

MERCANTILISM IN CHAUCER'S WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE FABLIAUX
AND IN THE PROLOGUE OF THE WIFE OF BATH

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTSii
I. THE MEDIEVAL WOMAN	1
II. THE WOMEN IN CHAUCER'S FABLIAUX.	9
III. MERCANTILISM IN THE <u>MILLER'S</u> AND THE <u>MERCHANT'S TALES</u>14
IV. PROSTITUTION IN THE <u>SHIPMAN'S TALE</u>28
V. ALYS OF BATHE: THE MERCANTILE FEMINIST.37
VI. CONCLUSION47
LIST OF WORKS CITED.49

CHAPTER I

THE MEDIEVAL WOMAN

Four features of medieval society affected the position of, and the attitude toward, women. The social position of women was dominated by the attitude that they were inferior creatures. This attitude is evidenced by the body of anti-feminist literature that had been a part of the Church's dogma since the fourth century. In contrast to this attitude was the courtly love tradition which exalted women and encouraged adultery. Finally, the rise of the middle class stimulated the attitude that women were good bartering material.

Women were not highly regarded in the Middle Ages. They were believed to be temptresses who lured men to sin--just as their mother Eve did. Like Eve, they were considered tools of Satan. Through their beauty and bodily charms, they lured men to sin. Women were inferior in all things to men. Whether they loved, or even liked, their husbands was of no consequence. In fact, love was irrelevant to marriage in medieval society. "At that time and place . . . marriage was a union arranged for practical considerations, financial gain, the alliance for mutual benefit of families, estates, or interests, the continuation of a family line."¹ Women were expected to fulfill their role as wife in a dutiful manner, not expecting anything in return. Love might come to them, but it should not be expected. "Affection between the parties . . . was not thought necessary; in fact, betrothals and even marriages between parties who had never so much as seen one another were common."²

¹Daniel Cook, ed., Troilus and Criseyde, Geoffrey Chaucer (Garden City, New York, 1966), p. xiv.

²Ibid., p. xiv.

When a woman married all of her worldly possessions became her husband's; her goods were really never her own. Women were completely subservient to their men. They were thought to be lesser creatures, unable to think or to understand. "The position of the law--which is to say . . . The Church--was that a woman was not in fact capable of a rational decision in such important family concerns as [marriage]." ³ Because women were considered inferior to the man in intelligence, they were ruled by the masculine head of the family--by father, brother, husband, or even son. But, in spite of this general attitude, medieval man acknowledged the importance of women for continuing the species.

Women tended to accept their inferior position in medieval society. They accepted their role as the necessary vessel for procreation, and as the temptress who lured man to sin. They accepted male domination as the "right and proper" condition of life. Women were seldom taught to read or write; there were no schools for women except the nunneries. As was previously stated, the medieval attitude toward women, and their acceptance of it, was mirrored in a large body of antifeminist literature.

This literature came primarily from the Church (Juvenal's Sixth Satire is an exception). St. Jerome and others set forth the idea that women lured men to sin. Some church fathers even doubted that woman had a soul. Cook, in his introduction to Troilus and Criseyde, states that "since earliest Christian times respected clerical opinion had held her to be the instrument of the fall of man, a vessel of concupiscence, and a continuing source of sin in the world." Cook goes on to say that "Aquinas . . . attributes her role as instrument of the Devil to her weakness and liability to deceit." ⁴

³Ibid., p. xiv.

⁴Ibid., p. xiv.

The main problem of the medieval Church was the definition of "sin," and what differentiated mortal from venial sin. What was sin and what was not sin, what was mortal sin and what was only venial sin in regard to sexual intercourse was one of the major problems for the Church fathers and the medieval theologians. How was man to regard his use of women for sexual gratification and procreation? The Manicheans taught that all intercourse was evil and advocated total abstinence. Other religious groups and men held a less severe attitude, but they all considered sexual gratification sinful in greater or lesser degrees.⁵ But, however difficult it was to reconcile their desires with their religious teachings, medieval men had only to look around them--these sensuous, tempting, sinful creatures were everywhere.

Throughout the Canterbury Tales we find Chaucer treating the position of women in medieval society, and he often uses extremes to show their position. In the Clerk's Tale, for example, Griselda accepts her inferior position stoically. She considers it her lot to be sadistically treated by Walter. He frequently reminds her that he raised her from a poor farm girl to the position of wife of a "markys." Each time, before he tests her patience, Walter reminds her that she owes him everything:

'I seye, Grisilde, this present dignitee,
In which that I have put yow, as I trowe
Maketh yow not foryetful for to be
That I yow took in povre estaat ful lowe
For any wele ye moot youreselven knowe.'⁶

⁵I would refer the reader to two works for further consideration of this subject: John T. Noonan, Jr., Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by Catholic Theologians and Canonists (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), and Joseph J. Mogan, Jr., "Chaucer and the Bona Matrimonii," The Chaucer Review, IV (1970), pp. 123-141.

⁶Geoffrey Chaucer, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed., F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), IV, 470-474. All references throughout this study are to Robinson's edition.

Griselda is so good that she becomes near-allegorical in her personification of patience. Griselda is an extreme example of the medieval attitude of the inferiority of women, but Chaucer uses less extreme character portrayals of women to show the general acceptance of this attitude.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Canterbury Tales is seen in the ways in which Chaucer shows women adapting and adjusting to the attitude of their own inferiority. Even Dorigan accepts her husband's final decision: that she must keep her word no matter what her desires are. In the Franklin's Tale Chaucer, through Dorigan, shows how marriage can be good and beneficial to both partners. Yet Dorigan acquiesces to her husband when the decision is a major one that will affect the rest of her life.

Madam Eglentyne, the Prioress of the General Prologue, is also an example of woman's adjustment within the framework of social prejudice. In the Middle Ages, women had three choices concerning their lives: they could find a husband; or failing this, they could go to a nunnery; or they could remain with their families as old maids. Those who went to nunneries were usually from a higher social station, but not necessarily from the nobility. Madam Eglentyne was probably from the upper middle-class because she had ambitions which she communicates through her manners and affectations of the courtly rituals. She had become a Prioress; she was director of a convent. In his characterization of her, Chaucer shows that she had achieved an acceptable social position but her accomplishment is negated in his satiric treatment of the religious woman aspiring to the worldly life. Through Madam Eglentyne, he shows that woman sometimes had difficulty adjusting to and accepting her position in medieval society.

In contrast to the social and antifeminist attitudes toward women

as inferior beings, there is a body of works which glorified women and placed them in complete control of at least one man. This literature reflects the courtly love tradition. The primary purpose of the tradition was to glorify adultery. The lover of the idolized woman, and not her husband, was subservient to her. C. S. Lewis states concerning the adultery of the lovers: "The general impression left on the medieval mind by its official teachers [of courtly love] was that all love--at least all such passionate and exalted devotion as a courtly poet thought worthy of the name--was more or less wicked."⁷ One of the reasons for the rise of the courtly love ideal was the absence of love in marriage; thus, love was found outside marriage, often in an adulterous situation. The courtly love traditions belonged primarily to the upper classes. Chaucer treats the conventions of courtly love in various ways in his Tales, but generally he shows that they were not really followed and believed by most people in medieval society. Probably one of the reasons that Chaucer frequently parodies the courtly love conventions is that the characters of the General Prologue, except the Knight and the Squire, and most of the Tales are of the middle and lower classes.

Madam Eglentyne will again serve as an example. She is portrayed by Chaucer as a religious woman who resembles the courtly love heroine:

Ful semyly hir wympul pynched was,
 Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas,
 But sikerly she hadde a fair forheed;
 It was almoost a spanne brood, I trowe;
 For, hardily, she was not undergrowe. (I, 151-156)

Not only her appearance, but her manners are of the nobility and of the courtly love lady. Chaucer is portraying her as the ladies of nobility are portrayed in the literature of the day. He is satirizing her in that

⁷C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (London, 1968), p. 17.

she, although in religion, aspires to be courtly, thus worldly, and she should not have these worldly aspirations. Chaucer generally satirizes the courtly love conventions in the Canterbury Tales, but he presents the romantic view of courtly love in Troilus and Criseyde. Through his various approaches, he shows that the courtly love tradition presented the problem of reconciling adultery with the religious teachings of the time. Courtly love also presented the problem of idealizing the woman when the reality of life was just the opposite. Medieval woman not only had to contend with an antifeminist attitude, but also with the courtly love ideal. How she adjusted and adapted to her general social position, and to two such contradictory ideas as courtly love and antifeminism can be seen in Chaucer's various treatments of women in the Canterbury Tales. The Wife of Bath, the fabliau women, and other women characters are shown using both the courtly love and the antifeminist attitudes to their own advantages. The Wife of Bath, for example, turns the antifeminist attitude to her own advantage in managing and controlling her husbands. Chaucer satirizes many of the courtly love conventions in his fabliaux by equating sex (usually adultery) with the greed of his characters. He shows the fabliau women using sex to gain a kind of security and this security lay in a basic greed, in mercantile, middle class attitudes.

