot me on the heed
That in the floor I lay as I were deed. (ll. 788–796)

While the violence described is not overtly sexual, it is clear that sexual dominance is at stake in this altercation. Nor is it one-sided. Jankyn has been bringing the error of her domineering ways to his Wife's attention by reference to other bad wives and the fates they met. From his point of view, gossiping, wandering Alisoun has already given him ample reason to lecture her. She reacts violently, both to Jankyn's book and to his person. His counter-reaction is to wallop her so hard that he fears he has killed her. This is a violent negotiation of gender dominance in marriage. Jankyn is so shaken by his close call with murder that he yields Alisoun 'al the soveraynetee' in their marriage from that moment on (l. 818). The result is marital bliss. Alisoun has achieved her prayed-for desire:

Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde (ll. 1258–1260)

Her ideal husband is both meek and 'fressh abedde'. He does not offer aggression, and is all the more sexually attractive for it. Violence is shown to be a necessary

¹⁷⁸ For example, see Lisa Perfetti's analysis of 'The Lewd and the Ludic: Female Pleasure in the Fabliaux', in H.A. Crocker (ed.), *Comic Provocations: Exposing the Corpus of Old French Fabliaux*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 17–31.

turning point in Alisoun's relations with her fifth husband. It is the catalyst for her happily-ever-after, one that features female dominance and sexual pleasure rather than the male achievement through violence of those ends. Thus the Wife's history of husbands begins and ends with sexualised violence and her Tale requires the Knight to commit a sexual crime in order that he be forced to reform. An adaptation of the Wife of Bath cannot ignore these narrative turning points without significantly altering both the structure of the plot and the central theme of 'what women desire'. Historical-novel adaptors of the Wife have not overlooked this theme. In what follows, I explore four such re-tellings of the Wife of Bath, before setting out my own solutions to the creative re-writing of medieval sexual violence.

Historical-Novel Wives and Sexual Violence

The Wife of Bath

Vera Chapman's adaptation of Chaucer's poetry into historical fiction offers a psychologised explanation for the Wife's *Canterbury Tales* actions while remaining substantially faithful to a literal interpretation of Chaucer's text. It is the only instance among the four Wife-adaptations that I have encountered that focuses on Alisoun as the primary character and undertakes – as I do – a novel-length reinterpretation of Chaucer's character. It is also the earliest of the four texts I examine and notably the least explicit or brutal regarding sexual violence. Nevertheless, Chapman not only expands upon the intimations of sexual violence in Chaucer's text but also invents a notable new addition, the latter combining salaciousness with an oddly orientalising barbarity. The result is an adaptation of the Wife in which sexual violence is naturalised within a barbaric medieval setting, shapes Alison's actions to a fundamental degree, and is even shown to be erotically stimulating when taken in moderate doses.

Chapman sets her Dame Alison¹⁷⁹ on pilgrimage to Canterbury in company with a full complement of *Canterbury Tales* characters. En route, Alison is upset by the

¹⁷⁹ Chapman adopts the modern spelling of 'Alison' for her character, which usefully distinguishes her from my character, spelled in the Riverside Chaucer manner as 'Alisoun'.

Prioress's caustic judgement of her morals and tearfully confides in the character Geoffrey Chaucer:

'Master Chaucer, do you think I'm a very wicked woman?'

'How do I know?' He smiled encouragingly ... 'Come make your confession to me, and I'll see if I can shrive you.'¹⁸⁰

The resulting confession takes up the bulk of the novel and is presented as the 'true' story upon which Chaucer based his character. In doing so, Chapman essentially produces an apologetic for Chaucer's more radical character. Alison suspects even as she confides in Chaucer that her listener is making his own biased interpretation of her account:

The poet seemed to have a fixed picture of her as an accomplished termagant, with a rolling-pin for any man's head, able to dominate them all. Well, life had made her something like that, but a woman didn't begin that way. Once she had been vulnerable and helpless [...]'¹⁸¹

The reader is to understand that Chaucer twisted the truth Alison tells him to his own ends when he created the *Canterbury Tales*. In Chapman's account, Alison is revealed to have been primarily a victim – of patriarchal structures generally and sexual violence specifically. Any outrageous behaviour she commits is prompted by her prior victimisation. 'Once she had been vulnerable and helpless', but oppression, particularly of a sexual nature, is shown to have significantly shaped her character.

The first turning point in the life of Chapman's Alison is supplied by the threat of sexual violence in the form of a terrifying and bestial friar. A 'lymytour', such as is mentioned in the Chaucerian Wife's Tale as a displacer of fairies from English woods, threatens young Alison with dishonour (l. 874). When the friar, 'a big, rough, hairy fellow',¹⁸² pursues Alison,

terror beyond all description possessed her; every kind and degree and element of fear – plain animal instinct of flight, shocked repugnance at the obscenity and foulness of the thing that followed her; creepy almost superstitious dread ... all these, and worse. If it had been some

¹⁸⁰ V. Chapman, *The Wife of Bath*, New York, Avon, 1978, p. 29.

¹⁸¹ Chapman, pp. 30–31.

¹⁸² Chapman, p. 43.

bloodthirsty beast that would kill and devour her and be done with it, she would have been less terrified.¹⁸³

The friar is barbarity embodied, a warped representative of medieval Catholicism, bestial, and 'obscene'. Alison is rescued by a handsome young man and consensual sex with him results. As such, this recipe of violence followed by sex recalls Matthews' asserted tension and balance between the gothic-grotesque and the romantic-chivalric strains of medievalism. Just as in Matthew's analysis of John Everett Millais' painting of *The Knight Errant*,¹⁸⁴ the helpless maiden is rescued from sexual violence by a handsome young 'knight'. As his reward, the rescuer gets the girl – as is conventionally the case. The threat of violence must exist to offer romantic-chivalric medievalism a force to counter.¹⁸⁵ The first seems a necessary narrative prompt for the second to occur: only a gallant rescue from a monstrous holy man provides sufficient impetus to throw Alisoun into her rescuer's arms.

On returning home after an eventful day, Alison declares that the friar *did* rape her, and her panicked parents immediately marry her off to her first old husband in case of pregnancy. The near-rape thus becomes the catalyst for Alison's future character and plot trajectory as she tumbles from one disastrous marriage to the next as a result. If only she had managed to marry her handsome young rescuer-seducer, then her life would have been entirely different, if a lot less interesting. Indeed, *The Wife of Bath* ends with the rediscovery of this first love at Canterbury and we may assume that Alison lives happily ever after with him.

But before Chapman's Alison can marry her sixth (and final?) husband, she must experience the woe that is in marriage with the preceding five. Both her first old husband and the second are benign figures. The third husband, however, is neither old nor benign. Harry takes the place of the Chaucerian Wife's fourth husband. In Chapman as in Chaucer he is a 'revelour' (l. 453), but Chapman also makes this Harry a drunkard, serially unfaithful, and a wife-beater. More problematically, Chapman's Alison does not object to any of the three within reasonable bounds:

¹⁸³ Chapman, p. 44.

¹⁸⁴ *Medievalism*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁸⁵ Matthews, p. 30.

It was a game at first – an uproarious rough game, at which she could always beat him, being sober. But it got a bit tiring, night after night, and after a while he was less playful and more malicious and it grew less and less funny. ... Wearily, every morning, aching all over, she would have to set to and clear up the mess. The neighbours were talking again – many men, especially in that seafaring community, got drunk now and again and beat their wives, but none so outrageously.¹⁸⁶

That this violence is sexually-inflected is intimated by the ‘uproarious rough game’. The reader recollects that, when she wedded ‘loud-mouthed, hard-drinking, jovial Harry,’ Alison ‘discovered a new thing in herself. This was that Nature had gifted her with a remarkable quality of sexual responsiveness.’¹⁸⁷ Although it is not stated, the implication is that Harry’s brand of rough joviality triggers his Wife’s sexual response. This is further implied by the resolution of the couple’s first violent argument (over infidelity): ‘in the end he took her in his arms, and they resolved their conflict in lovers’ fashion, and she slept.’¹⁸⁸ Violence leads to sex, and the marital violence continues. Alison defends herself and her children, and Alison’s brothers remonstrate with Harry, but nothing stops Harry until he is fatally stabbed. On his deathbed, Harry apologises yet again:

‘Alison, my love – oh, I’ve been a bad husband to you. A bad old bastard. I’m sorry.’

The tears were pouring down her face.

‘No, dear love. Not a bad husband. A good husband – the best.’

And at the time she really meant it.¹⁸⁹

Chapman here plays with the Chaucerian Wife’s assertion regarding her husbands that ‘thre of hem were goode, and two were badde./ The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde’ (ll. 196–197). Harry is clearly a ‘bad’ husband – he is a violent drunkard and, in Chaucerian terms, he is not one of the Wife’s three old and wealthy husbands (in fact, he spends Alison’s money freely). In what sense, then, does Alison ‘really’ mean he is a ‘good husband – the best’? Her discovery of responsiveness poses one answer. Her previous two old husbands had provoked no such sexual response. In this regard, Harry is ‘the best’ of her husbands so far. So

¹⁸⁶ Chapman, *The Wife of Bath*, pp. 114–115.

¹⁸⁷ Chapman, p. 103.

¹⁸⁸ Chapman, p. 112.

¹⁸⁹ Chapman, p. 116.

too, he has been a blast of fresh air after the dull and frowsty first two husbands – he has been ‘uproarious’ company. That this boisterousness and sexuality is accompanied by violence only enlivens the ‘game’, we are told – until matters get out of hand. Besides, Alison reasons, many husbands ‘got drunk now and again and beat their wives’. This is acceptable and normal. After all, this is a primitive medieval setting, in which real men are inevitably violent and women find this behaviour sexually invigorating – to a degree. In Alison’s eyes, Harry is good *because* he is bad – so long as he is not too bad, but even that excess we might expect from a medieval setting.

