

WHAT EVERY GOODWOMAN WANTS: THE PARAMETERS OF DESIRE IN *LE MENAGIER DE PARIS* / *THE GOODMAN OF PARIS*

CHRISTINE M. ROSE

*Portland State University*

ABSTRACT

Using the example of the 14<sup>th</sup> century household book *Le menagier de Paris* written by an old man for his teenaged wife, this essay explores how the desires of late-medieval women might have been articulated, manipulated and created by the paradigms they read about in popular conduct/courtesy/advice books, manuals usually written by men for an audience of women. I probe what indoctrination the author/narrator provides for the young wife's moral and domestic life in his bourgeois medieval Parisian household, what anecdotes about women are imbedded in the course of the narrative for her edification, and why it all matters for the medieval audience. The essay demonstrates how what women are to desire in order to be desirable to men is shaped in *Le menagier*. Manners, morals, and housekeeping details are equated and integrated in this book in complex ways. I want to interrogate aspects of the sort of cultural work a text such as *Le menagier* might perform. What are the consequences for medieval women (and modern women), for medieval men, for medieval literary expressions, for the depictions of gender relations – of an authorized conduct for women, created by men?

“Was there ever any domination which did not appear natural to those who possessed it?”

(MILL: 9)

“Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men except the most brutish, desire to have in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave, but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favorite. They have therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds...”

(MILL: 12)

“In the present day, power holds a smoother language, and whomsoever it oppresses, always pretends to do so for their own good.”

(MILL: 41)

"... they [techniques of discipline] are a series of mechanisms for unbalancing power relations definitively and everywhere; hence the persistence in regarding them as the humble, but concrete form of every morality, whereas they are a set of physico-political techniques."

(Michel Foucault 1995: 223)

This essay explores how the desires of late-medieval women might have been manipulated and constructed by the paradigms articulated for them in popular conduct/courtesy/advice books, manuals usually written by men for an audience of women.<sup>1</sup> One such conduct book, titled in its French edition *Le menagier de Paris*, known in its only English version inexactly as *The goodman of Paris*, but more correctly translated as *The book of housekeeping of Paris*, is a large household compendium purportedly compiled between 1392-94 by a well-connected 60-ish Frenchman of means, an official, but not an aristocrat, for the edification of his 15 year-old wife. It comprises an instruction manual on the duties and qualities of a good wife of her station in life. Whether or not we have here a fictionalized narration of a literary author, or a sincere didactic work from an actual husband (and we can't know), *Le menagier* was read and copied by a sizeable late-medieval audience. I hope to point out what woman's desire was educated to be in this bourgeois Parisian book, and concomitantly what men were led to desire in women, by investigating the conduct such a book as *Le menagier* holds up for societal approval and the manner in which the author expresses his instructions. The discourse of the book shapes what women should desire in order to be desirable to men. I want to probe the indoctrination the narrator provides for the moral and domestic life in his household, what anecdotes about women are imbedded in the course of the narrative for the instruction of women, and what the work's literary design tells us about the narrative voice and its author and audience. Fitting any discussion of this huge dirigible of a book into the small space of this paper is problematic at best, and will necessitate providing only a partial reading of a work that deserves much more analy-

<sup>1</sup> Speaking at a conference in honor of Prof. Margaret Schlauch is a rare pleasure, not only because of my admiration for her international stature as a scholar, but also more personally. Prof. Schlauch's book *Constance and the accused queens* was very important to me, as almost the first book I read in preparation for my dissertation. Her work with source-study and her magisterial expertise in medieval languages and literary culture has been an inspiration. I find her lurking in almost every bibliography I append to essays I write. This essay forms part of a book-in-progress on medieval conduct manuals for women. *Le menagier de Paris*'s link to Schlauch's scholarship is that it presents an intriguing blend of medieval sources for its exempla of bad and good wives. As a gloss on Chaucer, who employed some of the same sources for his own works, or rather the two works gloss each other, *Le menagier* provides an arresting example of authorial framing and redaction of sources. In addition, I am certain that had the author of *Le menagier* known of Trevet's tale of Constance, he would have included her in his gallery of good wives.

sis. The education of a medieval wife in this book is reified as management and surveillance. She, as well as those around her, must interiorize and participate in this surveillance. The dire sentiments of Mill and Foucault in my epigraph indicate that while techniques for the socialization of the wife in *Le menagier* are inscribed of course in the book's own medieval *dispositif* (Foucault's term for the "grid of intelligibility" the nexus of social, cultural and historical practices, both discursive and non-discursive), these techniques are recognized in other eras as having the same consequences for women.