Security, to medieval woman, meant the things that money can buy. Whether it was a new hair ribbon or a higher social position, the basic desire was mercantile in nature. Women had no rights and had to take their own set of values under the prevailing social attitude. They found that they had one commodity that had a definite market value--their sexuality. They used what charms they had to attract men, and they used them to provide security for themselves. Often a woman's virginity was used as an article of trade in securing a better social or financial

position for her family. This is the case in the Reeve's Tale, for the miller aspires to a higher social class and is quite willing to trade his daughter for this position. After medieval woman was bartered away by her father, she often had to use her so-called feminine wiles to take care of herself. The values women developed under such adverse conditions were fostered by the social attitudes that they were chattels and incapable of thinking or feeling. They developed the mercantile attitude because they were allowed no other security. Thus, in many cases, sex became the commodity women bartered for security, that is, in crassest terms, money.

The rise of the middle class (the mercantile class), the traders and merchants, during the Middle Ages also gave rise to the mercantile attitude we see in the Canterbury Tales. There was no longer just the nobility and the serf. Now there were craftsmen, traders, merchants; men whose primary purpose was to make a profit.⁸ Within this setting, women found their economic (and emotional) security. They used their femininity to secure a better social position or a better position monetarily. Both of these positions are, curiously, two sides of the same coin. Those who had money could buy a better, higher social position. Women could hope to better their social position only through marriage, never through their own merit. In the Reeve's Tale, for example, the miller is concerned with his daughter's keeping her virginity in order to marry her to someone of a higher social class. The irony in this fabliau is especially bitter for this reason. The miller is concerned with placing his daughter (and thus himself) in a higher social class, since she is the

⁸For a study of the rise of the middle class and its influence on the writings of the Middle Ages see: Robert W. Ackerman, Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature (New York, 1966), pp. 33-38.

granddaughter of a priest, not with his daughter as a human being.

The Wife of Bath and the women of the other fabliaux do not have a father manipulating their lives, but their motives are essentially the same as those of the miller in the Reeve's Tale. They seek a higher social position or money, or both at once, and they use their sex as their product of barter. These characters represent women who are forced to resort to this method of barter because of the social attitude toward women in the Middle Ages. Chaucer draws upon antifeminist literature, the courtly love tradition, and mercantilism to show the position of women and their adaptation to the medieval social attitude toward women.

CHAPTER II

THE WOMEN IN CHAUCER'S FABLIAUX

The fabliau is a distinct literary genre that originated in France in the thirteenth century. Geoffrey Chaucer took this genre that was no longer being written when he began to write his Canterbury Tales and added the flesh to the original bones of the fabliau. A fabliau is a short bawdy tale told in verse which attacks certain social pretenses such as greed, lust, hypocrisy, jealousy, and pride. The social pretenses most often attacked are those found in clerks, wives, and old husbands. The fabliaux are tales of "the bourgeois and lower classes."¹ The plots often turn on some sort of trick which is usually played on the husband or clerk in the tale. There are frequently occurring motifs in the fabliaux, some of which are "The Lover's Gift Regained," "The Misplaced Cradle," "The Misplaced Kiss," "The Pear Tree Episode," and "The Rash Promise."

The dominant characteristic of the fabliau is its humor. Most often the humor is associated with sex or with the "exploiting [of] stock attitudes toward many of the characters, such as scorn for women, priests, peasants, and boorish husbands."² The humor is coarse, the language is usually crude and matter-of-fact, but there is no sensuality in these tales. By this is meant that the treatment of sex is not designed to be sexually stimulating, only funny. Brewer states that the sex is handled in such a way that there are "well-marked limits of indecency: the

¹Robinson, p. 5.

²Robert Hellman and Richard O'Gorman, Fabliaux (New York, 1965), p. 187.

subject matter is low, and gross words are sometimes used for their shock effect, but there is not erotic elaboration, no pornography, no perversion."³

This description of the fabliau applies to both the Old French and to Chaucer's. There is, however, a considerable difference between the Old French and Chaucer's fabliaux. Geoffrey Chaucer took the stock features of the Old French tales (the motifs, the social pretenses, the tricks, etc.) and he embellished and enriched them. What Chaucer added to the Old French tales was a more elaborate setting, and more description. His tales remain plain spoken and even indecent but the emphasis is less on pure animalism than in the Old French. His fabliaux are more satirical in that there is a kind of morality in poetic justice and he has a comment on man's relationship to man. The crowning achievement, however, is in his characterization. Hellman and O'Gorman state, concerning the Old French fabliaux, "The characters are stock figures or conventional types, most often barely individualized and without development. We must wait for Chaucer . . . to add the dimension of character to the fabliaux."⁴ Chaucer builds character in order to show how that character's own personality contributes to his downfall. The miller is carefully described "As any pecok he was proud and gay" (I, 3926). He carried five knives; "Ther was no man for peril dorste hym touche" (I, 3932). "He was a market-betere swaggerer atte fulle" (I, 3936), and "A theef he was for sothe of corn and mele,/ And that a sly, and usuant for to stele" (I, 3939-3940). Chaucer shows us that the miller is proud, vain, and greedy. These qualities

³D. S. Brewer, "The Fabliaux," Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed., Beryl Rowland (New York, 1968), p. 250.

⁴See also Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning (Berkeley, 1957), pp. 197-204; 223-237, for an excellent treatment of two of Chaucer's fabliaux.

lead to his downfall. His daughter's virginity is lost in one night; thus, his pride in her virginity is dealt a severe blow. His vanity is lost in the same incident but this time it is his wife who cuckolds him. His greed is exposed and paid back in the deflowering of his daughter and his cuckolding by the two clerks whom he cheated.

The women of Chaucer's fabliaux are like those of the Old French in that they are rather flat, having only one or two dominant traits. But Chaucer differs from the authors of the Old French tales in his attitude toward his women. The Old French authors reflect the general antifeminist attitude of the period. The women characters "are treated without compassion, as necessary evils who, left unguarded for a moment, will bring shame on their husbands."⁵ Again the Reeve's Tale will serve to illustrate this point. The miller's daughter is locked up at night to preserve her virginity but it takes little persuasion for Aleyn to gain entrance to her and she, through her lust, brings shame on her father. In the Old French fabliaux women are seen as heartless creatures who are "almost without exception, unscrupulous, lecherous, lustful, inconstant, quarrelsome, gluttonous, shameless, treacherous, and resort to the most ingenious shifts and stratagems to deceive their husbands or take revenge on them."⁶ Most of these vices could be applied, in one way or another, to some, or all, of Chaucer's fabliau women. But, unlike the French fabliaux, Chaucer's attitude toward the women is sympathetic or non-committal: it is not anti-feminist.⁷

The Miller's Tale presents one of Chaucer's one dimensional women

⁵Ibid., p. 189.

⁶Ibid., pp. 188-189.

⁷Brewer, p. 261.

characters. In this tale the woman is presented in such a way that she is delightfully "sinful." Alisoun, an eighteen year old country girl, is married to an old, rich, jealous carpenter named John. Alisoun is described in country images which is Chaucer's way of showing her naturalism. She has one dominant characteristic: she loves Nicholas. She is capable of joining in the ruse to trick John, but she only follows where Nicholas leads; in other words, Nicholas does the thinking and she follows. She is part of the trick on Absalom; she shows her imaginative qualities in this scene. But everything she does is for love, or lust, of Nicholas. Brewer sums up the Miller's Tale quite well when he says that "the poem is, at its heart, a delightful comedy of sex, full of heartless injustice, and quite immoral."⁸

January and May, of the Merchant's Tale, are again the old man marrying the young wife. May is another of Chaucer's flat women characters, but she, with the help of the gods, is ingenious in her ability to extricate herself from her compromising position in the pear tree. May is justified in her behavior toward January because his attitude toward, and treatment of, her are far from what they should be in marriage. She is simply the instrument for his sexual gratification, and almost incidentally, the vessel for an heir to his fortune. In the beginning of the tale Chaucer creates sympathy for May by describing January's sexual desire as "hasty." Even her later behavior with Damyan seems justified, though morally wrong, considering her previous treatment by January. May is not punished; January chooses to be deceived and is justly rewarded by deception. Chaucer is bitterly satirical toward January but basically sympathetic toward May.