After the safe boredom of a fourth marriage to another old husband, the pattern of good-badness is repeated in husband five, ‘Jenkyn’. Certainly, Chapman has Chaucerian precedent to show this twenty-years-younger husband beating Alison but, rather than a single *Canterbury Tales* incident, Chapman conjures a relationship rooted in sex-and-conflict. The reader is told that, ‘In spite of their disparity in age, they each found the other a satisfying lover’.¹⁹⁰ We are told that:

That was the sweet side – but the other – well, she had known how it would be. Of course he was a spendthrift and a waster, and lived entirely on Alison How angry he used to get when she wouldn’t allow him more – yes, he’d the devil’s temper, and oh how he’d fight, yes, and claw and bite and scratch and throw the furniture about. One night loving caresses, and the next night beating – that was the pattern. But it didn’t frighten her ... she could fight back too and did. What times they did have, and how they smashed up chairs and mirrors and glasses, and then fell into each other’s arms embracing.¹⁹¹

Alison ‘had known how it would be’ – violence and sex, the one feeding off the other – and she embraced it. Chapman’s Alison is a woman of primitive medieval appetites – she delights in a mixture of violence and sex.

The trope of sex-and-violence that Chapman uses to explain the ‘badness’ of the Wife’s two younger husbands is echoed a bizarre third time in Chapman’s most notable plot-addition to her Chaucerian base. The incident of the Wife, the Moroccan Bey, and the nuns combines sexual violence with a distinctly orientalisering

¹⁹⁰ Chapman, p. 143.

¹⁹¹ Chapman, p. 144.

brand of medieval barbarity. Alison is on pilgrimage to Jerusalem a second time when her ship is captured by Moors and she and ten pilgrim-nuns are taken to the North African coast. All eleven are to become the sexual slaves of the local ruler, the Bey. Alison challenges this scheme, demanding of his Vizier:

‘So? How many women will he ravish in a night?’

The Vizier grinned more widely and counted on his fingers – on both hands. Alison shook her head, and laughed aloud.

‘He will take one, and one only.’¹⁹²

Of course, the ‘one’ is she – Alison will save the ten nuns from rape and captivity by challenging the Bey to a sexual duel: Alison wagers the Bey that bedding her will so exhaust and satisfy him that he will have no energy left for the nuns. The Bey must agree to let them *all* go if she wins their duel. Nevertheless, her laughter is only for show, and Alison’s voice is ‘dry with strain’ when she takes leave of the nuns.¹⁹³ Inwardly she prays, ‘Oh, holy Virgin, help me! I’m gambling with more than my own life.’¹⁹⁴ Make no mistake – this is sexual violence, and in classically orientalisng mode. As we might expect, Alison does indeed tame the Bey. In fact, she finds him unexpectedly gentle and she lingers on, enjoying herself, for some weeks before heading to Jerusalem. Once again, Chapman indicates that a degree of sexual violence is erotic and more than acceptable – at least to this lusty medieval Wife. Chapman’s last, extra-Chaucerian scene of sexual coercion bundles together two versions of violently virile Otherness – the oriental and the medieval.

The Wife of Bath is thus punctuated by eroticised (and, importantly, non-consensual) sexual violence. While by the standards of more recent decades these portrayals are relatively mild, the novel’s cover blurb advertises salacious content as the novel’s primary attraction. The front cover promises a ‘deliciously bawdy novel of the woman whose passion was legend and whose lovers were legion’.¹⁹⁵ Sex sells, and if the back-cover emphasis on the Moroccan Bey is any indication, a sexual innings with an Oriental Other is expected to boost sales even further. The

¹⁹² Chapman, p. 157.

¹⁹³ Chapman, p. 160.

¹⁹⁴ Chapman, p. 158.

¹⁹⁵ Chapman, front cover.

character of the Wife is, as a result, presented as centrally shaped by sexual victimisation, abuse which Alison can only combat in similarly sexual terms. More troubling still, Chapman's Alison finds non-consensual abuse stimulating. This Wife of Bath not only exists in a barbaric Middle Ages in which the threat of sexual abuse is normalised – it is, after all, a conventional trope of medieval-set fiction – but she experiences sexual violence in moderate doses as positively erotic. Nevertheless, Chapman remains largely faithful to Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife, with the exception of the Bey incident. This latter insertion only emphasises the Otherness of the erotic violence portrayed – the modern Western reader can safely (and with a feeling of distinct superiority) indulge in medievalist entertainment, assured it would not happen here and now.

The Clerkenwell Tales

Peter Ackroyd does not need Orientalism to enhance the Otherness of his Middle Ages. London of 1399 in *The Clerkenwell Tales* is quite barbarically dirty and nasty enough. The Wife of Bath is only a minor character in this *Canterbury Tales*-structured medieval conspiracy tale. While Ackroyd's short novel gathers together a Chaucerian cast, the overarching story this cast presents diverges noticeably from Chaucer's: Ackroyd loosely but deliberately echoes Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* structure and character list, but uses them to tell a tale more closely related to twenty-first century concerns over suicide bombers and religious and political fanaticism.¹⁹⁶ Ron Charles sums up the novel's overall structure neatly:

With a nod to Chaucer, Ackroyd moves through 22 short tales, each named for a different character, some familiar from that legendary pilgrimage. (The Wife of Bath steals the show, again.) In this case, though, all the tales contribute to the same developing story about a crisis in London, and they're told about – not by – their title characters.¹⁹⁷

The result is that *The Clerkenwell Tales* is related through a dizzying cast of characters of whom the Wife is but one, and a largely superfluous one at that.

¹⁹⁶ R. Charles, 'A Medieval Friar Wields Unholy Fire; A Mystery About Christian Terrorism in 1399 with a Nod to "The Canterbury Tales"', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 31 September, 2004, p. 15; M. Pye, 'A Mad Nun's Tale', *New York Times Book Review*, 31 October, 2004, p. 27.

¹⁹⁷ 'A Medieval Friar Wields Unholy Fire', p. 15.

Despite Charles proclaiming that she 'steals the show', her tale contributes nothing to the larger conspiracy narrative. The Wife's inclusion in *The Clerkenwell Tales* functions instead as a cameo appearance of a popular character and a token gesture of aggressive sexuality, the purpose of which is to underline the barbaric medieval setting.

Unlike Chapman's Alison, Ackroyd's Alice is no victim of sexual violence. Instead, as the madam of a brothel, she is a perpetrator. This unwed Wife runs a bath house (read brothel) just outside the walls of London, and through it wields both physical and verbal violence of a sexual nature. When Sir Miles Vavasour, the sergeant-at-law of *The Clerkenwell Tales*, comes to Alice's brothel, she greets her well-born customer with insults:

'You old fetart, you lusk, what will it be with you tonight? What raging damsel will be your delight?'

Dame Alice had acquired a reputation for the contempt which she showed to her customers; they accepted it as part of their humiliation.¹⁹⁸

There is a definite aura of the dominatrix about Alice which tailors well with a convincing simulation of the Chaucerian character's foul mouth (although it must be noted that neither 'fetard' nor 'lusk', nor many of her expressions elsewhere, form part of her *Canterbury Tales*' vocabulary). A reader might even applaud this Dame's assertiveness. What they are less likely to applaud is her provision of a maiden aged eleven for the sergeant's sexual pleasure.

While Sir Miles is occupied with the child, Rose, Dame Alice justifies her facilitation of paedophilia to a physician. She declares that the girl is:

'Not too young to be fisked and ramped. Eleven years. I found her in the clipping house. Sweeping hair.'

'And you stalked her like a crane.'

'I spoke with her, and she followed me. She wants coin. ... There are girls who will go behind a hedge for twopence or a sheaf of wheat. Rose will have shillings in her purse. Am I to be blamed for doing good works?'¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ P. Ackroyd, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, London, Random House, 2004, p. 141.

¹⁹⁹ Ackroyd, p. 145.

Given the evident irony of the last statement from this cynical procuratrix, we are indeed to blame her. This Wife of Bath claims to be looking after the maiden's interests, but the only interests this Dame Alice is ever shown to further are her own. As Ackroyd tells us, Alice is 'as hard as London' itself.²⁰⁰ The scene evidently echoes *Canterbury Tales* Wife narratives: primarily the rape of the maiden in the Wife's Tale, but also Alisoun's first marriage in her Prologue at the age of twelve. Like the Knight of the Wife's Tale, Ackroyd's Sir Miles is also sentenced to penitential wandering after committing this sexual violence: the serjeant-at-law goes on pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the end of the *Tales* to atone for his many sins, intercourse with a child only one amongst them. Thus a Wife engaging in child prostitution acquires a minimal plot-function: she facilitates yet more proof of Sir Miles's flawed nature. Primarily, however, she is a cipher used to underline a point already thoroughly established: in this brutish London, everyone is using everyone else. Mentors murder their followers, heretics betray their fellows, and, at the top, a new king will assassinate the old. This is truly a barbaric age, and the Dame's brand of brutality is sexual violence: under the guise of looking after a young girl she makes a profit by selling her.

