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January's 'honeste thynges': Knighthood and Narrative in the *Merchant's Tale.**

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The tale told by the Merchant is a new version of an old tale of marital deception. A rich old man, here January, knight of Pavia, marries an innocent young girl. Delighting in his newly-wedded bliss, he fails to notice that his bride, to whom the married state is less than blissful, is receiving advances from a younger man, his squire. Inevitably the husband becomes a cuckold.

The question I want to address is this: why does the story as told by the Merchant concern a knight? This is not provided by any of the direct sources, and the husband's rank is not an essential ingredient of the plot; it is enough for him to be old, rich and married to a young wife. If he is also blind so much the better, the cruel inevitability of the fabliau genre will take it from there. Indeed it is unusual, although not unknown, for the fabliau to show a knight in such an undignified role.[1] There are of course several narratives in the *Canterbury Tales* with knightly protagonists, none of which raises this problem: we 'know' why the Knight tells his tale of knights - to display his insider knowledge of chivalry. We 'know' why the Franklin tells of a knightly marriage - it is the class to which he aspires. We can guess that the Wife of Bath tells a tale of a knightly rapist as a feminine raid on the masculine world of Arthurian chivalry. But why does the Merchant tell his tale about a knight?

Criticism has largely ignored this question. Indeed to read the accounts of the tale in the Chaucer criticism and scholarship of the last century you could be forgiven for assuming that the plot concerns a merchant, or at least a protagonist so deeply identified with the merchant-narrator of the tale that he is a merchant in spirit if not in rank. Particularly since Sedgewick's influential article in 1948 dubbed January 'an old fellow with a past',[2] critics have seen January as primarily a *senex amans*, a role which gives full rein to an analysis of his age and sexual vigour or lack of it, but implies nothing about

rank. While several critics do pick up the introduction of January as an 'old knight', few develop this. He is described variously as an 'elderly sensualist', 'the sixty-year old', a 'Boethius manqué', or a 'Janus-manqué', as an 'old goat', an 'old dupe', an 'old lechour', even 'an elderly Christian gentleman' and most recently 'a dirty old man'.[3] This tendency is strengthened by the fashion for seeing January as the alter-ego of the Merchant narrator.[4] Again it is Sedgewick who states this so categorically as to brook no contradiction: 'You look at it as through bifocal glasses, seeing first, January, and secondly, the Merchant; and somehow, the two finally blend into one.'[5] So we have the full quasi-Freudian psychodrama of the teller's revelatory projection of himself onto the miserable protagonist of his tale. So Schroeder: 'there is a parallel between the mental processes of the teller and that of his protagonist' ... the Merchant has 'been exactly in the position of January ... the conflicting claims of self-loathing and self-pity are projected onto the figure of January' and Jordan, in an influential survey of the criticism, asserts flatly: 'it is generally agreed that January is the surrogate for the Merchant', while Emerson Brown, another influential voice, adds: 'the Merchant cannot see January objectively for he sees in him his own earlier self.'[6] There has been some reaction against this - several voices raised to point out that the Merchant of the General Prologue has nothing to say on the subject of marriage, and that the later development of the figure in the prologue to the tale gives the complaint of a middle-aged husband married to a shrew, not an elderly husband married to a wanton.[7] But even the most vigorous of these attempts to restore a sane distance between the teller of the tale and its protagonist, fails to explore the question of the difference of *rank* between the Merchant and the Knight of Pavia; the majority seems to concur with Olson's assertion that 'the relationship between the Merchant and his victim *may have been obscured for the modern reader because January is a knight*' (my emphasis).[8]

January's rank is thus ignored, even denied; however, I would argue that a reading of the poem shows that January's rank is part of his identity, not only an introductory label, that the authenticating detail of the tale reinforces the reader's awareness of this, and consequently a number of questions arise as to the type of knight January is, the effect his rank has on the fabliau plot of the tale, and finally, how this affects our reading of the merchant narrator and the contribution of his tale to the rich social and moral patterning of the

Canterbury Tales.[9]