⁸Ibid., p. 258.

The Wife in the Shipman's Tale fits the description of the French fabliau women because she is wanton, avaricious, and shrewd when it comes to protecting herself. She has one dominant trait: she likes luxuries and is not too careful where she gets them. She is scheming and she is ingenious in her self-protection. The Wife escapes detection but she has to trade sex for a hundred francs. In this tale Chaucer is nearer the Old French fabliaux: it is harder, there is less characterization, and the accent is more on action.⁹

Chaucer took a genre that was dead before he was born and adapted and changed it into something distinctly his own. He accomplished this through extended description and characterization. His tales are more satirical and have a kind of morality. He comments on universals in his approach to man and his relationship to other men. Chaucer has generally shown a sympathy toward his women characters that is not present in his models. He has carried on, even elaborated upon, the basic element of the fabliau--his tales are funny. The fabliau continues to be, in Chaucer's hands, a humorous tale meant to entertain. Brewer states Chaucer's achievement: "Critics [have come] to realize the rich poetic texture which Chaucer has draped over the originally bare and simple fabliaux-form."¹⁰ Chaucer took all of the elements of the Old French fabliaux and created six fabliaux and one fragment that were richer in character and in setting and in humanity than the originals.

⁹Ibid., p. 259.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 257.

CHAPTER III

MERCANTILISM IN THE MILLER'S AND THE MERCHANT'S TALES

With the rise of the middle class in medieval England came a mercantile attitude: the basing of values and security on the accumulation of gold. The man who amassed enough gold was considered successful. He could in fact buy himself, or his heirs, into the nobility, either outright or through marriage. This statement is, of course, not true for all people in the Middle Ages, but the trend toward the commercialization of values is apparent in some of the literature of the period.

Medieval woman, as we have seen, was in a position to take perhaps more of a mundane attitude toward her social role than man. She had no rights, and because of this she sought security in the only way available to her--mercantilism. The usual way to find security was for her to marry wealth; it did not matter whether she or her family chose the man, it was comforting to know that he had gold. She could marry an old man for his wealth and position, then find love and sexual gratification, if she must, with a younger, more virile man. She could reconcile the antifeminist attitude toward women and the courtly love ideal through her dual roles of dutiful wife subservient to her husband, and illicit love object of her chosen lover. In other words, venality afforded medieval woman with a way to reconcile two radically different concepts and still have her own way within a social structure that believed her to be a mere possession.

Through the study of Chaucer's fabliau women and the Wife of Bath, we can see that medieval social values forced women to seek security in mercantilism. They were condemned by theologians as instruments of the devil. They were bartered to the highest bidder. There was a monetary

value placed upon first, their virginity, then after this was gone, upon their physical charms and sexuality. No wonder that medieval woman became mercenary and looked upon a husband as a necessary evil and a lover as the only way to find love and sexual gratification. This is not to imply that there were not marriages for love nor that husbands and wives were not faithful in marriage. But the picture we get from Chaucer's fabliaux (the historical accuracy of which we cannot ascertain) is that love and loyalty in marriage were uncommon occurrences.

In three of the fabliaux, specifically the Miller's Tale, the Merchant's Tale, and the Shipman's Tale, Chaucer's commercial (trade) imagery shows how the middle and lower classes placed special emphasis on monetary wealth. From the previous discussion of the fabliau women we can see how medieval attitudes forced venality to become a trait in some of the women characters. Chaucer shows a sympathy toward the women who function within this money-dominated system. He does not make a real judgement as to sin and sinning as far as his women characters are concerned. They are never the object of mortal or divine punishment. They "get away with" many sins, but mostly the sin of adultery. It must be noted that the fabliaux were written for fun and entertainment and that they are not "real" life. Nor is the avaricious attitude presented in them necessarily Chaucer's attitude. The degraded social position of women in medieval society was real, and their condition could lead to a need for spiritual and physical security found in commercialism. Chaucer, in his treatment of his women characters in the fabliaux, shows how some women found this security. Whatever Chaucer's attitude toward mercantilism, it is present in the fabliaux and should be examined as a reflection of a medieval social attitude.

The Miller's Tale is the story of a young wife married to an old,

rich, and very jealous husband. This is a standard fabliau plot. There is no direct source for Chaucer's tale, but there are two close analogues: a fourteenth century Flemish tale and a French tale that fills some of the gaps between the Flemish and Chaucer's tale. Stith Thompson says that "the presence of the tale in oral tradition of the poet's day is well established," but he neither elaborates nor shows how the tale's oral tradition has been established.¹

Most of the criticism of the Miller's Tale has been concerned with the male characters, John, Nicholas, and Absolom. It is notable that Alisoun has for the most part escaped critical appraisal. One reason for this is that she, of all the characters in the tale, escapes poetic justice. Here we see Chaucer's essential sympathy toward her. We see in Alisoun many of the medieval attitudes toward women. She is Youth married to Age:

This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,
Which that he lovede moore than his lyf;
Of eighteteene yeer she was of age.
Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,
For she was wylde and yong, and he was old,
And demed hymself been lyk a cokewold. (I, 3221-3226)

She is young and wild--made to tempt men, and without the governance to control her natural tendencies. Besides, her old husband is very jealous. Therefore, she must be governed by "a rich gnof," and kept "narwe in cage."

Alisoun is parodied as a courtly love lady in that Chaucer describes her in the manner of the romances. "The long description of Alison . . . presents an attractive, frisky, lusty country girl and

¹Stith Thompson, "The Miller's Tale," Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, eds., W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago, 1941), p. 160.

burlesques the conventional item-by-item catalogue of charms, physical and spiritual, that a heroine of romance generally receives."² The traditional courtly lady had gray eyes, blond hair, natural eyebrows, fine clothes and jewels. Alisoun, in contrast, is described as "a brunette rather than a blond, plucked eyebrows rather than natural, embroidery of black silk rather than of gold, pearls of latten, not precious stones."³ Also, Chaucer uses farm or country images in his description of Alisoun and these heighten the parody. She is compared to a "wezele," the "wollie . . . of a wether," a "kyde or calf," and "a joly colt" (I, 3233-3263). "Many heroines of romance are compared to flowers, but only Alisoun is a piggesnye, a pig's eye, which, while it is a flower, has quite a different symbolic impact from--let us say--a rose."⁴ Chaucer's long description of Alisoun in these terms puts this tale in what Muscatine calls an "Oxford context"--the bourgeois rather than the romantic nobility.⁵

Alisoun is indeed an example of the middle and lower class medieval woman seeking security within a monied, commercially-oriented social level. She has married an old man for monetary security, and she finds love (at least of a kind) and sexual gratification with the clerk Nicholas--the younger, more virile man. We also see in this tale that not only the courtly love, but the acquisitive attitude is present in at least one of the male characters.

Absolom, whom Chaucer bitingly describes after the manner of a courtly love heroine, applies the principles of courtly love to his wooing of

²E. T. Donaldson, ed., Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader (New York, 1958), p. 907.

³Muscatine, p. 229.

⁴Donaldson, p. 907.

⁵Muscatine, p. 229.

Alisoun. But he does not really understand that which he is using, nor that which he is pursuing. For Alisoun is "the delectable little animal who is not to be won by a protracted, artificial wooing."⁶ She quickly succumbs to the more direct method of Nicholas. There is also a mercantile overtone in Absolom's wooing of Alisoun. Only a man who does not understand courtly love would send his chosen lady such gifts as "pyment, meeth, and spiced ale,/ And wafres, pipyng hoot out of the gleede" (I, 3378-3379). The lines following these reduce the whole courtship to a crass level when Chaucer writes, "And, for she was of town, he profred meede," and concludes "For som folk wol ben wonnen for riches" (I, 3380-3381). Although it is never clearly stated, we can assume that Alisoun accepted these gifts. Later in the tale Absolom, understanding himself to be the butt of Alisoun's and Nicholas' joke, offers her a gold ring, "My mooder yaf it me" (I, 3795). Again he is appealing to her avarice, and at the same time, revealing that he does not understand that which he is practicing, courtly love.