Ackroyd depicts Dame Alice much as he does the majority of his characters – they are the seedy, self-serving, and depraved underbelly of medieval London. This is a boorish Middle Ages, overflowing with vile acts and, as more than one reviewer has noted, vile smells.²⁰¹ In part, this conjuring of a barbaric Middle Ages acts to equate the terrorism and religious-political extremism that underpins Ackroyd's plot with its twenty-first century manifestations. In a familiar rhetorical gesture, modern religious fanaticism is characterised as 'medieval'.²⁰² Ackroyd appropriates the *Canterbury Tales* characters themselves primarily for their colour and literary kudos. As medieval types, they all collude to create a novel-length picture of nastiness and

²⁰⁰ Ackroyd, p. 145.

²⁰¹ S. Abell, 'The Visionary Nun of EC1: Peter Ackroyd's Medieval Metafiction,' *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1 August, 2003, p. 19; S. Smee, 'Local Colour Laid on Thick', *The Spectator*, 9 August, 2003, p. 38. On a similar note, Hugo Barnacle points out that the novel emphasises 'a squalor that would not have been so apparent to people living at the time,' in: 'A Chaucerian Joke', *The New Statesman*, 11 August, 2003, p. 37.

²⁰² Pugh and Weisl, *Medievalisms*, pp. 140–148.

endemic violence. This is a familiar Middle Ages to modern readers; yet to some degree, Ackroyd does turn the convention of sexual brutality on its head. In *Dame Alice*, he shows us a woman who is *not* a victim of patriarchal violence herself, but rather one who harnesses it to her own ends. In this regards at least, Ackroyd inverts the conventional depiction of medieval woman as sexual victim – but to what degree? As Laurie Ormond observes in relation to fantasy fiction, simply inverting a generic convention does not necessarily subvert it:

[I]t is often the case that the modification of these stereotypes is not radical, and the challenge to generic convention does not always challenge underlying ideas Characters, roles and plot elements that are presented as having overturned generic expectations are often conservative in themselves.²⁰³

Ackroyd tells us that this Wife of Bath fell pregnant when aged 12, subsequently killed her newborn, became disillusioned with love, and cynically embarked on a career founded on selling female flesh. The narrative thus presents us with a Wife fundamentally shaped by, if not violent, then at least seedy sexual experiences. Thus shaped, she continues to shape others in her mould. The stereotype is modified, but in overturning the generic expectation, the notion that the medieval woman is fundamentally defined by the masculine abuse of her sexuality remains. Indeed, it is strengthened. Sexual violence is naturalised as a conventional plot element of historical fiction founded on historical fact. Ackroyd clearly bases his interpretation of the Wife upon material Chaucer provides, selected and coloured in the light of the medieval barbarity underpinning the plot, and modern genre expectations of medieval female sexual abuse collude to authenticate the portrait.

The Brewer's Tale

Karen Brooks's *The Brewer's Tale* presents us with an oddly similar medieval milieu to *The Clerkenwell Tales*. I say 'odd' because, on the face of it, Brooks's Alyson is an entirely different character to Ackroyd's Alice. Rather than self-serving, this Alyson is caring, warm-hearted, and goes out of her way to look after women in need. The heroine of the plot, Anneke, is just another of the women Alyson takes under her

²⁰³ L.A. Ormond, 'Negotiating Genre: Magic, Ecology and Sexual Violence in Contemporary Australian Fantasy Fiction', PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 2011, p. 193.

wing. For the first half of *The Brewer's Tale*, Anneke lives in Elmham Lenn, a fictitious port town on the east coast of England. After her ship-captain father drowns at sea, Anneke is forced to turn to brewing ale and beer to support her family. This is considered a low-status occupation when undertaken by women, especially single women, and her reputation suffers. Worse, she is persecuted by the local monastery for infringing on their ale-making profits. This persecution reaches a horrible peak midway through the novel when Anneke is brutally raped, her home and business burned, members of her family murdered, her sister mutilated, and she flees Elmham Lenn as a wanted criminal. To compound matters, she falls pregnant as a result of the assault. It is in fleeing home that she falls in with Alyson, appropriately enough when Anneke joins a group of London-bound pilgrims returning from Canterbury. She ends up living in Alyson's bath house in the suburbs of London and eventually setting up her brewing business there. And here one of the odd similarities between Brooks's and Ackroyd's *Wives* emerges: both run a brothel on the outskirts of London.

The explanation for this similarity may be simple: Hope Phyllis Weissman published an article in 1980 explaining that one of the reasons that Chaucer's Wife is from 'Bath' is that medieval bath-houses were often used as venues for prostitution;²⁰⁴ both Ackroyd and Brooks adopt this interpretation quite literally, to the degree that bathing is quite overlooked. The Bawds who head their respective suburban 'bath-houses', however, pedal female flesh for entirely divergent reasons – Ackroyd's to look after herself, and Brooks's to protect helpless women. While Ackroyd's Alice certainly declares that she is looking after young Rose, her larger characterisation encourages disbelief. Brooks's depiction of Alyson, however, urges us to accept that her exploitation is not only well-meaning but produces positive results. As Anneke notes:

all those who dwelled within the bathhouse were steadfast towards the goodwife who gave them shelter, food and ale and didn't try and cheat them. The same could not be said for others who ran similar businesses in the area.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ 'Why Chaucer's Wife is from Bath', pp. 18–23.

²⁰⁵ K. Brooks, *The Brewer's Tale*, North Sydney, Harlequin Mira, 2014, p. 339.

Both Wives make money by selling other women's sexual services, yet the reader is situated to interpret the character-motivations fuelling these actions quite differently. Brooks tells us that the women are loyal to Alyson because she feeds and houses them, and takes an honest cut of their profits. These actions are rendered the more positive by comparison to nearby negative examples. But is Alyson's behaviour really so remarkable or worthy of admiration?

Both Ackroyd's and Brooks's Wife's actions and declared motivations are very similar: they claim to be looking after women who could not look after themselves and both do so by selling women sexually. Certainly, this chimes with the Chaucerian Wife's sexually-laden Prologue declaration that 'al is for to selle' (l. 414), but Alisoun is here referring only to herself – Chaucer's Wife sells herself to her husbands. Brooks and Ackroyd not only make literal what was in Chaucer merely metaphorical, but also transform the Wife's self-selling into the peddling of female flesh not her own. Brooks's primary character, Anneke, is a woman determined to support herself by brewing. Why must Brooks's Alyson run a brothel instead of, for instance, a cloth business in order to employ destitute women? Both Brooks and Ackroyd depict a Wife who employs female sexuality to empower herself in a patriarchal society, so faithfully echoing the *Canterbury Tales*. However, their selection of the racier business option also supplies a voyeuristic frisson and highlights the widespread sexual abuse of medieval women's bodies, factors more indebted to current convention than to Chaucer. After all, popular culture prompts us to believe this a given of the Middle Ages. Historical verisimilitude must be observed. The result? Both versions of Wife perpetuate a patriarchal reduction of women to commodities – objects for sale.

That Alyson might be accepted as Brooks presents her – as practically running a charity for abused women (that they be abused the more) – is due to the overwhelming patriarchal oppression that pervades the rest of medieval world of the novel. Brooks's London and Elmham Lenn mirror the medieval barbarity of Ackroyd's London, but her mirroring takes a narrower focus: women are the specific victims of medieval barbarism throughout *The Brewer's Tale*. Anneke's mother was

raped, also resulting in pregnancy. Anneke's brother, the unknowing product of that rape, undermines Anneke's efforts to support herself. Even the man she eventually marries, Sir Leander, begins by accusing Anneke of whoring herself. The monks persecute her and, when her house burns, the majority of the townsfolk turn on the struggling brewer. Whether in Elmham Lenn or London, Anneke is harassed by (male) officials. In London, the women of the brothel are hounded by the sadistic bailiff, Master Fynk, prompting Alyson to tell Anneke:

'I tolerate this,' she pushed up her sleeve to expose a violet bruise, 'for us all. Master Fynk needs to be the victor. If he can't achieve that one way, he finds another. For the moment, his beatings suffice.'²⁰⁶

This Alyson tolerates misogynist violence in to protect her women (and her business), but she cannot protect Anneke when she is charged with selling poisoned ale. The brewer is sentenced 'to be sealed in an empty ale barrel which will be set atop lighted faggots where she will burn until nothing remains but ashes',²⁰⁷ a truly 'medieval' torture. Anneke comes very close to dying in this way before Sir Leander rescues her. But the persecution is not over quite yet. Anneke is attacked by the same monk who raped her and her death is only prevented by Alyson's timely intervention. Yet again Dame Alyson, who makes her living by selling women's bodies to men, is presented as one who protects women against sexualised male violence. Aside from Anneke's nasty female cousin, all of the brewer's persecutors are male. Certainly, there are a few decent, supportive men in the plot, but these are evident exceptions. The overwhelming impression Brooks creates is of a fifteenth-century England absolutely rife with the patriarchal persecution of women. The women of *The Brewer's Tale* are continually portrayed as victims and as largely defined by this deluge of male abuse. In this barbaric Middle Ages, a warm-hearted Bawd cannot help but seem an angel of goodness.

What is the effect of so much misogynist violence? Anneke's rape provides a mid-point peak of savagery and the (foiled) carrying out of her torturous death sentence provides a similar climax towards the end of the narrative. While Anneke and Alyson do eventually triumph, it is at enormous cost. The reader is positioned by

²⁰⁶ Brooks, p. 394.