The only area in which January's milieu receives any sustained attention is in discussions about the Italian setting of the tale - Lombardy, more precisely, Pavia. It has long been recognised that as Chaucer himself visited Pavia in 1378, sent to seek the assistance of Bernabò Visconti and the mercenary Sir John Hawkwood in England's war against France, the setting to the tale may well be both significant and authentic.[10] But gradually this line of enquiry has become assimilated into the identification of the teller with the subject of the tale - Pavia as a commercial centre lends support to the commercial tone of the tale, and by extension the commercial nature of the protagonist: January becomes a peculiarly Italian breed of commercial knight.[11] An interesting counter-proposal is that in Brown and Butcher's *Age of Saturn* in which January is seen as the ruler of Pavia, a reading which is not altogether convincing, but provides a useful counterpoise to the tendency to reduce January to mercantile rank.[12]

Such discussions are mainly concerned with the interpretation of the first three lines of the tale. Otherwise we seem to have reached the rather despairing conclusion that Chaucer missed an opportunity to signal with unmistakable clarity to the identification of teller and protagonist. I would like to suggest that we should rather attend more closely to what Chaucer has actually done in this tale, and the opportunities offered by his careful delineation of the rank and social status of January.

Chaucer is, after all, a master of telling detail, used sparingly to indicate a background of depth and colour. Especially in the fabliau tales, there is an economy of line and a use of authenticating detail which has always been seen as distinguishing his tales from the anonymous fabliaux from which they are derived. The Oxford and Cambridge of the Miller's and Reeve's tales, the domestic machinations of the Shipman's tale of a mercantile household prove the point amply. But the carefully placed details of the *Merchant's Tale* have been ignored - see any of the editions from Skeat onwards[13] - so it is with these that we must start.

January is clearly not the chivalrous knight usually associated with romance. He is old, and therefore his status is established and displayed not through action but through possession, more precisely, through his household. The importance of the household in establishing social status is emphasised by Mertes: 'By keeping a luxurious

house and a generous table ... by displaying a large following, a lord was able to assert his nobility, proclaim his wealth, and advertise his power ... thus gaining respect',[14] and the work of social historians over recent years - Mertes, Dyer, Duby, and Given-Wilson among them - provides a fund of information which has yet to be brought into discussions of the *Merchant's Tale*, and this is a process I want to begin here.[15] To ignore January's household, as the majority of modern readings do, is to ignore the public face that Chaucer is careful to give his aged cuckold and to miss the target of a large part of the tale's satire.

The architecture of January's dwelling declaims his status:

> al ful of joye and blisse is the paleys. (1712)[16]

January lives in a *paleys*; defined by MED as '1) the luxurious dwelling of a ruler, noble or public official or 2) a palatial house (sometimes hard to distinguish from sense 1).' Other occurrences in Chaucer are the palaces of Theseus in Athens and of Criseyde in Troy from which it seems that the term is associated with the urban dwellings of the royal and noble and may have classical associations. Palaces in the London of Chaucer's day, other than that of Westminster, were those of the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth, the Bishop of London at Fulham, and John of Gaunt's palace at the Savoy. It must be said, of course, that Italian cities had palaces for the urban nobility although even these were not numerous at this date.[17] The term would still indicate considerable social status when used in English if not in an English setting.

At a key point in the development of the narrative of his disastrous marriage, January dismisses May on the pretext that he wants to rest 'a lite' (1926); in fact he turns to household business, the wilfulness and peremptory behaviour that is so disastrous in January's private life is here operating quite unremarkably in public:

> And with that word he gan to hym to calle
> A squier, that was marchal of his halle,
> And tolde hym certeyn thynges, what he wolde.
> This fresshe May hath streight hir wey yholde
> With alle hir wommen unto Damyan. (1929-33)

No editor glosses 'marchal of his halle'; MED defines the term as 'an official in a royal or noble household in charge of ceremonies etc.'[18] and from Mertes we can gather a) that only a sizeable household has a hall marshal, as distinct from an outdoor one, b) that to have a squire, a man of gentle rank, filling that role indicates a household of considerable status.[19] This apparently casual sentence not only deepens our sense of January's demeanour, but provides an audience with a clear pointer towards status. As indeed does 'all her women': Mertes establishing that there were few women in even a noble household.[20]