Nicholas, on the other hand, takes the direct method and wins the lady. He says essentially, "Go to bed with me" and Alisoun does. Nicholas appeals to her animalism and she responds. This action supports the antifeminist attitude that women are governed by their passions and are not capable of genuine moral understanding.

Although the antifeminist attitude is present in this tale, Chaucer is sympathetic toward Alisoun. Muscatine states that Chaucer shows "an outright, unqualified sympathy with the character."⁷ This character, Alisoun, manages to find both emotional and physical security in a mer-

⁶Ibid., p. 230.

⁷Ibid., p. 229.

cenary society. That she finds security is Chaucer's means of showing his sympathy. She finds emotional security (or, perhaps, animal fulfillment) in the same sense that she finds a kind of love in sexual gratification. She finds physical security in the sense that she is physically comfortable in the wealth of her husband.

Chaucer's sympathy for Alisoun can also be seen in her escape from retribution. John, Nicholas, and Absolom are all punished and made foolishly funny at the end of the tale. They all receive poetic justice. But this is not the case with Alisoun. She keeps her lover, and has even more freedom with him when people believe that John is "wood." Chaucer carefully delineates the punishments of the characters: of John, "The folk gan laughen at his fantasye;/ . . . They seyde, 'The man is wood' . . . / And every wight gan laughen at his stryf;" of Absolom, he "hath kist hir nether ye," and of Nicholas, he "is scalded in the towte" (I, 3840-3853). But Chaucer speaks of Alisoun only as she relates to the realization of John's fears: "Thus swyved was this carperteris wyf" (I, 3850). Alisoun's sin is revealed but not censured. As Donaldson says, "Justice is . . . chivalrous: to the heroine of a courtly romance no ultimate evil ever comes, and Alison escapes scot-free."⁸ Chaucer's view of woman adjusting to and using to her own advantage those demands upon her in a money-oriented society can be seen in his treatment of the character of Alisoun.

Where the Miller's Tale is basically and ultimately funny, the Merchant's Tale is bitterly ironic. There is a basic monetary attitude underlying the entire fabliau. The Merchant's Tale is a statement of the folly of old men marrying young women but it is also much more: it is

⁸Donaldson, p. 909.

a denial of human values in that it reduces all relationships to those involving money. These relationships stem from the narrator of the tale, the Merchant. It is the Merchant who has married a young woman and found grief in his folly. He, like January, fails to see that his attitude has caused his grief. "Instead of the boasted profits with which he fills his conversation he discloses his real loss, not only of a wife but of all values higher than those of the market place."⁹ The folly in this tale is mostly January's, but ultimately it is the teller's because his values and his motives are commercial and avaricious. He considers his wife (as January considers May) as a product purchased for a price and he is bitter when he realizes that his product is not perfect. He failed to examine it carefully enough before he bought it. In short, he made a bad deal.

There is no known source for the Merchant's Tale. Chaucer has taken motifs from several sources and analogues. For example, Dempster suggests that the old age marrying youth motif is probably from Deschamps' Miroir de Mariage. Also from this source comes the motif of contradictory advice on the taking of a wife. Dempster speculates that the description of January comes from Boccaccio's Ameto where the description of young Agape's old husband contains many of the same elements. The pear tree episode has a long tradition in folk literature. The blind husband motif could have come from an Italian prose work, Novellino, but there is no proof that Chaucer knew this work.¹⁰

Chaucer, through his narrator, the Merchant, begins the tale by establishing the wealth, age, and morality of January. He "lyved in

⁹ Ibid., p. 921.

¹⁰ Dempster, Sources and Analogues, pp. 333-341.

greet prosperitee;" he was passed "sixty yeer," and he "folwed ay his bodily delyt/ On wommen, ther as was his appetyt" (IV, 1247-1252). This sets the tone for the entire tale. January chooses a wife as he would a horse. She is simply another piece of livestock who will serve specific purposes.

Although the purpose of this study is to consider the mercantilism of the women characters of the fabliaux, in this tale it is impossible to study May's attitudes without some understanding of January, and her relationship to him. For it is January who reduces May to a creature for use both sexually and procreatively. And it is January who initially perverts the values of marriage:

And namely whan a man is oold and hoor;
 Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of this tresor.
 Thanne sholde he take a yong wyf and a feir,
 On which he myghte engendren hym an heir,
 And lede his lyf in joye and in solas. (IV, 1269-1273)

January, first, sees a wife as a part of what he owns; second, as a means of begetting a legitimate heir; and finally, as a source of sexual pleasure. He also sees a wife as a form of insurance (the commercial aspect again), as a means of saving his soul; he says:

For if so were I hadde swich myschaunce,
 That I in hire ne koude han no plesaunce,
 Thanne sholde I lede my lyf in avoutrye,
 And go streight to the devel, whan I dye. (IV, 1433-1466)

January also expects complete obedience, for he asks, "For who kan be so buxom as a wyf?" (IV, 1287). From January's attitude we see that women are things, not human beings.

We see that January's understanding of a wife is that she is a man's property:

A wyf is Goddes yifte verrailly;
 Alle othere manere yiftes hardily,
 As londes, rentes, pasture, or commune,
 Or moebles, alle been yiftes of Fortune. (IV, 1311-1314)

He sees a wife as the best of what he owns, as God's gift, but he is constantly turning religious teaching to mean freedom for his sexual drives in marriage so that a wife becomes only the legitimate means of exercising these drives. She is then a part of his property, his plaything. He also considers a wife as a source of an heir and for a specific reason:

Ne children sholde I none upon hire geten;
 Yet were me levere houndes had me eten,
 Than that myn heritage sholde falle
 In straunge hand . . . (IV, 1437-1440)

Here again he perverts religious teaching because his purpose is to save his goods and not "the intention of having offspring to raise them religiously in order to honor God; his motive is solely to get an heir to save his possessions."¹¹ Again we see a basic commercial attitude underlying his motives.

Finally, and most important to January, is the idea that a wife brings unlimited and unrestrained sexual pleasures, and to this purpose he desires "som mayde fair and tendre of age" (IV, 1407). He makes his motives abundantly clear when he says: "'I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere./ She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn;/ Oold fissh and yong flessch wolde I have ful fayn'" (IV, 1416-1418). And he continues with "'a yong thyng may men gye'" (IV, 1429). We see a lecherous old man seeking young flesh that he can mold to his own desires. He also plainly states that if he cannot find sexual pleasure in marriage he will practice adultery, "avoutrye" (IV, 1435). This desire for sexual pleasure "suggests of course that the pleasure of the marriage-bed are his controlling motive for seeking a wife."¹²

¹¹Joseph J. Mogan, Jr., "Chaucer and the Bona Matrimonii," The Chaucer Review, IV (1970), pp. 129-130.

¹²Ibid., p. 129.

Justinus, one of January's advisors, places women in the same category as any other piece of goods. He advises January to consider well "'to whom he yeveth his lond or his catel'" (IV, 1525). And he further says:

'I warne yow wel, it is no childes pley
To take a wyf withouten avysement.
Men moste enquire, this is myn assent,
Wher she be wys, or sobre, or dronkelewe,
Or proud, or elles ootherweys a shrewe,
A chidestere, or wastour of thy good,
Or riche, or poore, or elles mannyssh wood.' (IV, 1530-1536)

Justinus, in other words, advises January to examine that which he proposes to purchase at least as well as he would a prize cow or other piece of livestock. The selection of a wife is thus reduced to a monetary level. He goes on to say "'certein I fynde in it [marriage] but cost and care'" (IV, 1547), and here he is speaking for the Merchant who has also found marriage's "cost and care." Donaldson examines Justinus' relationship to the Merchant when he says: "If there is anyone in the story who enjoys the Merchant's approval it is Justinus, whose hardheaded and cheaply cynical counsel makes the good mercantile point that a man ought to examine goods very carefully before he buys them. But his conclusion seems to be the same as the Merchant's: the goods, if a woman, will cheat you anyhow."¹³

Thus far we have seen the mercantile attitude of the male characters of the Merchant's Tale; it is appropriate at this point to examine May's motives in marrying January. The Merchant states them clearly:

I trowe it were to longe yow to tarie,
If I yow tolde of every scrit and bond
By which that she was feffed in his lond,
Or for to herkennen of hir riche array. (IV, 1696-1699)

¹³Donaldson, p. 921.

May gains riches and finery when she agrees to marry the old man. Her motives are strictly venal. And thus her attitude is no better than that of the other characters.