²⁰⁷ Brooks, p. 533.

sympathy for these central female characters to condemn the violence and oppression that affects and surrounds them, but to what end? *The Brewer's Tale* portrays a barbaric Middle Ages full of twisted sexualised violence. This is an historical novel whose cover image,²⁰⁸ publisher,²⁰⁹ and female protagonists implies a largely female readership. Presented with a story-world so inimical to women – particularly independently-minded ones like Anneke and Alice – a female reader is likely to compare past historical conditions with their own experience of the present and find modernity infinitely better. Brooks's rigorous framework of historical detail encourages the reader to accept the violence as historically representative, an acceptance further encouraged by the conventionality of sexual violence in medieval-set historical fiction at large. Rampant brutality against admirable women (portrayed as rather modern for their time) is thus cast as a barbaric Other to current female experience. Given this past 'reality', a reader may well feel sheer relief that women live in such comparatively benign circumstances today – that we may congratulate ourselves on how far we have advanced. We cannot alter the past, even if it was as Brooks implies, and the Otherness of her portrayal mitigates against any parallel being drawn between then and now. Misogynistic violence portrayed as safely occurring in a very different and long-distant past intimates that such things do *not* happen today.

The Ship of Fools

Brooks's and Ackroyd's *Wives* exist in very clearly defined medieval times and places, and, while Chapman's narrative is marked by no specific dates, it is still cast within a realistic and concrete historical context. This adherence to the primary genre convention of evident historicity may well have fostered author-adherence to the secondary convention of showing female characters to be defined by sexual violence. Gregory Norminton's *Ship of Fools*, by contrast, is far less grounded in time and place beyond a generalised evocation of late-medieval Europe. *The Ship of Fools* is also perhaps more closely related to the *Canterbury Tales* than my previous

²⁰⁸ The covers of all published editions feature a beautiful woman in an attitude of distress.

²⁰⁹ Mira is an imprint of Harlequin, a publisher long associated with romance and 'women's' fiction.

examples, not only by reason of its structure (a collection of character-told stories), but also by virtue of its allegorical, even surreal tone. While *The Ship of Fools* comes furnished with a degree of historical verisimilitude, its narrative mode also signals that there are further messages to be read in its stories than those supported by straightforward realism. Perhaps this is why Norminton is able to at least partially subvert the historical-novel tendency to portray the Wife of Bath as primarily defined by pervasive and inventive sexual violence.

It is near-impossible to locate Gregory Norminton's *Ship of Fools* in any specific time or place. His frame narrative is literally that – set within the static and placeless frame of a painting. Hieronymus Bosch's c.1490-1500 'The Ship of Fools' (itself likely based upon a contemporaneous German satire),²¹⁰ furnishes the novel's title, narrative frame, character-cast, cover-art, and setting. While Norminton never provides us with dates, sufficient historical clues are dropped to suggest a late-medieval context, perhaps reflecting the painting's dating. The stories told are assumed to have an earlier chronological setting than the frame narrative. That Norminton's *Ship of Fools* is also inspired by the *Canterbury Tales* is less conspicuously announced than its Bosch-allegiance, but soon becomes apparent in the novel's structure – a collection of tales introduced by prologues, and told by the characters who inhabit the 'The Ship of Fools' painting. But why pinpoint Chaucer's *Tales* and not, for example, Boccaccio's *Decameron* or Marguerite of Navarre's *Heptameron*? As a first clue, Norminton's opening chapter is entitled 'General Prologue' in clear parallel with modern conventions of *Canterbury Tales* titling. This 'General Prologue' contains introductions, Chaucer-style, to a cast who are explicitly referred to as 'pilgrims without a destination'.²¹¹ Taken as a whole, *The Ship of Fools* seems to sketch a pilgrimage to nowhere, perhaps an allegory of human existence itself. The chapters that follow are given names like 'The Monk's Tale' and 'The Glutton's Tale'. 'The Drinking Woman' and her 'Tale' display distinct parallels with

²¹⁰ This painting is now held at the Louvre, Paris. Background information was derived from the: *Louvre Museum* [website], 'The Ship of Fools, or the Satire of the Debauched Revelers', <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/ship-fools-or-satire-debauched-revelers> (accessed 19 January, 2015).

²¹¹ G. Norminton, *The Ship of Fools*, London, Hodder Headline, 2001, p. 2.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath. What interests me for the purpose of this exegesis, however, is the oddly compelling subversion of both the Chaucerian knight-who-rapes and modern conventions of medieval sexual violence that Drinking Woman's Tale performs.

Rather than imitating the Chaucerian plot, Belcula, the heroine of the Drinking Woman's tale, takes aspects of the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale to symbolic extremes. Like the Wife, Belcula is possessed of prodigious and unabashed sexual appetite. However, while Belcula's men number in the hundreds, she marries none of them. Indeed, much of the plot of the Tale is driven by her pursuit by the man who brought Belcula to the altar and wishes to complete the ceremony. She, however, feels no need to obey societal convention and limit herself to one man. Unlike the Wife, Belcula does not rail against misogyny – she simply ignores it. She seems blissfully unaware of any patriarchal restraint.

Belcula is the extreme embodiment of medieval female sexual stereotypes, and to a far greater degree than Chaucer's Wife. There is no doubt, for example, that Belcula outperforms the Wife of Bath in the matter of sex. Belcula's appetite is initially portrayed as animalistic: she is raised from abandoned infancy by a wild boar and thereafter is characterised by earthy, unashamed animal instincts, especially towards intercourse. As in medieval stereotypes, female libido is emphasised and allied to animal existence – that Belcula is raised by that most maligned of earthly animals, a pig, is no coincidence. Despite this, Norminton's Belcula is definitely a heroine to be admired. She is quite literally larger than life, having derived, along with her animal sexuality, great strength and vitality from her boar-babyhood. She is not the sort of female to succumb to male oppression or even recognise its existence. Faced with sexual violence, Belcula subverts and redefines it. Take, for example, the first 'rape' scene. Pig-keeper Piers, who has lusted after young Belcula for years, finally entraps her by means of:

gifts of fruit and honey.

Within the hour, Belcula is ravished. Being twice her captor's size, she assists Piers in his efforts, dragging herself to his pigsty; where she scoffs his fruit and gladly submits to his veneration.²¹²

Again, the heroine is associated with pigs. Indeed, Belcula has not yet learned human language at this point and is as susceptible to taming by food as any animal. The mention of Piers's 'veneration', suggestive of spiritual worship, seems supremely ironic. Is this an extreme portrayal of misogyny or a bizarre mix of dichotomised womanhood – half animal, half goddess?

The aforementioned is only the first of many attempted rapes. In each case, Belcula not only fails to recognise that she is the object of sexual assault, but turns the violence against her attackers. Nothing oppresses this sexual warrior. She cheerfully uses and abandons Piers, and then, threatened with imminent marriage, she embarks on a quest, romance-knight-like, to find what she most desires – her human mother. Her carnal prowess and animal strength is a parody of the superlative martial skill of a knight of courtly romance. Rather than victim-maid, Belcula takes on the role of the knight of the Wife's Tale. Unlike that knight, she does not visit sexual violence upon others, but effortlessly defeats it or turns it to her own advantage. In echo of medieval courtly romance, she is an errant knight wandering abroad and stumbling upon amazing adventures. Here, she vanquishes a gang of would-be rapists in her sleep:

the leader of the band – a wall-eyed churl with conger-eel teeth – approaches his victim with his breeches down. Belcula, sleepily turning at the nip of his blade, crushes the villain under her right tit. Wading in after him, his deputy expires, wedged like a furrier betwixt seals, in Belcula's cleavage. Whereupon the lesser bandits waddle, stark buttocked, to their deaths. One suffocates between Belcula's thighs. Two more, approaching stiff rigged from behind, are blown off their feet by a thunderous fart [.]²¹³

For all the violence of their demise, Belcula is innocent of any ill will. After all, she is asleep. When Scatologus, the sole survivor, later lures her into whoredom, 'Belcula, for her part, enjoys her men's enjoyment'²¹⁴ and when she grows bored, she simply

²¹² Norminton, p. 39.

²¹³ Norminton, p. 48.

²¹⁴ Norminton, p. 54.

strides away to pursue her interrupted quest for her greatest desire. Male attempts at sexual oppression simply slide off Belcula's back. Nor does this emancipated force of womanly nature need men or husbands. She only needs one woman – her mother.

Norminton's Belcula is woman personified, at least as medieval and Wifely type-casting would have it. She is desirable womanhood made flesh: 'Hers is not the kind of beauty that poets praise but the kind they *want*.'²¹⁵ She is the essence of overflowing feminine carnality, and as such, mesmerising to men and leaving them deliriously sexually satisfied in her wake. 'Nor can Belcula's appetites be sated with one little man. Like Nature, her passions are changeable. She is various, bountiful, humid.'²¹⁶ Here, Norminton links medieval theories of female nature quite explicitly to Belcula. Woman was held to be astrologically humid,²¹⁷ changeable,²¹⁸ closer to Nature than man, and sexually voracious.²¹⁹ Belcula's sexual appetite and attractiveness recalls Chaucer's Wife's claim that:

And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me,
I hadde the beste quoniam myghte be.
For certes, I am al Venerien
In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien.
Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse,
And Mars yaf me my sturdy hardynesse (ll. 607–612)

'Quoniam' is just one of a number of words the Wife uses to name her genitalia, in this case to assert that men find them beyond compare. Belcula too possesses such attributes and inclinations, only multiplied. The Wife's 'sturdy hardynesse' also echoes Belcula's martial spirit. Rather than showing Belcula to be in any way subjected to a man, however, Norminton leaves his heroine forever unmarried. In stretching the stereotypes of medieval womanhood evoked in Chaucer's Wife to an extreme, Norminton produces a character impervious to the sexual violence that

²¹⁵ Norminton, p. 37.

²¹⁶ Norminton, p. 39.