This confirms the information implied in lines 1893-1919, in which January is surrounded by squires, deferential, even nervously defensive in their attitude towards him (and this is an everyday scene, not an especially formal occasion). The irony latent in the concern he expresses for Damian draws on the sense that this is a relationship of public dependence and a publicly acknowledged difference in rank. Nor should January be ridiculed for sending his wife to visit his sick squire - sick visiting, as de La Roncière reports, was seen as a household duty pertaining to women.[21]

Beneath the showy rhetoric, the description of the marriage feast accords with accounts of ostentatious celebration and feasting with large numbers of friends and kin invited to act as witnesses and to escort the bride to her new home amid scenes of public celebration.[22] Christine Klapisch-Zuber confirms that the marriage celebrations in Italy would begin three days before the ceremony and continue for three days after.[23] When we see January's marriage feast in this context we notice the more forcibly the absence of any family supporting May, a telling indication of her inferior social status.

We notice too that the narrator is uncomfortable when describing such social rituals:

> So longe hath Mayus in hir chambre abyden,
> As custume is unto thise nobles alle. (1889-90)

- a typically snide distancing remark, and one which clearly marks the narrator's self-differentiation from the social level he is describing.

Another question rarely attended to is that raised by the depiction of Damian's fear:

> And softely to hire right thus seyde he:
> 'Mercy! And that ye nat discovere me,
> For I am deed if that this thyng be kyd.' (1941-3)

Most cuckold-makers in fabliaux, Chaucerian or otherwise, are cheekily self-confident. Even when the husband is as irascible as the miller in the *Reeve's Tale*, the wife's lover risks no more than a sore head in an undignified brawl. But Damian fears for his life: January is seen as a figure of power. It is not clear to what extent this fear reflects actual custom,[24] or a literary referent which could be to tales in the *Decameron* such as those of Day 5, or Day 4 novella 5, which gave Keats the story of Isabella and the pot of basil. Whatever the case, in the *Merchant's Tale* it has the effect of compensating for the imbalance of sexual power between the two men by a reverse statement of social power. This January is not yet a pathetic figure.

Another setting rich in irony and allusive reference is of course the garden of the final catastrophic scene, and it is introduced with one of the most sustained passages of sneering in the Tale:

> This noble Januarie, with al his myght,
> In honest wyse, as longeth to a knyght,
> Shoop hym to lyve ful deliciously.
> His housynge, his array, as honestly
> To his degree was maked as a kynges.
> Amonges othere of his honeste thynges,
> He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon. (2023-29)

The problem with this passage is to distinguish the information it contains from the tone in which it is conveyed. There is no doubt that the narrator's sneering repetition of 'honest' devalues that which he describes. Even so we are twice told that January lives according to his status. Introduced here is the vital plot element of the garden, and again the social historians can be illuminating: 'No noble abode was without its pleasure garden' and: 'If there was a garden, there was usually an access to it at ground level from the master's apartments.'[25]

Furthermore, Chaucer's depiction of the old knight is more than just a matter of externals. January's deportment is that of a confident aristocrat; he has the effortless authority of one born into the élite in the way he dominates his household. In line 1599 January does not go to bed, he is put to bed

he was in his bed ybrought

with a nice touch of patrician passivity. The belittling rhetoric with which the narrator torpedoes the wedding feast should not obscure the fact that January himself is exquisitely conscious of his dignity and the need to conduct the public side of the event with suitable decorum. So while his impatience to get his guests out of the way has been noted often enough, the decorous way in which this is done has not:

> 'I wolde that al this peple were ago.'
> And finally he dooth al his labour,
> As he best myghte, savynge his honour,
> To haste hem fro the mete in subtil wise.
> ...
> And to his privee freendes thus seyde he:
> 'For Goddes love, as soone as it may be,
> Lat voyden al this hous in curteys wyse.' (1764-7;1813-5)