In the early part of the fabliau May does not speak. She is referred to by Chaucer and the characters, and Chaucer builds a sympathy for her through her muteness. She becomes the object that is acted upon; she is passive. Because of her passivity, January's love-making becomes all the more grotesque and repulsive. He is hideous in his lechery; he also reduces even his activity in the marriage-bed to a mercantile level when he compares himself to a skilled workman: "'Ther nys no werkman, whatsoevere he be,/ That may bothe werke wel and hastily;/ This wel be doon at leyser parfitly'" (IV, 1832-1834). "Thus laboureth he til that the day gan dawen" and we see January fulfilling his greatest desire, to find sexual gratification "by the lawe" (IV, 1841-1842). Sympathy for May is shown when Chaucer ironically states:

But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte
Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
She preyseth nat his pleyynge worth a bene. (IV, 1851-1854)

Later Chaucer says of January's love-making "How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle," and his comment on May's feelings continues our sympathy toward her, "Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle" (IV, 1963-1964). May's motive in marrying January is strictly business-like, yet Chaucer builds such sympathy for her in the way January uses her for his own sexual gratification that we are almost tempted to excuse her original motive. We cannot, however, because later we see that she has no more real humanity than the men in the tale.

May, like the other fabliau women, seeks some sort of security within the money-oriented social structure. She finds monetary security by

marrying January. She responds to Damyan's advances to find worldly pleasure. She will give him "ese" and "'love hym best of any creature,/ Though he namoore hadde than his sherte'" (IV, 1983-1985). Although her feeling is sincere in a sense (to love him best) she is incapable of raising this feeling above the venal level. When she says that she will love him even if he has only his shirt, she is placing a monetary value on love. May is no more capable of real understanding of the relationship between man and woman than is January. She is indeed a product of her society, for she understands security only in terms of money, not in humanity.

January, after he is blinded, still is unable to go beyond the commercial level. He asks May not to cuckold him and he gives her three reasons. Two of these are honest, for the love of Christ and her honor; but the third reduces the whole situation to a monetary level. The third reason shows January's unfeeling attitude and appeals to May's greed when he promises, "Al myn heritage, toun and tour;/ I yeve it yow" (IV, 2171-2172). The jealous, blind old husband is as blind to human emotions as he is to the light of day.

May was considered sympathetically as long as she was mute; she was the object that was lecherously used by her husband. But as soon as she begins to speak, we become less sympathetic toward her. Her attitude is animalistic as well as acquisitive. She answers January's request for fidelity with a tirade reminiscent of the Wife of Bath, assuring him of her faithfulness. All the time, however, she is planning to meet Damyan in the garden. The scene in the tree is purely animalistic. There is no "love," only sexual gratification. May is no better than her husband in this scene. Her animalism supports the antifeminist attitude that women are lustful, deceitful creatures. That she may be justified

as the result of January's lechery is beside the point. She too has a basically commercial attitude, for she also reduces all values to the monetary level. What Chaucer is saying in his treatment of January and of May is that the lecherous old man is willingly duped by his young, lustful wife. Chaucer's use of the motif of January's sight-blindness is not humorous; it is a telling comment on the resulting human condition when all values are reduced to the language and concepts of trade.

What it all amounts to is that the narrator, the Merchant, does not understand that human relations have to come above the commercial to be meaningful, and this failure to understand is transferred to the characters in his tale. Donaldson states it most skillfully: "It no more occurs to the Merchant than it does to January that marriage involves something more on the husband's part than a transfer of funds from one commodity to another, and throughout the tale the word love is sadly ironic."¹⁴

In the Miller's and the Merchant's Tales, Chaucer uses stock fabliau characters and motifs but he adds a comment on man and his relationship to other men. The old, rich, jealous husband and the young, sensual wife are stock characters in many of the fabliaux. Chaucer takes the greed motif that is also found in many fabliaux and he uses it to show the fallacy of basing human relationships on money. In both the Miller's and the Merchant's Tales, we see old husbands duped and made ridiculous figures by their young wives. The basis of both tales is greed and from this greed Chaucer creates a picture of the breakdown of human relations when John and January and Alisoun and May all seek their individual ob-

¹⁴Ibid., p. 922.

jectives within a money-oriented context. The quid pro quo attitude of his characters is Chaucer's comment on the failure of man to care for or to understand real human values.

CHAPTER IV

PROSTITUTION IN THE SHIPMAN'S TALE

Chaucer's use of mercantile imagery reaches its epitome in the Shipman's Tale. Here the woman becomes no more than a prostitute because she trades sex for a hundred francs. The motif of this fabliau is "The Lover's Gift Regained," which involves the wife's need for money to pay for finery. She reduces love and other human values to their lowest level. Here there is the traditional fabliau triangle of "the dull-witted or jealous husband, the sensual wife, and the lecherous priest."¹ And these three base all values on whatever money can buy. The husband is a merchant busy making money. The lover is a monk who is known for his "largesse." The wife is a woman who "treats material welfare and happy sexual relations as going hand in hand."² The strictly monetary point of view of all three characters reduces morality and values to a baseness not seen elsewhere in Chaucer's works.

The Shipman's Tale is, of all of Chaucer's fabliaux, the most like the Old French fabliaux generally. It is harsher and the action is stressed more than description or characterization. It is, however, distinctly Chaucer's; for he takes an old folk motif and uses it as a vehicle to expose the effect on man of strictly commercial values. There is no direct source known for this tale. It is probably based on an Old French fabliau that is now lost. There is an analogue for this tale in

¹Muscatine, p. 61.

²Albert H. Silverman, "Sex and Money in Chaucer's Shipman's Tale," Philological Quarterly, XXXII (1953), p. 332.

Boccaccio's Decameron.³

In the Decameron, in the first tale of the eighth day, Neifile tells the story of "The Lover's Gift Regained." Neifile's preamble to the tale introduces the idea that will dominate Chaucer's tale: "I affirm that she who consenteth to her own dishonor for a price is worthy of the fire, whereas she who yielded for Love's sake . . . meritith forgiveness from a judge not too severe."⁴ The point that Neifile makes concerning the giving of favors is the point that Chaucer also makes. There is, however, one idea that must not be overlooked: the Church found all adultery mortally sinful, and whether it is found in Boccaccio's or in Chaucer's works the fact remains that the women were sinning. But sexual intercourse for love was not as socially unacceptable as was prostitution.

The character of Chaucer's narrator, the Shipman, is nebulous, but he seems to see the tale he tells as nothing but a clever trick.⁵ There has been much critical debate concerning Chaucer's intention of the teller of this tale. It is now generally believed that it was intended for the Wife of Bath, but that Chaucer changed his mind as her character continued to develop more and more.⁶ The evidence for this speculation is in nine lines at the beginning of the tale. Here a woman discusses wives' attitudes toward their husbands:

The sely housbonde, algate he moot paye,
He moot us clothe, and he moot us arraye,
Al for his owene worshipe richely,

³John Webster Spargo, Sources and Analogues, p. 439.

⁴Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron, trans., John Payne (New York, 1947), p. 369.

⁵Donaldson, p. 932.

⁶Charles A. Owen, Jr., "Morality as a Comic Motif in The Canterbury Tales," College English, XVI (1955), p. 226.

In which array we daunce jolily.
 And if that he noght may, par aventure,
 Or ellis list no swich dispence endure,
 But thynketh it is wasted and ylost,
 Thanne moot another payen for oure cost,
 Or lene us gold, and that is perilous. (VII, 11-19)

From these lines the general tone and human situation of the tale are developed. The tale is placed strictly within the mercantile realm. Who this tale was originally meant for is not important to this study, but the pervading mercenary attitude is. In the passage just cited the idea of prostitution is established and continues throughout the tale. Here we see a woman willing to sell herself for the trappings of luxury--for self-adornment--and from this attitude she becomes no better than that which the prevailing antifeminist attitude believed her to be.

While the current social attitude was one of woman-as-temptress, an instrument of the devil, Chaucer, until this tale, has not supported this belief. He still does not support it fully, but he does present what happens to the humanity of a woman who lives within a strictly commercial environment. The prevailing tone of the Shipman's Tale is one of "the commercialization of the marriage relationship."⁷ Again, as in the other fabliaux, the wife is adapting to, and finding her security within, the social system. This is an extreme situation, however, because in the process of adaptation the wife loses her humanity.