²¹⁷ V.L. Bullough, 'Medieval Medical and Scientific Views of Women', *Viator*, vol. 4, 1973, p. 491; K.M. Phillips, 'Introduction: Medieval Meanings of Women', in K.M. Phillips (ed.), *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 6–7.

²¹⁸ Blamires, *The Case for Women*, pp. 126–127.

²¹⁹ A. Harper, 'Bodies and Sexuality', in K.M. Phillips (ed.), *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 42–43 and 57.

surrounds her and not in the least shaped by patriarchal brutality. Chaucer weaves an estates satire about Alisoun evoking social persons of woman and wifehood. Norminton inflates medieval female typecasting to fantastical lengths in Belcula, a not-wife undefined by men either in regards of misogynist violence or that which she most desires.

While Belcula is shown triumphant over all patriarchal or sexual violence, in other ways 'The Drinking Woman's Tale' actually reinforces the historical-novel convention of misogyny and abuse. Sexual violence is still clearly rampant in Belcula's world. She would not have so many opportunities to subvert male depredations if this were not the case. This casual and pervasive objectification of women fits in seamlessly with the general historical evocation of late-medieval context. The implication is that Belcula is exceptional rather than representative of women in this environment. Most women in this context would quickly succumb to the abundant rapists and pimps or would simply never attempt a quest like Belcula's in the first place. As Jane Tolmie puts it, 'patriarchy itself serves as the female adventure and oppressive gender-based structures consistently provide the external criteria that define extraordinary women.'²²⁰ Laurie Ormond develops Tolmie's argument, pointing out that such exceptionalism actually works to define its female characters against a baseline of patriarchal oppression.²²¹ Quite probably such depictions are often intended in a positive spirit: women *can* conquer misogynist violence (if they try hard enough or suffer sufficiently). Nevertheless, such female characters are still defined primarily by male oppression. Glorious and victorious though Belcula is, Norminton still casts this exceptional female's adventure in terms of ever-present sexual violence.

Social Persons and Sexual Violence

Eroticised and misogynistic aggression is, I have argued, a conventional trope of medieval-set fictions. Even when sexual violence seems inserted solely for the provision of plot interest and historical verisimilitude, it bears underlying messages

²²⁰ 'Medievalism and the Fantasy Heroine', p. 155.

²²¹ 'Negotiating Genre', p. 195.

of a power comparable to its often climactic narrative charge. After all, sexual violence is frequently employed as a shocking narrative turning point. These are scenes that linger in the mind, which is all the more reason to agree with Sarah Projansky when she asserts that:

Discourses of rape ... are not simply narratives marketed for consumption in an entertainment context or “talk” about real things. They are themselves functional, generative, formative, strategic, performative, and real. Like physical actions, rape discourses have the capacity to inform, indeed embody and make way for, future actions, even physical ones. They are not simply metaphors for how people behave; as Raymond Williams (1977) puts it, they are “structures of feeling” for how people act in social contexts. The pervasiveness of representations of rape naturalizes rape’s place in our everyday world, not only as real physical events but also as part of our fantasies, fears, desires, and consumptive practices.²²²

While Projansky is addressing the representation of rape in film, the principle holds true for the more general category of sexual violence against women in fiction. That is, unless there is a subversive or larger thematic purpose to the presentation of sexual violence, offering female abuse as entertainment cannot help but subtly inform reader-structures of feeling and thought. Yet Norminton’s radical recasting of the Wife of Bath shows it *is* possible to adapt the Chaucerian Wife’s sexually-overt character and the misogynist abuse in her narratives in a mode that presents her not as a victim but as a sexual warrior, neither shaped in character by male violence nor defining her desires by her relationships with men. However, Norminton still invokes the stereotype of medieval barbarity. Without the ever-present threat of violence – particularly of a sexual-misogynistic cast – Norminton’s Belcula-plot could not exist. As an adaptor of the Wife of Bath, I was confronted with a dilemma. To omit all sexual violence against Alisoun from my fiction would be to evacuate it of a primary and productive challenge to what women most desire; on the other hand, I did not want to perpetuate stereotypes of medieval barbarism that posit sexual brutality as a thing of the distant past, revisited for

²²² *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, New York, New York University Press, 2001, pp. 2–3.

entertainment. Instead, I show Alisoun adapting and adopting social personae to counter those forces that would subdue her.

This final section of Part Two presents my solutions to the dilemma of adapting Chaucerian elements of sexual violence to *The Jerusalem Tales*. Overall, my approach has consisted of three strategies. The first was awareness of the prevailing convention and its ramifications: if an author does not recognise a convention *as* conventional, they may simply replicate and so reinforce it, along with its problematic implications. Secondly, I put the lessons I had gleaned from this awareness into practice. I avoided portraying violence and barbarity, sexual or no, as endemic and definitive of my medieval setting. In particular, I aimed to avoid showing Alisoun's character as fundamentally sculpted by sexual violence. I also followed Chaucer's example in ensuring that any sexual violence was thematically important rather than simply defining and driving character trajectories. (I must admit, however, to failing in this regard in the case of the secondary character, the Quaestor.) My third and crowning strategy was social persons. By invoking a variety of social persons about Alisoun, I also trigger variant positions on sexual violence. I intend that none of these social persons exercise hegemony over her character but compete against each other, so facilitating interpretive agency. It is this strategy the final section will address.

As a conventional figure in medieval-set novels, a social person of 'victim of sexual violence' needs little prompting to arise in a reader's mind. It is very much an available schema for the genre simply because it is reiterated so often. Some of the social persons I evoke about my Alisoun *are* informed and even shaped by sexual violence in deliberate dialogue with current convention and the *Canterbury Tales'* Wife. I also defined each major social person by giving each a controlling desire. By invoking competing social-person positions and their concurrent desires, I aimed to complicate my Wife's character and her desires. After all, who among us only ever desires just one thing? Competing desires are more likely to clash within us. Likewise, a fictional character who desires one thing alone will seem 'flat', emblematic rather than possessing 'rounded' and human-like personality. Indeed,

the very question 'what do women most desire?' seems the product of a mindset attempting to simplify 'woman' to a single definable type, characterised by the desire of just one thing. Whether one judges that Chaucer held this attitude or intended to undermine it through the complexity of the Wife, is immaterial. Sexual violence is a direct inversion of human desire, singular or multiple; this is why it is present in Chaucer's Wife-narratives, which are centrally concerned with what women most desire.

As explained in Part One, the identity of 'wife' is not only a fundamental but also a multiple aspect of my Wife of Bath's overall character and its development. Each of her marriages sees her don new wife personae, and some of these do involve sexual violence. I wished to have Alisoun try on traditional wife roles only to reject them, or at least alter or move beyond them. Each of her marriages also frames a different mode of sexual relations between husband and wife. Yet to define Alys solely as 'wife' would be to define her purely in relation to her husbands. In *The Jerusalem Tales*, Alisoun also acquires each husband as part of her quest for cloth-mastery, thus each marriage is shaped by her adopting at least two social persons, one wife-related, one cloth-related. When the desires of these two primary personae clash, a husband dies. The sexual violence of *The Jerusalem Tales* is nearly all husband-related, and it is this evocation of multiple persons within marriage that I now outline. Given that the half of the novel presented for the thesis does not describe my Wife's third and fourth husbands and that her second marriage is entirely chaste, I will discuss only Alisoun's social-person relations with her first (Wilkin), and her fifth and current husband, Jankyn.

In her first marriage, Alisoun's official role is to become a mother – her husband intends that she provide him with a male heir. But Wilkin also chooses Alisoun for her evident skill with wool and furthers her training. That is, he does not view his young bride entirely as a wife in need of insemination, at least not at first. When Wilkin comes to treat Alisoun too single-mindedly as mother material, his desire for procreation clashes with hers for wool. The result is Wilkin's death. My casting Alisoun as reluctant 12-year-old wife to a much older man that she beget a male

child evidently suggests sexual violence. Indeed, Alisoun describes sexual clashes with Wilkin to her fellow pilgrims, replete with loaded innuendo. In part, this narrative choice was prompted by Chaucer's material – but I have the Wife give many more hints of sexual violence than Chaucer, if under the guise of shocking her listeners and punishing the Parson. In the current-time of the narrative, innuendo and coarse-grained humour is integral to her character, in part used as camouflage. My Alisoun wields sexual description of her own past in order to shock and keep her companions off-balance, while also echoing the ribaldry of the *Canterbury Tales* Wife. In doing this, my Alisoun turns her experience of violence upon her listeners, especially the Parson, son of her first husband. She is no longer victim but engaging in some victimising of her own. In fact, the reader may suspect she stretches the truth in her storytelling. Nor does the role of intended motherhood define Alisoun within her account of the marriage. She is far more interested in cloth-making. In short, narrating the Wife's first marriage, I adapt Chaucer's suggestion of sexual violence and dwell upon it to a greater extent than Chaucer, but I do not let it define Alisoun's larger character. The persona affected by sexual violence is balanced (I hope) both by her past social person self-identity as a weaver and wool-worker, but also in her present narrator-mode, in which she wields sexual description militantly and in order to manipulate others.