I think it can also be argued that January has the virtues of his caste, not many virtues and they are overshadowed by the vices that are all his own (or belong to the *senex amans*), but virtues there are, and it is part of the painful semi-tragedy of the tale that his few weak virtues are essential to his downfall. January is an idealist who dreams of a world in which women are fair and honest (has he heard the *Wife of Bath's Tale*?) and in which age brings vigour as well as wisdom. He is generous; unlike the merchant-narrator with whom he is so often identified, he does *not* see the world in commercial terms, indeed he is careless with money and gifts, lavishing substantial gifts on May before and after marriage.[26] He is also generous with sympathy for his sick squire - and there is no need to see the admiration this causes as the response of 'toadies'.[27] Nor is there any denying the expectation of a sense of outrage at the activities of Damian, the 'hoomly foo' (1794), here the treachery is as important as the lechery, as the order of the household is disrupted.[28]

January's concerns are not with his fortune, but with his patrimony - he is anxious lest his lands fall into the hands of a false heir (1438-40). This does not seem to be the world of commerce speaking, but the world of patriarchal feudalism - a prison for women like May who have the function of delivering the rightful heir, but a

world that differentiates itself from the mercantile by just this concern with wealth that is inherited not earned.

To sum up: there is a good deal of authenticating detail in the Tale, and it all adds up to a consistent picture of a noble household of considerable wealth, status and position. January possesses the social power, and is in receipt of the deference, that go with money and rank. January's faults - his lechery, wilfulness, self-indulgence and self-deception - are so clearly presented as to be revolting, and oddly perhaps this seems to be at the root of the critical refusal to admit January's knighthood. January is thus, according to one critic 'superficially well-bred', or he is 'trying to live up to the knightly style of his class' so that the garden becomes 'a travesty of the knightly honour to which January pretends'.[29] What does this mean? There is nothing in the text to suggest that January's nobility is only a generation or two deep, nothing to suggest a parvenu masquerading as a nobleman. It presumably means that the critics are making a moral judgement, that January's behaviour is so loutish that his breeding cannot be genuine. There is of course a rather good discussion in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* demonstrating that breeding and innate good manners do not necessarily go together. As the Wife of Bath puts it - paraphrasing Dante's comments on the Italian nobility - 'He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl / For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl.'[30] January is well bred; he is also foolish, lecherous, self-deceiving and physically repulsive. That is the point, and to resist it is to assent to an apparently deep-rooted belief in the inherent gentility conferred by rank, a belief that finds no easy support in the works of Chaucer.

The Merchant's attitude to Lombards may be attributable to a professional xenophobia, but this still fails to account for January's status. As an urban knight with no commercial ambitions, a waster ready to be fleeced, he would not appear to be in competition with, or opposition to, any merchant, English or otherwise. Is the answer then a stereotypical antagonism between the new man and the old money? Something as simple as this might work very well. Chaucer's merchant, telling his spiteful tale of aristocratic impotence and degraded idealism, is the voice of envious malice, a voice which is found in *Piers Plowman* in the figure of Covetousness (the essential vice of merchants) and the tone of envy cloaked in moral superiority adopted by Winner in *Winnour and Wastour*. Chaucer is not, of course, dealing with such abstractions, but as is apparent in the antagonism between the Reeve and the Miller or that between the Summoner and

the Friar, malice or 'quiting' often proves to be the primary motive behind this kind of fabliau-derived narrative.

The distance between January, knight of Pavia, and the more familiar protagonist of chivalric romance, may in the end be bridged by the Tale's manipulation of a theme which can be seen as peculiarly fitting to the secretive Merchant of the General Prologue. The chivalric romance, from its earliest days, explored disguise and the gap between private individual and public persona largely through the knightly protagonists, who disguise themselves by changing armour, shields or knightly accoutrements, eventually simply by lowering their visors. In the *Merchant's Tale* the association of knighthood with disguise, with secrecy and with the tension between the various roles of the knightly individual are still evident in a peculiar way, in one of the Tale's many subversions of the romance genre. The famous passage in *Piers Plowman* regretting the new fashion for privacy in noble households, suggests that questions of the divisions, whether moral or architectural, between public and private life were of live interest.[31] January's chamber, and later his garden, are attempts to create private space, a private space in which his most intimate relationship can be enjoyed. The tale is suspicious of privacy and secrecy and the narration is intrusive and prurient. And the modern reader, accustomed to intimacy in literature, to revelation of character through sexuality and intimate detail, will privilege January's private world and neglect the information pertaining to his socially distant public world. But while the reader is thus allowed to see behind the façade of January's marriage and his 'honeste thynges', the truth is never revealed on the public stage. In the public world January is respected, honoured and never exposed; the contrast with the fate of the cuckolded husband in the *Miller's Tale* is instructive here. The lack of a revelatory catastrophe at the end of the Tale, equivalent to that provided at the end of the *Miller's Tale*, combines with the themes of blindness and self-deception to draw attention to society's willingness to turn a blind eye to the personal weaknesses of the rich and powerful. January is a whited sepulchre, or a figure resembling that of his patroness Fortune, fair in front and foul behind. Like his namesake Janus, he is indeed two-faced.