All three of the characters show their money-orientation. The merchant is known for his "largesse;" he is "riche" and because he is rich "men helde hym wys" (VII, 2). He keeps a fine table where he has guests "grete and smale" (VII, 24). But he spent much time in his "counter-hous" where he sat alone among his "books and his bagges many oon" (VII, 77-82).

⁷Silverman, p. 330.

The monk, daun John, is free of "dispenche;" he gives gifts to everyone; he is "ful of diligence/ To doon plesaunce, and also greet costage" (VII, 43-45). Both the merchant and the monk place the respect and admiration of others upon the getting and spending of money. The merchant is thought wise simply because of his "largesse." The monk is admired because he gives expensive gifts. Nowhere in the tale does Chaucer show these characters rising above the venal in their relations with others.⁸ The wife must get her money from the men in the tale. Because she is a wife, and more important because she is a woman, she must depend on a man, or men, to provide for her basic necessities as well as her luxuries.

Because the wife of the Shipman's Tale understands her position within her mercantile-oriented society, she uses her "physical charms for financial gain."⁹ And to her money in itself means nothing. The desire for money for its own sake, as her husband knows it, has no meaning for her. To her, money simply means the basis for the purchase of finery. Today we would call her a "gold-digger," but Chaucer uses her attitude to show how money, and what it buys, corrupts the morality and the humanity of those who take this attitude.

The degradation of the wife to the level of that of prostitution begins with daun John's proposition to her and his promise to keep all secret. At this point in the tale she lies:

'My deere love,' quod she, 'O my daun John,

 Myn housbonde is to me the worste man
 That evere was sith that the world bigan.
 But sith I am a wyf, it sit nat me
 To tellen no wight of oure privetee,
 Neither abedde, ne in noon oother place

 Save unto you thus muche I tellen shal:

⁸Donaldson, p. 932.

⁹Ibid., p. 930.

As helpe me God, he is noght worth at al
In no degree the value of a flye.' (VII, 158-171)

In this passage she implies that her husband is a poor sexual partner. She is proven false at the end of the tale when the merchant shows obvious sexual enjoyment of her. In this same speech, the wife continues her lying:

'But yet me greveth moost his nygardye.
And wel yet woot that wommen naturelly
Desiren thynges sixe as wel as I:
They wolde that hir housbondes sholde be
Hardy, and wise, and riche, and therto free,
And buxom unto his wyf, and fressh abedde.' (VII, 172-177)

She is being truthful when she lists the qualities wives desire in husbands, but she is not truthful when she says that her husband is "nygardye." In her list of desirable qualities in a husband we see her equating sexual prowess with money. In her lie we see her preparing for her prostitution. Chaucer proves that she is lying when he has the merchant considering everything to make her comfortable while he is away on a trip:

'Thou hast ynough, in every maner wise,
That to a thrifty household may suffise.
Thee lakketh noon array ne no vitaille;
Of silver in thy purs, shaltow nat faille.' (VII, 245-248)

This statement is ironic, for when the merchant says that she will have enough of everything a thrifty person needs, he is failing to see that she is above all not thrifty. The wife's testament to the merchant's niggardliness is simply not true, as Chaucer shows in the above statement. "It is much more likely that the wife's extravagance in buying clothes, rather than the merchant's close-fistedness, has run her into debt."¹⁰ Her extravagance and resultant debt is the key to the motif of the tale.

After she has told the monk of her husband's lack of sexual prowess

¹⁰Silverman, p. 332.

and of his failure to be generous enough with his money, she has intercourse with daun John for one hundred francs. And she does this simply to pay a debt she has accrued for finery. She asks daun John to "lend" her "an hundred frankes" which she needs to pay a debt for her "arraye" (VII, 179-186). They have already agreed to meet as soon as the merchant leaves town, but she puts a price upon her charms. Thus she becomes as a prostitute.

The motif of "The Lover's Gift Regained" is the vehicle Chaucer uses to show the degradation of human values. The teller of the tale, the Shipman, considers it only a good joke, a clever trick. The humor also comes from this motif. Daun John borrows the necessary hundred francs from the husband of the woman he plans to seduce. He gives the money to her, enjoys her sexually, and then tells the merchant that he has repaid the money to his wife. The hundred francs comes full circle, except that the merchant is never repaid the money, but he is well content when his wife promises to repay him with her body. It is a good joke on the merchant and on the wife, for the monk enjoys the sexual pleasures and is not punished, or even discovered.

Of course, the key to Chaucer's use of this motif lies in the wife's cleverness in extricating herself from a very dangerous situation. Here she again equates sex with money, and so does the merchant. On his return from "Parys," he has enjoyed his wife "al that nyght . . . for he was riche and cleerly out of dette" (VII, 375-376). Chaucer is showing the merchant in a happy mood because his trip has been monetarily successful. The wife, in order to save herself when questioned about the hundred francs, lies to her husband about the repaid debt:

'For . . . I wende, withouten doute,
That he hadde yeve it me bycause of yow,
To doon therwith myn honour and my prow,
For cosynage, and eek for beelee cheere
That he hath ful ofte tymes heere.' (VII, 406-410)

She acknowledges acceptance of the money from the monk and turns it to her own advantage. She has not only prostituted herself, but she has lied to her husband and also about him. She shows no remorse for these sins; in fact, she turns them to her advantage when she agrees to pay the hundred francs back to her husband:

'Ye had mo slakkere dettours than am I!
 For I wol paye yow wel and redily
 Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,
 I am youre wyf: score it upon my taille,
 And I shal paye as soone as ever I may.

 As be nat wrooth, but lat us laughe and pleye.
 Ye shal my joly body have to wedde;
 By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde!' (VII, 413-424)¹¹

The wife again equates sex with money. She prostitutes herself for what money will buy and also, finally, to protect herself. Silverman examines this point when he says "the most devastating satirical point in the tale . . . is in the ending. While the husband has been such a careful, serious businessman . . . the basis of his own marriage has been commercialized, and the tale ends with the wife paying off her monetary debt to her husband in the same way she rewarded the monk who gave her the hundred francs--like a prostitute."¹²

This tale, of all Chaucer's fabliaux, is perhaps the most moral. It is not so joyously funny as the Miller's Tale. It is more akin to the Merchant's Tale in that both January and the merchant naively accept the false stories of their wives and continue happily and contentedly with them. The Shipman's Tale, however, presents a corruption of human values

¹¹I would refer the reader to two articles on Chaucer's use of "taille" and "taillynge": Claude Jones, "Chaucer's Taillynge Ynough," Modern Language Notes, LII (1937), 570; and Robert A. Caldwell, "Chaucer's Taillynge Ynough, Canterbury Tales, B² 1624," Modern Language Notes, LV (1940), 262-265).

¹²Silverman, p. 335.

by money. In this presentation, Chaucer is showing what happens to human beings when they reduce all values and morality to the monetary level. Through this exposition of the loss of morality through commercialism, Chaucer is proving a moral: money corrupts if it is the basis of all values in human lives. "The story demonstrates that the vision of life as a purely mercantile arrangement sterilizes those who hold it so that all human values disappear, including that of human awareness."¹³

Of the three fabliaux which have been examined in this study, this tale is the only one that does not have even a surface reference to love. Love is mentioned only once and this usage is especially ironic, for it is in the context of the wife's naming her price to the monk. She addresses him as "My deere love" and complains of her husband's niggardliness to her; thus leading to her own prostitution (VII, 158). The fact that love is unimportant to these characters is another manner in which Chaucer shows the effects of a strictly mercantile attitude on the part of these characters. There is an absence of any sort of awareness of relationships that are either profound or meaningful between human beings. The characters are shallow and unfeeling except for their own desires, either sexual or monetary, or both.

Although the merchant is the loser in this tale, he loses his money and is cuckolded, he does not sense his loss. But it is with the wife and her loss that we are most concerned. Her attitude is one of adaptation to the norms of her society. She lives in a strictly mercantile society and her values are those of that society. She has become a shallow "gold-digger" who continues her daily life as if her sins had never occurred.

Chaucer is definitely pointing a moral in his treatment of the wife,

¹³Donaldson, p. 932.

as well as the male characters. Both the merchant and daun John have the same social norms as does the wife. They too equate human relations with money. The merchant's activities are all money-oriented. He sets a fine table; he is concerned with his wife's physical comforts, and he has made a profit from one of his "deals." Daun John also equates human values with money. He gives gifts; he buys sex, and he pays his debts. In all of their attitudes and relationships, the merchant and daun John show their venality. They share their commercial attitude with the wife. But the wife's sin is the most heinous of the three since she places money over marital fidelity.