Sexual violence also evidently enters into my Wife of Bath's relationship with her fifth husband, Jankyn. This marriage is depicted in the present-time of the plot rather than being narrated by Alisoun, which allows me to explore the precarious balance and multiplicity of social-person relations to the most pronounced degree of any of Alisoun's marriages. Jankyn wields sexual violence as one element in his attempts to increase his authority within the marriage. This battle for authority is central to Chaucer's depiction of the Wife's fifth marriage, and I have entangled their relationship in terms of multiple social person pairs, most of them inspired by Chaucer. My Wife is both Loathly Lady (an older and hence 'ugly' wife), and a magical fairy bride apparently able to make all Jankyn's wishes come true. He in turn is the self-centred knight of the Tale who must learn hard lessons. She is a mother-figure to Jankyn – it is revealed in the second part of the novel that Jankyn

was initially apprenticed to Alisoun's third husband and that she treated the lonely boy like a son. This earlier social-person dynamic is never entirely discarded, and Alisoun still thinks of him as her 'boy' and exerts a motherly dominance over him. Another uneasy social-person relationship between them arises by virtue of Alisoun's awareness that Jankyn has committed murder and has never been brought to justice. This past persona of murderer colours Jankyn's character with subtle violence, and Alisoun's with both power over him (she can expose her husband's crime) but also fear of him and the legal consequences for them both. Jankyn is also proud of his identity as a scholar, which he conceives of as hierarchically and morally above Alisoun's artisan occupation. Finally, Jankyn is 'toy-boy' to his much older Wife, a type as current in Chaucer's time as today. In this mode, she can be seen as an aging but well-off widow who lures an attractive but penniless young man into marriage. This older-wife persona is understood to lust after her husband's youth and beauty, while his desire is primarily for her money. In addition to these husband-wife personae, the Wife is still deeply defined by her cloth-working identities while wedded to Jankyn. At this stage of her career, she has assimilated all the cloth-working personae acquired through previous husbands – spinner, weaver, fuller and tenterer, cloth-merchant, and now clothier at large. In turn, Jankyn is jealous of the aspects of his Wife to which he has no relation while yet understanding that they fund his material desires. While all previous four husbands were wedded as part of Alisoun's quest for cloth-mastery, this fifth marriage is Alisoun's attempt at perfection, derived from her assimilation of previous desirable social persons and lessons learned from those that are not. My Wife considers she need only correct the mistakes of the past in regards of cloth and husbands in order to secure what she believes she most desires in both respects. Yet desires and social persons are never finite, as my Wife discovers to her cost: her quest for a state of perfection, whether in husbands or cloth, is fatally flawed. The very question – what do women most desire? – is a false premise.

The previous paragraph outlines the social-persons web that I designed about the Wife and her fifth husband. I seeded their depiction with clues that point towards these intertwining and competing social persons. By doing so, I intend that none of

these persons dominate her character (or Jankyn's) but instead create tensions and complexities within it, so broadening the character and offering interpretive agency to the reader. While readers will read different nuances and personae into these clues than those I consciously design, I hope that these multivalent relationships will reveal Jankyn's sexual violence as only one thread among many, symptomatic of his commonality with the Tale's knight and the Chaucerian Wife's description of her fifth husband's violence towards her.

In sum, the conventional requirement of evident historicity in historical fiction results in a blended evocation of past- and present-based social persons in the characters they contain. Readers and authors are unavoidably influenced by current notions of what the Middle Ages represents. For people living in contemporary Western societies in particular, a novel set in the Middle Ages (itself a term designating alterity) is highly likely to provoke comparison between then and now. The empathetic bond a reader tends to feel towards central protagonists creates the illusion of experiencing this pastness through their senses, and, unless a narrator is clearly unreliable or belief is undermined by evident textual anachronisms, readers are positioned to trust that what the character experiences is in some sense reliable. Medieval female exposure to sexual violence accords neatly with larger notions of a barbaric Middle Ages, despite the 'bagginess'²²³ of the period so characterised (roughly a thousand years and encompassing an entire continent) and the impossibility of any accurate comparison with modern conditions. As I hope I have shown, medieval-set historical novels frequently employ scenes of (often extreme) sexual violence against female characters to drive narrative action and character development, or simply to provide story-interest and historical 'realism'. As a result, social persons fundamentally moulded by sexual violence are easily identified by readers, which in turn acts to reinforce the convention. This, when located within a fiction replete with convincing historical detail, acts as self-authenticating 'proof' of past barbarity. The social persons thus

²²³ Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl sum the matter up neatly: 'this sense of the medieval, although very much a reduction of a complex history, takes a baggy historical period loosely defined by geography and with as many diversions as similarities, and turns it into a single entity, a signifier of irrational, violent darkness.' In: *Medievalisms*, p. 147.

evoked blend evidently-researched historicity with modern self-definition via medieval alterity. The few adaptations of the Wife of Bath I have been able to locate are no exception.

To end on a personal note, I find this conventionalised depiction of female sexual abuse in medieval-set fiction ethically-troubling for its objectification of female characters, its voyeuristic undertones, and for its subtle support of New Traditionalist postfeminist complacency. Yet, given its thematic importance in Chaucer's Wife of Bath narratives, it is near-impossible to avoid issues of sexualised brutality in an adaptation of the Wife. My solution has been social persons: I hope that my evocation of multiple and competing social-person positions permits a negotiation of sexual violence that offers the Wife's character – and the reader's interpretation of it – agency.

Conclusion

... Jhesu Crist us sende
Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves (ll. 1258–1262)

What do women most desire? The rapist knight of Chaucer's Wife's Tale must find out or lose his head. The knight's quest-romance is framed by Wifely agreement with its apparent answer: the reformation of Wife-beating Jankyn at the end of the Wife's Prologue is in full accord with Alisoun's closing words, cited above. It seems that women desire mastery over their husbands, and that they would prefer those same husbands to be meek, young, and energetic in bed. Appropriately, in both the Wife's Prologue and Tale, men wield sexual violence, thus demonstrating the need for reform through very antithesis of 'what women most desire'. Yet, as Arthur Lindley points out, the Tale's Queen and her ladies never categorically assert the Loathly Lady's answer to be the only correct one – husband-mastery is simply an acceptable answer.²²⁴ That Alisoun of Bath – a demonstrably complex, ambiguous, and flawed character – agrees with the Loathly Lady does not necessarily inspire us to do likewise. In fact, the question itself is unanswerable – or more accurately, it triggers a multitude of answers, as the knight himself discovers in his wanderings. The very question presupposes 'woman' to be a monolithic entity. No single answer can define any one woman, or at least not for all time. In echo of messy reality, a complex literary character must be composed of many personae, each with different drives and desires. Herein lies the value of Fowler's concept of social persons.

This exegesis has set out my analysis of and solutions to what I have found to be primary obstacles to adapting the character of the Wife into historical fiction – that is, the complexity of her character and the centrality to her plots of sexual violence against women. To both obstacles, I have offered the answer of Elizabeth Fowler's

²²⁴ 'Vanysshed was this daunce', p. 13.

theory of social persons, supported with insights from cognitive literary criticism and expanded to apply to creative practice. At the same time, the exegesis explicates the theory and method behind the creative production portion of my thesis – the first half of the historical novel, *The Jerusalem Tales*. Fowler's theory has underpinned my creative production from the outset, and, in the process of application, I have come to appreciate its wider potential. The mitigation of sexual objectification is only one such aspect. I have engaged social persons to many ends in *The Jerusalem Tales*; a brief sketch of a few of these illustrates just how versatile and generative an application of this theory can be.

For example, the use of varying social-person positions might be used to explore and test out contested historical topics. In my character of Sir George, I employed social persons to animate different aspects of the debate over attitudes towards chivalry and knighthood in the later Middle Ages. Knighthood was by no means a clear-cut identity adhering to undisputed chivalric ideals. As Jeffrey J. Cohen notes, medieval 'chivalric identification tended to scatter knightly identity across a proliferating array of objects, events, and fleshly forms' with the result that knighthood continually diverged from 'the stable and timeless social body that chivalric myth obsessively envisioned.'²²⁵ The disparate social persons collected under the umbrella-character of my Knyght allowed me to evoke and explore these tensions within one would-be chivalric identity.

In a similar vein, the different attitudes my characters display towards pilgrimage and religious veneration, especially of relics, delves into past motivations for pilgrimage. Historians continue to debate and dissect this issue.²²⁶ Were pilgrims primarily driven by a felt need to reduce their sentence in Purgatory, a kind of religious bargain? To what degree were they motivated by profound piety, and

²²⁵ J.J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 47.

²²⁶ See, for example: N. Chareyron, *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages*, trans. W.D. Wilson, New York, Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 11–15; C. Morris, 'Introduction', in C. Morris and P. Roberts (ed's), *Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 7–8; and F.E. Peters, 'Where Three Roads Meet: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Pilgrimage to Jerusalem', in *Unearthing Jerusalem: 150 Years of Archaeological Research in the Holy City*, K. Galor and G. Avni (ed's), Winona Lake, Ind., Eisenbrauns, 2011, pp. 6–8.

what were the forms and spiritual foundations of this devotion? Was pilgrimage an early form of tourism, and, if so, must this negatively impact spirituality? Clearly, medieval reasons for pilgrimage must have varied over time and between pilgrims; by embodying motivations through social persons, I can illustrate how different drives might arise not only between individuals, but also within a single pilgrim, sometimes conflicting, sometimes co-existing, and sometimes altering over time. In this way, I explore an active historical debate through imaginative recreation. Fiction can examine such issues in quite a different mode than conventional history, dramatising conflicting motivations in individual characters, and testing boundaries of belief, logic, and emotion. An engagement of social persons facilitates historical argument in this mode, arguments founded upon research but aiming to convince readers through persuasive characterisation.