The tale of one man's folly levels suspicion at every knightly household and aristocratic palace, as it exposes (or claims to) the hollowness behind knightly pride. To recognise this is to restore at least a starting point for understanding the malicious satire that runs like a

connecting thread through the fabric of one of Chaucer's most complex tales.

NOTES

*This paper was first read to the Graduate Seminar at the University of Reading, and a later version to the M.A. seminar at the University of Kent at Canterbury. I am grateful to both groups for their comments and suggestions.

1 On the sources and analogues of the *Merchant's Tale*, see W.F. Bryan & G. Dempster, eds, *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, Chicago 1941; repr. New York 1958, pp.333-356. None of those they cite have a knightly husband. See also the discussion of rank in the fabliau in Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux*, Geneva 1973, pp.108-139, and Benjamin L. Honeycutt 'The Knight and his World as Instruments of Humour in the Fabliaux' in Thomas D. Cooke and Benjamin L. Honeycutt, eds, *The Humour of the Fabliaux*, Missouri 1974.

2 G.G. Sedgewick, 'The Structure of the *Merchant's Tale*', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 17, 1948, 337-345.

3 See Gertrude M. White, ' "Hoolynesse or Dotage": the Merchant's January', *PQ* 44, 1965, 397-404; C.A. Owen, *Pilgrimage and Storytelling in the Canterbury Tales*, Oklahoma 1977; Emerson Brown Jnr, 'Januarie's "Unlikely Elde" ', *NM* 74, 1973, 92-106, and 'Chaucer, the Merchant, and their tale: getting beyond old controversies' Part 2, *CR* 13, 1978; Robert M. Jordan, 'The Non-Dramatic Disunity of *The Merchant's Tale*', *PMLA* 78, 1963, 293-99; Norman T. Harrington, 'Chaucer's Merchant's Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum', *PMLA* 86, 1971, 25-31; M. Miller, 'The Heir in the *Merchant's Tale*', *PQ* 29, 1950, 437-40; David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, London 1980, p.152; Roger Ellis, 'Persona and Voice: Plain Speaking in Three Canterbury Tales', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 74, 1992, 121-139.

4 Thus ignoring the awkward evidence of the manuscript tradition which indicates clearly that the tale existed independently of the Merchant's Prologue: see John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, Chicago 1940, p.111, p. 374, and B.H. Bronson, 'Afterthoughts on the *Merchant's Tale*', *SP* 58, 1961, 583-96.

5 Sedgewick, 343.

6 Mary C. Schroeder, 'Fantasy in the *Merchant's Tale*', *Criticism*, 12, 1970, 174, 179; Jordan, 295; Emerson Brown Jnr, 1. 143. Sedgewick again

seems to be the fount of this: '[It is] a tale told by an angry and disillusioned man who is deeply involved in a situation similar to that which he is describing ... we must *always* remember that he is uncontrollably angry, and therefore that the tale must *always* be read as sharpened into his own mood' [my emphasis]. Owen (p.190) could be added here: 'The bitterness and ambiguities ... throw inadvertent light on the Merchant's two-month marriage and the thwarted expectations that must have preceded it.'

7 See Aers, p.224; Martin Stevens, 'And Venus Laugheth: an Interpretation of the *Merchant's Tale*', *CR* 7, 1972, 118-31; David Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales*, Chapel Hill 1986, and Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, London 1985.