Chaucer shows that a dominating mercantile attitude can completely corrupt a human being. This is most vividly seen in the characterization of the wife. She equates sex with money. She has become what the anti-feminists accused all women of being. She is an instrument of the devil; she entices men to sin and in the process she herself is most sinned against by the society that nurtured her. Her values reduce her morality to the level of prostitution. The moral which Chaucer draws is that the characters of this tale are unaware of their loss of humanity. In the entertaining context of a fabliau, Chaucer has placed a woman in a money-oriented society and has shown how it has corrupted her.

CHAPTER V

ALYS OF BATHE: THE MERCANTILE FEMINIST

Mercantilism is an integral part of the Wife of Bath's Prologue. It is, in fact, so much a part of the Wife's attitude, evidenced throughout her Prologue, that it is often overlooked on a first reading of it. Chaucer establishes dame Alys' commercialism, however, in the General Prologue. She is a weaver by trade, the very best of weavers, for "she passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt" (G.P., 448). The fact that she is a weaver establishes her for the medieval reader "as an economically independent bourgeoisie, a type that was becoming increasingly common in Chaucer's time."¹ Chaucer also establishes her character in the General Prologue, for she is shown to be a woman who would catch one's eye in any situation. "Her clothing is elegant and extreme; elegant because, despite her rugged durability, she is intensely feminine, and extreme because she is flamboyantly unconventional."² She is gap-toothed, which is a sign of sensuality. Both the Wife's sensuality and her flamboyant nature are related to the pervading monetary attitude of her Prologue.

Dame Alys reveals her basic venal nature in her dialogue and dramatic monologue, in the Prologue to her Tale. She immediately jumps into the medieval debate on the function of marriage and the debt of husbands and wives. Next, in her dramatic monologue, she presents a picture of a young wife adroitly managing old husbands by attacking their monetary

¹Donaldson, p. 893.

²Ibid., p. 894.

equation of money with sex. They have bought a young sensual wife and they "buy" her favors by turning over their estates and their traditional role as domineering male to her. Thirdly, she presents her essential mercantile attitude by her own equating of sex with money. Finally, through the revelation of her own character as avaricious, savagely independent, and also quick-witted and gay we see her as the first feminist in a prevailingly antifeminist society. She loves every minute of her life; she says that even if she is forty, "yet to be right myrie wol I fonde" (III, 479). Whether dame Alys is justifying her five marriages, turning antifeminism against its advocates, or finding pleasure under adverse conditions, 'she emerges from every encounter the victor. She is a medieval woman who takes the best that she can find from an essentially hostile society: she is indeed the first feminist."

Chaucer's sources for the Wife of Bath's Prologue are many. In her arguments concerning marriage and antifeminism, she cites many traditional authorities, including the Bible. Chaucer also draws on Jean de Meun's Roman de la Rose, on Deschamps' Miroir de Mariage, on Jerome's epistle against Jovinian which contains a fragment of Theophrastus' Liber Aureolus de Nuptii, and Walter Map's Dissuasio Valerii ad Ruffinum.³

From these antifeminist sources, Chaucer draws what he needs to help the Wife of Bath throw the doctrinal material back into the faces of the authorities. One specific way in which she does this is in her discussion of the marriage debt. The debitum was considered by medieval theologians as a duty of both husband and wife to have sexual intercourse with each other in order to avoid the sin of adultery and to produce children for the glory of God.⁴ In this one area the "medieval moralists

³Bartlett J. Whiting, Sources and Analogues, pp. 207-208.

⁴Mogan, p. 125.

. . . recognized the equality of the marriage partners."⁵ In all other areas of the marriage the husband was considered dominant over the wife. What the Wife of Bath does is that "she capitalizes upon her husbands' debt to her without acknowledging her own debt to them, and thus she cleverly exploits the one advantage the medieval clerks gave to woman."⁶ Dame Alys puts the marriage debitum in the commercial realm when she stresses her own sexual desires, and the fact that each of her three old husbands had in some way to bribe her for her favors. She says, concerning her governance of the sexual act:

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 him do his nycetee. (III, 409-412)⁷

She understands the theologians' meaning of debitum, but she puts it into a context of money, for she equates sex and money. When Alys refers to the marriage debt, therefore, she means sexual intercourse as it relates to mercantilism, not to theology. This use of debt in the monetary sense can be seen when she says:

Why shoulde men elles in hir bookes sette
That men shal yelde to his wyf hire dette?
Now wherwith sholde he make his paiement,
If he ne used his sely instrument? (III, 129-132)

And again in the same context she says:

If I be daungerous [stingy], God yeve me sorwe!
Myn housbonde shal it have bothe eve and morwe,
Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette.
An housbonde I wol have . . .
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral. (III, 151-155)

She puts the marriage debt in a commercial vocabulary. Alys has turned

⁵Ibid., p. 136.

⁶Ibid., p. 136.

⁷Italics my own; "raunson" means "pay."

the theologians' debitum to her own advantage because her husbands must buy her sexual favors with things, as well as with the loss of mastery in marriage.

Again we see the Wife of Bath attaching prices to the positions of the marriage partners in a marriage. In her dramatic monologue, she shows how she managed her three old husbands. Dame Alys is earthy, realistic, and practical and she uses all of these qualities in the management of her three old husbands.⁸ The two most important qualities found in these husbands is that they are rich, and that they are governed by the Wife because of their lecherousness. She says that "the thre were goode men, and riche, and olde;/ Unnethe myghte they the statut holde,/ In which that they were bounded unto me" (III, 197-199). In this statement the words "statut" and "bounden" put her attitude concerning the husbands and marriage squarely in the realm of trade. The idea of trade is further stressed when she says, "Thou shalt nat bothe . . ./ Be maister of my body and of my good" (III, 313-314). She trades sex for material wealth and she states this fact most succinctly when she says, "Sith they hadde my yeven all hir lond,/ What sholde I taken keep hem for to plese,/ But it were for my profit and myn ese?" (III, 212-214). She plainly shows that she married her three old husbands for their money, and after marrying them and thereby gaining control of their wealth, she felt that she "neded nat do lenger diligence/ To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence" (III, 205-206). In other words, she "used her body as a pawn, for her decisive

⁸The Wife of Bath's is the first dramatic monologue in English, and Muscatine says of Chaucer's use of it: "Its familiar imagery, its scraps of biography and opinion, its colloquial rhythm, and its awareness of a live audience all contribute to relating the speaker [the Wife] to the earth, to the present, and to the practical facts of daily existence." Muscatine, p. 205.

battles were won in the bedchamber."⁹

One other element that is definitely a part of the Wife of Bath's treatment of, and attitude toward, her old husbands is her attack on their antifeminist arguments. Here again, as in her control of the men and their estates, her argument and her attitude is grounded in her own venality. She shows herself to be a woman who has adjusted to, and even used to her own advantage, the antifeminist attitude of her age. Muscatine says that "the traditional antifeminist material sets off and gives perspective to the Wife's position."¹⁰ And, of course, her position is that of aggressive female defending herself and surviving in an antifeminist society. She shows her agile mentality when she uses these traditional arguments to have her own way. She lists the different kinds of wives that men might marry, and for each kind she lists some sort of monetary consideration:

Thou seist to me it is a greet meschief
To wedde a povre womman, for costage;
And if that she be riche, of heigh parage,
Thanne seistow that is a tormetrie
To soffre hire pride and hire malencolie. (III, 248-252)

She continues her argument, and her comparison, in the following lines:

And if that she be foul, thou seist that she
Coveiteth every man that she may se,
For as a spaynel she wol on hym lepe,
Til that she fynde som man hire to chepe. (III, 265-268)

A rich woman has an evil temper, a poor woman has no dowry, and an ugly woman is so eager to marry that she will take the first man who will buy her "chepe."¹¹ Alys takes the traditional antifeminist argument that

⁹Mogan, p. 137.

¹⁰Muscatine, p. 211: see Donaldson, p. 914.

¹¹Thomas A. Kirby explains "chepe" to figuratively mean "'with little effort.'" Thomas A. Kirby, "As Good Chepe," Modern Language Notes, XLVIII (1933), pp. 527-528.

women are evil, and places the masculine attitude toward them on a monetary basis.