Social persons may also enable the exploration of issues that cross historical, literary, ethical, and psychological boundaries. My character of the Quaestor, based on Chaucer's Pardoner, represents one such tangle. On the rather slight basis of Chaucer's describing this character in terms of:

No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
As smothe it was as it were late shave.
I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare. (ll. 689–691)

a lively academic debate has arisen over the possible homosexuality of this indulgence-seller.²²⁷ Yet to decide that these hints point to pederasty, to label the Pardoner as gay is to invite anachronism. A category of 'the homosexual' is highly historically contingent, and, as a label of personhood, seems to have crystallised from the seventeenth century on;²²⁸ prior to this, same-sex desire certainly existed but the entity of the homosexual did not.²²⁹ To interpret Chaucer's Pardoner in fiction thus requires an author not only to take a stance in terms of literary criticism, but also historical context versus contemporary social understandings, and

²²⁷ R. Horrox, 'The Pardoner', in S.H. Rigby with A.J. Minnis (ed's), *Historians on Chaucer: The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 454–458.

²²⁸ Usefully summarised in: J. Weeks, 'Queer(y)ing the "Modern Homosexual"', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 51, 2012, p. 531.

²²⁹ S.F. Kruger, 'Claiming the Pardoner: Toward a Gay Reading of Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale', in T.C. Stillinger (ed.), *Critical Essays on Geoffrey Chaucer*, New York, G.K. Hall and Co., 1998, pp. 153–154.

an ethics of representation. Evoking a number of social persons within a re-imagined Pardoner allowed me to gather incongruent identities and interpretations within the one conflicted character.

There are also potential uses a social persons application might be put to, but which I have not engaged in *The Jerusalem Tales*. As a method of literary critique, social persons may be applied as productively to modern literature as to medieval. The dissection of *Lolita's* anti-hero Humbert Humbert in terms of social persons, for example, could yield fascinating results, as might the notoriously complex *Hamlet*, or *Hedda Gabler*, or, a personal favourite of mine, Judy Johnson's *Jack*. Further, a social persons critique can fuel the creative adaptation of literary character into historical fiction, whether such fiction is set in the Middle Ages or some other era. To make a bolder claim, a Fowlerian approach such as I have demonstrated may be utilised for the depiction of *any* character, not only for adaptations of literature, but for any literary enterprise that aims at the evocation of complex character, be it biography, memoir, contemporary-set fiction, or novels based upon real historical individuals. In short, Elizabeth Fowler's concept of 'social persons' is worthy of a much greater attention and wider application than it has yet received; my *Jerusalem Tales* offers a taste of the literary critique and character creation this theory can underpin.

As a final word, there is a definite irony in my proposing a sole solution to problems intimately connected with the Wife of Bath's monolithic question-and-answer concerning womanly desire. Yet I defend my solution, for it is only ostensibly single: the whole point of social persons as I approach it is *multiplicity* – a crowd of personae under the umbrella of one character, proffering a wealth of possible schemata to a reader's cognition. The Wife of Bath is a slippery, heterogeneous, and fascinating character who simply cannot be reduced to singularity – whether in literary interpretation or creative reinterpretation.

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Appendix A

As noted in the Abstract and Introduction, The Jerusalem Tales is too large to included in its entirety in this doctorate. The thesis presents the first half of the novel; the plot of the second half is summarised below.

Summary of Section Two of *The Jerusalem Tales*

After Bolzano, the pilgrims continue towards Venice. As they ride, the Wife tells the Quaestor of the long period that followed her second husband's death, in which she did not marry but attempted instead to run her cloth-making affairs as a *femme sole* businesswoman. She succeeded in this goal – although not without opposition from the Guild – but eventually the desire to master the dyeing of cloth drove her to marry again. She wed a Master Dyer from Bristol, who then brought his young apprentice with him to settle with Alys in Bath. Smith the Dyer was a Vulcan-like figure to Alys's Venus. He was highly skilled but limping and ugly. His apprentice was much more appealing to Alys, being golden haired and in need of mothering. He took the place of the child Alisoun lost.

When they reach Venice, Alisoun discovers that a naval war has erupted between Venice and Genoa, with the result that no ships are sailing to the Holy Land. Minotto accommodates them in his father's palazzo and even shows Alys around his dye workshop in Chioggia, but Alys is impatient to travel on. Jankyn gives his Wife the slip when she is arguing with ship captains. While anxiously waiting for him to return that night, Alisoun tells Cecily of her marriage to her third husband, learning to dye, and her motherly relationship with Johnny, the apprentice. She goes on to explain how she and Johnny discovered that the springs of Bath have properties that enhance red dye.

Meanwhile, the Knyght is attempting to raise funds for his passage to Jerusalem by means of prize-fighting. In patching George up afterwards, the Quaestor reveals his desire. George reacts badly, Tom flees, and, in seeking paid-for sexual solace,

manages instead to rescue Jankyn. In the aftermath of Jankyn's return to Palazzo Minotto, Alys recalls the progression of her relationship with Johnny into quasi-marriage and sexual dalliance behind her third husband's back. Towards the end of the scene, it becomes evident that the apprentice was Jankyn.

Minotto offers Alisoun passage to Jaffa aboard his own ship, which regularly carries trade-goods to the Eastern Mediterranean. Minotto will accompany them. The Wife thinks that he does so for love of her, but is still suspicious of Minotto's motives. Soon to leave Venice, the Parson and the Quaestor enter San Marco to view its enormous relic collection. Parson John is apprehended in the act of stealing a relic (courtesy of Tom's sleight of hand). John is publicly whipped for his crime before being allowed to board Minotto's cog and sail for Jaffa.

John feels that the whipping has atoned for his 'crime' of sexual incontinence in Bolzano, and does not protest his innocence. As Alys tends his bloody back on the ship, he requests that she relate how her third husband died. John suspects that Alys needs to unburden herself of sin – much as his whipping has lightened his sin. So the Wife admits that she had sexual relations with apprentice Jankyn: eventually her husband caught them at it in the dye workshop. Smith and Jankyn fought, with the result that Smith ended up drowning in a boiling vat of red madder. Alys relates it as an accident, asserting that both she and Jankyn lied to avert blame afterwards. She does not mention that Jankyn deliberately held his master under.

The ship docks to repair storm damage in Patras, north-western Greece. Minotto takes Alys to see living kermes on oak trees in the hinterland. There, he attempts to seduce her scarlet dye secrets from her. She plays with him, delving into his motivations and aware that she cannot reject him entirely, for that might mean the end of their voyage to the Holy Land. In the process, Alys glimpses the linen tunic Minotto wears beneath his black clothing – it is dyed an intense, poisonous green, a shade she knows all too well.

Later in their voyage, the ship becomes marooned mid-Aegean. The water the ship carries is undrinkable and Alys's barrels are in danger of being tapped. She hovers about her precious barrels of Bath spring water, guarding them and telling Tom and George the tale of her fourth marriage. She wed Herri Carter for his physical appeal and his carting business, the latter assists her clothier concerns. Herri is a Hercules-type in physical characteristics and tendency to stray, and Alys become his Dianeira. After the shock of her previous husband's death in red dye, Alisoun focused on perfecting green instead, a shade notorious for fading. With the aid of an arsenic compound, however, she achieved a vibrant green dye. She then demonstrated its staying-power by distributing green cloaks to the beggars of Bath – and gifting a particularly fine one to her traveller-husband. Green dye normally fades quickly in sunlight; Alisoun left for her first pilgrimage to Jerusalem, hoping to return to find the hard-used cloaks just as bright on her return. Instead, she came home to disaster: when damp, and over long periods of time, the green-dyed cloth leeches poison into its wearer. Herri died of arsenic poisoning under the care of a lover. No one ever realises that Alisoun's dye poisoned so many people – she does not reveal this to her listeners either – but she is plagued by guilt and thinks it one reason she has failed to have a child with Jankyn.

Parson John prays up a wind for the marooned vessel, and the ship sails on to Rhodes. There, Alisoun discovers a possible source of Ararat kermes, and sneaks her barrels of spring-water out to test whether the holy scarlet indeed agrees with her holy water. It does. Triumphant, she returns through the midnight streets of Rhodes only to discover Cecily and Jankyn making love in the stables. In one night, she has acquired one of her greatest desires and lost another. She fills the now empty barrels with Ararat kermes and voyages on towards Jerusalem.

They moor off Jaffa and wait for permission to enter the Holy Land, now under Egyptian Mamluk rule. When Mamluk officials board the ship to assess the pilgrims, they insist on checking all baggage – pilgrims are permitted no weapons or trade goods. The Knyght's sword and the Wife's barrels must be left behind. Alys nearly abandons her pilgrimage at that point, but realises that this would look too

suspicious. Minotto promises to guard her barrels on the ship, for he is not traveling to Jerusalem. The pilgrims land and Minotto's ship departs, abandoning them – Minotto sails for Venetian Crete to test the contents of the Wife's barrels.

Alys is now bereft of her kermes and her husband. She's not sure there's much point in pilgrimage any more. She confesses her crime of green poison to Parson John on a night journey towards Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem, they make the round of holy sites, leaving the Sepulchre to last. Alisoun, remaining in her hostel as the others seek absolution, is approached by a white-swathed Saracen. He claims to have some of the kermes she has been asking after in the market, however, their transaction must be kept a secret. She must view the kermes under cover of night, meeting at a crumbling holy pool. Alys asks the Parson to accompany her. The others follow them, undetected. The Saracen turns out to be the Venetian disguised. He has tried to produce scarlet from Alisoun's kermes and failed to replicate her results. Now he offers Alisoun a choice: her scarlet dye process or death. Her hidden companions must now decide whether to rescue Alisoun or let this (possible) murderess die. (The latter option was urged by the Prior and Guildsmen who sent the Quaestor, the Knyght, and the Parson on this quest in the first place.) In the ensuing melee, the kermes is destroyed, the Venetian escapes, and Jankyn dies protecting Alisoun, but not before Cecily reveals that Jankyn was never married to Alisoun but to her, and that she – supposedly her niece – is actually Alisoun's daughter.