8 Paul A. Olson, 'The Merchant's Lombard Knight', *TSLL* 3, 1961, 262.

9 The important study by Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, Maddison 1991, became available while I was working on this paper. He draws attention to the fact that 'the protagonist of the *Tale* is, after all, not a merchant but a "worthy knight", and the Merchant never allows us to forget that the action takes place within a courtly context' (p.335), and goes on to discuss the high rhetorical style used in the Tale.

10 Phillipa Hardman, 'Chaucer's Tyrants of Lombardy', *RES* n.s. 31, 1980, 172-178, was the first to suggest that the theme of Lombard tyranny held a strong imaginative potential for Chaucer.

The fullest and most recent discussions of the political context and literary repercussions of Chaucer's Italian journey are those by David Wallace, '"Whan She Translated Was": A Chaucerian Critique of the Petrarchan Academy', in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson, Berkeley 1990, pp.156-215, and 'Writing the Tyrant's Death: Chaucer, Bernabò Visconti and Richard II', in *Poetics: Theory and Practice in Medieval English Literature* (The J.A.W. Bennett Memorial Lectures 7th ser. Perugia 1990) ed. P. Boitani & Anna Torti, Cambridge 1991, 117-130.

11 Olson, 263, but note P. Boitani, *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*, Cambridge 1983: 'In Italy, where city and countryside were much more intimately linked than in the northern world ... the great mercantile families were either noble in origin or had become or were becoming nobles ... they differed from the nobility of the northern world, and yet at the same time they were very different from any English merchant' (p.10).

12 Peter Brown and Andrew Butcher, *The Age of Saturn: Literature and History in the Canterbury Tales*, Oxford 1991, p.158.

13 J.P. Tatlock, in his influential article, 'Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*', *MP*

37, 1936, states: 'There is little of the external; none of that description of people's looks or dress ... little of interior or outdoor scenes.'

14 Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household 1250-1600*, Oxford 1988, p.103.

15 Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1989; David Herlihy, *Medieval Households*, Cambridge Mass. 1985; Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages; the Fourteenth-Century Political Community*, London 1987; Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, eds, *A History of Private Life*. vol. 2: *Revelations of the Medieval World*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge 1988.

16 All citations to the text of the *Merchant's Tale* are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, Oxford 1988.

17 By 1520 only 2 out of 200 noble families in Florence had built themselves palaces: Charles de La Roncière, 'Tuscan Nobles on the Eve of the Renaissance', in Ariès & Duby, p.178.

18 The term is used with comic effect in describing the Host of the *General Prologue*, l. 752.

19 Mertes, p.39 on the position of hall marshal and p.59: 'The posts of chief servants might often, though certainly not always, be filled by those of gentle birth, particularly in the households of the greater baronage.'

20 Mertes, p.58

21 'Tuscan Nobles', 245.

22 *Ibid.*, 247-9, 297.

23 C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane, Chicago 1985, ch.9.

24 May's rather extravagant reference to being executed for adultery, ll 2197-2201, is echoed by Proserpyne in l. 2271: 'For lak of answere noon of hem shal dyen.' It could be noted here that Agnese Visconti, daughter of Bernabò, was executed by her husband, Francesco Gonzaga of Mantua, in 1391 for alleged adultery with a page.

25 Philippe Contamine, 'Peasant Hearth to Papal Palace', p.435 and de La Roncière, p.181, both in Ariès & Duby, *Private Life*.

26 ll. 1697-99, 2172-4. See the discussion in Joseph Allen Hornby, *Chaucer and the Law*, Oklahoma 1988, pp.92-4.

27 Tatlock, p.374.

28 See Hornby, p.128.

29 Tatlock, '*Merchant's Tale*' and Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, London 1990, p.117.

30 *Canterbury Tales*, l.111, ll.1157-8.

31 'The size, splendour and cost of noble households is testimony to one of the most striking differences between medieval and modern society, that is, the extent to which the public and private lives of medieval people were interwoven, and this is especially true of the great. Constantly surrounded by servants and companions, constantly mixing business with pleasure, the medieval noble was hardly ever actually alone, or even alone with his wife and children.' Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility*, p.87; on Langland's criticism of the desolate hall in the B text, X, 96-102, see p.91.