Throughout her Prologue, the Wife uses domestic imagery, and usually this imagery is tied in some way to the economically oriented bourgeoisie attitude of her day. "Chaucer . . . suggests . . . her feeling for domestic property, and with the use of domestic imagery adds a few vivid peices to his mosaic of her domestic, physical world."¹² In the following passage we see both Alys' commercialism and her contined use of anti-feminism for her own purpose:

We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye,
In this matere a queynte fantasye;
Wayte what thyng we may nat lightly have,
Therafter wol we crie al day and crave.
Forbede us thyng, and that desiren we;
Preesse on us faste, and thanne wol we fle.
With daunger oute we al oure chaffare;
Greet prees at market maketh deere ware,
And to greet cheep is holde at litel prys:
This knoweth every womman that is wys. (III, 515-524)

She is saying that women are just what the antifeminists claim (irrationally ruled by their emotions), but that they are this way because of the social attitudes of the day. She shows her mercantilism in her selling-buying analogy in the last four lines. The Wife of Bath uses domestic imagery when she speaks of age:

But age, allas! that al wole envenyme,
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith.
Lat go, farewell! the devel go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is namoore to telle;
The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle. (III, 474-478)

Again we see her trading the most valuable commodity she has, her body, and she puts her trading in domestic terms.

The way in which dame Alys uses her feminine wiles to gain a dominant

¹²Muscatine, pp. 205-206.

position in her marriages is part of Chaucer's artistry. He has taken one woman who must live in an essentially hostile society and has shown how she capitalizes on every facet of the hostile attitudes toward her in order to have her own way. Donaldson writes of Chaucer's purpose in creating Alys, Wife of Bath: "One supposes that when he first thought of her Chaucer was possessed of the happy and mischievous idea of forcing the reader to compare the Wife, representing woman in her traditionally lecherous, traditionally avaricious, traditionally domineering, traditionally pragmatic form, with women as the reader knew them: the Wife would be placed before her ink-stained perpetuators and be allowed to say, 'You made me what I am today: I hope you're satisfied'."¹³ The artistic success of the comparison between Alys and reality is no longer the question, for the Wife of Bath has become the epitome of woman-taking-care-of-herself in the face of really adverse conditions.

When the Wife of Bath marries her fifth husband, however, she creates special problems for herself. With Jankyn, for the first time, she marries for love. Even though she marries Jankyn "for love, and no riches," her basic venality is evident for, in spite of his poverty her sensuality becomes the greatest force in her marrying him (III, 526). She says:

I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,
But evere folwede myn appetit,
.
I took no kep, so that he liked me,
How poore he was, ne eek of what degree. (III, 622-626)

This statement is ironic in that it applies only to Jankyn; in the earlier parts of the Prologue she plainly shows that she married her old husbands for their money. With her other husbands she trades sex for money,

¹³Donaldson, p. 914.

but with Jankyn the tables are turned; he, not she, trades sex for dame Alys' wealth. There is a certain pathos in this turn-about of hers, but in the end she regains her dominance and independence even from the young man that she loves.¹⁴ She loves him to the point that she does what is, for her, a thoughtless thing; she says: "And to hym yaf I all the lond and fee/ That evere was me yeven therbifoore./ But afterward repented me ful soore" (III, 630-632). The Wife never really loses her avaricious, domineering nature; she regrets her generous action done in a moment of passion. She tells that later she and Jankyn have a violent quarrel and that he hits her. Ever one to capitalize on the moment, she uses this incident to regain that which she carelessly gave away; she says to Jankyn "'O! hastow slayn me, false theef? . . ./ And for my land thus hastow mordred me?'" (III, 800-801). Even in a very emotionally charged situation the Wife keeps her mind on the thing most important to her--her wealth. Following the quarrel she tells us that "he yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,/ To han the governance of hous and lond . . ./ After that day we hadden never debaat" (III, 813-822). Thus we see that the Wife of Bath must have sovereignty and independence even in a marriage for love. Her need for sovereignty and independence are based upon her understanding that wealth brings all other qualities in a human relationship.

Chaucer shows, through his characterization of the Wife of Bath, one woman who not only adjusts to her antifeminist society, but who also thoroughly enjoys herself. She is the embodiment of feminine sexuality;

¹⁴Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Critical Passages in Five of The Canterbury Tales: A Study in Irony and Symbol," Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed., Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1959), p. 261.

"In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument/ As frely as my Makere hath it sent" (III, 149-150). She is domineering; she must be the "boss" in her marriages, even in her one marriage for love. She has an independence generally unheard of for women in the Middle Ages: She goes on pilgrimages; she goes out wherever and with whomever she chooses, and, of course, she manages her own estate. Her independence is based upon money because her wealth allows her freedom from dependence on her husbands. She says concerning her femininity, that wives like to "make us gay/ With clothyng, and with precious array" (III, 337-338). Within her femininity there lurks an avaricious streak, for she likes the things money can buy; her manner of dress is one example of this avaricious femaleness. She likes for her husbands to bring her "gaye thynges fro the fayre" (III, 221). She is practical in that she takes care of herself in all situations. She is a realist because she sees that the only way to gain and to keep those things that she wants from life is through her use of her sexual prowess. But more than any other quality which Chaucer shows in his characterization of her is her zest for living. She says, "For evere yet I loved to be gay" (III, 545), and "For myn entente is nat but for to pleye" (III, 192). No matter what life brings to her we know that she will face it, use it if she can to her own advantage, and above all enjoy it.

The Wife of Bath is a product of her trade-oriented society in that all she does is based, in some manner, upon money. Mercantilism is so much a part of her character that it is often unconsciously used by her to gain whatever she is seeking. But even her basic venality becomes secondary when she shows her optimism and love of life in a statement such as "Welcome the sixte" (III, 45). No marriage, nothing in

life can daunt her spirit and it is this quality above all others that makes her one of the most memorable characters in literature. Donaldson says of Chaucer's achievement with her: "If the Wife of Bath's Prologue were the only literature to survive between 1200 and 1600 one might say that in her character the Renaissance sprang from the Middle Ages."¹⁵ Chaucer shows, through Dame Alys, woman in her multiplicity of character, and through her, as well as the fabliau women, the basic mercantilism that was becoming an integral part of the rising middle-class society of the Middle Ages.

¹⁵Donaldson, p. 915.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

We have seen in Alisoun, May, the Wife in the Shipman's Tale, and in Alys of Bath, Chaucer's characterization of women in a middle class, mercantile-oriented society. Chaucer, through the characterization of these four wives, shows medieval woman adjusting to, and finding her place within, a social structure that was becoming more and more commercialized. The only security she could find in an essentially antifeminist society was one based upon money. Since women in the Middle Ages had no rights and were totally dependent on men, they developed a quid pro quo attitude, as Chaucer shows in the four wives considered in this study.

In the three fabliaux which I have examined in this study, Chaucer has developed the greed motif that was present in the Old French fabliaux to show how greed corrupts human beings who allow themselves to be dominated by money. In the three other fabliaux, greed is also a motif. In the Reeve's Tale, for example, there is the same greed motif. This greed is shown primarily in the character of the miller. He is a braggart and a thief. Chaucer shows his artistry in the development of this motif from the Old French fabliaux in proving that the miller's greed brings about his own downfall.

Alys of Bath, the five-times-wife, is Chaucer's greatest character because she seems real, alive, vitally complex. She has a basically mercantile nature, and in this she reflects the general thinking of her social class in the Middle Ages. She is a trader par excellence. She manages all of her husbands in such a manner that she gains dominance in each of her marriages, and she also controls their estates. She

trades her sexual prowess for this control. She is a woman who has learned to accept and to adjust to the commercialism of her class.

The fact that there is a strain of greed running throughout the three fabliaux and the Wife of Bath's Prologue is simply Chaucer's way of showing how at least one social class was thinking in his age. This greed was (as I have shown throughout this study) an outgrowth of the necessity for security. Chaucer's works reflect his age, but they should not be taken as historical fact. For Geoffrey Chaucer, above all else, wrote to entertain. This is not to say, however, that he was any the less skillful in his perception and artistic depiction of human nature, particularly that of women. The element of greed in the fabliaux has been emphasized by many critics, and rightly so. What I have been concerned to show throughout this study, however, is that this greed is not so much a vice or a flaw of moral degeneracy as it is a true picture of the medieval woman of the middle class. After all, May, and the two Alisouns (of Bath and of the Miller's Tale) are seeking security just as was Criseyde with Diomedes. The concept of "security" of the middle class and of the aristocracy was different. But Chaucer has shown emphatically that women's drives are basically the same, because of their common humanity, even though they are of different social classes.

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