The remaining companions manage to return to Rhodes. None of them now wish to convict the Wife, and Alisoun has achieved her goals of pilgrimage, if in unexpected and undesired ways – she has acquired a 'child' of sorts in Cecily, and in Rhodes secures an ongoing supply of Ararat kermes. She also acquires all she needs of a 'husband' in Parson John. As for the Venetian, where-ever he is, he is still wearing her poison green tunic. As for Tom and George, they decide to remain in Rhodes, for there is no point in their returning to England.

Appendix B

CHAUCERIAN DIALOGUE AND *THE JERUSALEM TALES*

Character speech is a powerful means of characterisation,²³⁰ and the Wife's speech in Chaucer is particularly so, being notably rambling, militant, and peppered with swearing and sexual reference. I wanted to echo the Chaucerian characterisation of the Wife in my fiction through her dialogue. To this end, I derived the vocabulary that follows from *The Riverside Chaucer* edition of the Wife's Prologue and Tale.²³¹

Given its strongly characterising effect, dialogue is also the source of many social-person clues. My choices in inflecting Alisoun's speech with Chaucerian Middle English were made with their potential impact upon her social persons in mind. For example, I have largely limited Chaucerian speech to the Wife, while secondary characters speak primarily in modern English. This was done in part to invert the convention that only minor characters of low class or limited intelligence speak in non-standard English,²³² but also to *invoke* this convention. That is, my Alisoun is a sympathetic (and heroic) heroine, but she can also be interpreted as ill-educated, of low social class, and being decidedly vulgar. Her Middle-English speech is designed to suggest this underlying tension in social persons.

I also included period speech in accord with what I identify as the prime convention of historical fiction – evident historicity. Yet, as my publication on 'Dilemmas of Dialect' points out,²³³ employing period dialogue in order to invoke believable

²³⁰ S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd edn., London and New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 65–67.

²³¹ Benson (ed.), 3rd edn..

²³² See, for example: M.Y. Miller, "'The Rhythm of a Tongue": Literary Dialect in Rosemary Sutcliff's Novels of the Middle Ages for Children', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1994, pp. 29–30.

²³³ C. Hoggart, 'Dilemmas of dialect: Dialogue in medieval and early-modern set historical fiction', in J. Lunn (ed.), *The Rites of Spring*, Perth, WA, Black Swan Press, 2017, pp. 31–46. Available from: https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/57507838/The_Rites_of_Spring_FINAL.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1550730462&Signature=Xrn3Cfl0VxC9Mz3Kmv4mfN9Bc8o%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DBeing_a_Human_Book_Conversations_for_Rup.pdf

historical setting can backfire. This is a particular hazard for Chaucerian Middle English, the *ayes* and *foresooths* of which have been so frequently employed as shorthand tokens of historicity that it is challenging to use them in a credible manner. Hence my determination to employ a solely Canterbury Tales' Wife-derived vocabulary, the specifics of which I explain below.

Chaucer-derived Vocabulary in *The Jerusalem Tales*

NOTES ON GRAMMAR

VERBS: The infinitive form of the verb in Chaucer generally ends in **–en**, e.g. **spoken** – to speak. I have sometimes used this infinitive ending on verbs still used in MSE, which therefore do not appear in the vocabulary list. In the present tense, the verb often retains the final **–e**. In the past tense, the verb may alter its form slightly, e.g. **I reft** – I take away, **I raft** – I took away.

NEGATIVES: Ne is the primary negative adverb. Negation also may involve the insertion of an **n–** as the first letter of a word. For example: **nis** – is not; **nil not** – will not. Double negation is frequently employed, but does not usually have the effect of cancelling out the negative; for example: **ne stood nat still** – stood not still; **he nath nat** – he has not; **noide not** – will not.

CONTRACTIONS: Words may be contracted, particularly those that introduce questions. For example:

artow – are you

canstow –can you

dostow – do you

han't – have not

hastow – have you

hem – them

namoore – no more

thankee – thank thee

th'art – you are

thou'lt – you will
wastow – what ... you
what **wenestow** – what do you believe
wertow – were you

CHAUCER-DERIVED VOCABULARY LIST

NOTE: Some of the words listed below are also spelled in MSE in the novel, generally due to the influence of surrounding word sounds. For example, **enow** sometimes appears as **enough**, **nat** sometimes appears as **not**.

abroachen *v.* to open; to broach a cask; often figurative
a God's name! in God's name!
asterten *v.* to get up suddenly, escape
avisement *n.* advice
avisen *v.* to advise, consider
been *v.* to be (often used after modal verbs)
bethinken *v.* to think
betimes at times, within a short time
bismoterred *adj.* dirty, besmattered
bisynesse *n.* fuss, industry
bitwix *prep.* between
blissed *adj.* blessed
bobance *n.* boast, pride, worldly vanity, display of prowess
bower *n.* bedroom
breech *n.* male undergarment
brennen *v.* to burn; **brenne** – present tense
burgher *n.* a freeman of a borough
caitiff *n.* a despicable person
chaffare *n.* goods, merchandise; trade in merchandise
chiden *v.* to chide, berate,
clepen *v.* to call, speak, name; **clep** – present tense; **clept** – past tense
coillons *pl.n.* testicles
cuckwold *n.* cuckold
contrarious *adj.* contrary, unfavourable

convenable *adj.* fitting, appropriate, reasonable
delice *n.* the quality of delightfulness
dighten *v.* to have sexual intercourse (NB: this verb also has other meanings in Middle English)
doon *v.* to do
dotard *n.* fool, simpleton, senile man
eftsoon soon after, immediately, also, again
enow enough
ere *conj.* before
everichoon everyone
everydeel every bit, every
eyen *n.* eye (singular or plural)
ferforth far
forfenden *v.* to forbid
fro from
fulfilled of full up with, full
gabber *n.* idle talker
gale *n.* speech, noise
gan *v.* began, often used for emphasis; also a form of get
gentil *adj. n.* noble, a term of respect
getten *v.* to get; **gat** – got
gnof *n.* churl, i.e. an insult
grinten *v.* to grind
gytes *pl.n.* clothing
han *v.* to have; **han't** – have not; **hath** – has
henten *v.* to seize, take; **hente** – present tense
holour *n.* lecher
hostelry, hospice *n.* an inn or lodging house
(an) **impossible** *n.* an impossible thing
jangler *n.* incessant talker
jape *n.* trick, joke, frivolous pastime
Jhesu *n.* Jesus
jolif *adj.* jolly
kaynard *n.* a sluggard, a slob, i.e. an insult

(take) **kep** *n.* (take) care, notice; often an imperative
kitte *v.* cut
lesten *v.* to wish, desire; **leste** wish; also impersonal, e.g. as him leste (as it pleases him)
leten *v.* to allow, let, leave; **lat** – let (often imperative)
licker *n.* lecher
lickerous *adj.* lecherous
lickery *n.* lechery
lief *n.* sweetheart
lieve *adj.* dear, darling
lore *n.* fool, scoundrel
lymed *adj.* limed, i.e. caught like a bird in lime
maistry *n.* mastery
maugree notwithstanding, despite
mine *pron.* my or mine
misericorde *n.* slender dagger, so-named for its use in ‘mercy’ killing
moote *v.* must, might,
namoore no more
nat not
natheless nevertheless
ne never, not, neither ... nor, an emphatic negative introducing a sentence: no!
needly *adj.* necessary
nosethirl *n.* nostril; (a **thirl** is an external bodily orifice or hole in the skin)
offren *v.* to offer
pan *n.* head
[high] **parage** *n.* noble birth
pardee *interj.* By God, indeed, without a doubt, of course
parfit *adj.* perfect
pigsney *n.* term of endearment
pleasance *n.* pleasure
pleynen *v.* to complain, lament,
popelote *n.* poppet, i.e. term of endearment
practik *n.* practice, craft

pure *adj.* refined, made pure
pye *n.* magpie
renomee *n.* renown
(be)**reven** *v.* to deprive, take away *esp.* by violence; **reft** – present tense;
raft – past tense
roulen *v.* to roam, wander
sapience *n.* wisdom
sate *v.* past tense of sit
secree *adj.* discreet, secretive
sely *adj.* innocent, good,
shenden *v.* to destroy, kill
shrew *n.* a wicked person, a scold
shrewed *adj.* cursed
(be)**shrewen** *v.* to curse
siker *adj.* sure, secure
somedeel *n. adj. adv.* a portion; some, a little; partly
sondry *adj.* sundry, various
sooth *n. adj.* truth, true
southren *adj.* southern
spiteous *adj.* spiteful, piteous
stibborn *adj.* stubborn
stinten *v.* to cease, stop,
suffisant *adj.* sufficient
swinken *v.* to work
swolwen *v.* to swallow
taken *v.* to take
tormentrie *n.* torment
trowen *v.* to believe, think; **trowe** – present tense
tweye two
up-so-down upside down
verily *adv.* truly
verray *adj., adv.* especially, truthful, i.e. used to lend emphasis or give prominence
welked *adj.* withered, drooping, i.e. an insult

wenen *v.* to believe, think, hope; **wene** – present tense

weylaway! alas!

whan when

willen *v.* will; **wolde** – would; **wol** – will

witen *v.* to know (with certainty), **woot** – present tense; **wiste** – past tense

withal also, as well, wholly

wood *adj.* mad

wrecched *adj.* wretched, contemptible, subject to hardship

yaf gave; **yif** give