"Educating" women to fill a certain role in medieval culture, educating them for capitalism, for finding their sphere in the private, in the home; educating them for chastity, and compliance above all, delineates either the avowed purpose or the subtext of such books as *Le menagier*. These conduct works are legion. Vital to understanding popular literature about women and their role in medieval society, in the main such texts are under-researched by scholars, and unavailable in student editions. Medieval women and men indeed read and were read to from these books. They ordered them from booksellers; they commissioned manuscript and later print editions and translations of them for their daughters, such as Caxton's 15<sup>th</sup> c. *Book of the Knight of the Tower* (Caxton 1971). Nevertheless, most scholarship on conduct books remains descriptive, rather than analytic.<sup>2</sup> Or, as I found with *Le menagier* – they might be studied as cookery books! The only copies of the book in the University of Washington Library and the only copy of the partial English translation (Eileen Power 1928) north of Berkeley, CA reside in the cookbook collection of the Natural Sciences Library. My own interest in *Le menagier* includes the use of the work as a kind of gloss on Chaucer's depiction of women, since Chaucer was a contemporary of the alleged *Le menagier* author, and uses in his *Canterbury Tales* many of the same exempla which *Le menagier*'s author proffers in his manual for his young wife. Chaucer's "reading" of the story of patient Griselda, for example, has wonderful differences from the way the *Le menagier* author "reads" the Petrarchan tale for his wife's elucidation.

Conduct books as a genre seem to be based upon the assumption, like saints' lives or confession manuals, that men and women can be produced, changed, trained for different roles. Proper instruction is crucial to their satisfactorily assuming their places in the social system. In *The ideology of conduct* (1987) Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse assert that conduct books are "integral and instrumental" to the history of desire. Such works "strove to reproduce, if not always to revise, culturally approved forms of desire" (1987: 1). These

<sup>2</sup> See Ashley – Clark (2001) for a much-needed and excellent collection of highly theorized and analytical pieces about various sorts of medieval conduct books. They have set the bar high for further work of this nature.

books prescribe and proscribe behaviors in order to constitute an individual who was expected to re-make herself along the books' ideological lines, as the object of cultural desire. That is, as Armstrong and Tennenhouse argue, "such expressions of desire in fact construct ideology in its most basic and powerful form, namely one the culture designates as nature itself" (1987: 2). Conduct books for women, then, offer us clear examples of the means which western culture has developed to create and regulate desire. If redefining female desire revises the basis of sexual relations, then this redefinition of desire must be the basis of political power, because changes in marital and familial relations inevitably have profound effects upon the official institutions of state. The literature of female conduct, with its assumed ability to produce change in women, can also then be read as a literature about political authority, its creation and maintenance. Such books also fostered upward mobility, for bourgeois self-definition, as many of them written for upper-middle-class women seek to model the behavior of women along aristocratic lines.

Thus, however silly or ephemeral these texts about manners and behavior may seem, books of conduct for women in the Middle Ages need to be attended to for their roles in shaping social reality and educating women (and men) in their socially-approved desire, and their reproduction of the dominant ideology. These books seek to inscribe what is desirable in a woman in order that she receive social approbation and thus attract a socially-approved male. Such works, however, also imply another aspect of desire – the subject who desires the object of desire. Men are conditioned to desire a particular type of woman and so desire is a two way street here, with such handbooks continually reproducing male and female norms of desire.

Kathleen Ashley argues that despite the medieval romance narratives' emphasis on noble birth as desirable, an alternate way of figuring the desirability of women emerges in the conduct literature of the late medieval period aimed at bourgeois readers. Good manners equal good morals (Ashley 2001: 100). These conduct books repeatedly inscribe the view, says Ashley, that the *good* woman is one who, through chaste and courteous behavior, seeks good reputation and familial honor as well as a serious spiritual life and salvation (Ashley 2001: 101-2; 1987: 32). Learning courteous behavior in this bourgeois mode, says Ashley (1987: 30) paid off in worldly as well as spiritual profit. Carried out in ordinary lives, this principle was designed to predispose the female audience of conduct books to piety, sweet-temperedness, and silence. These highly-desirable qualities in a wife, a kind of conflation of the Martha and Mary roles, worked hard to suppress evidence of sexual desire in females. Passivity and humility, even in the face of marital violence, seems to be the approved model. Female conduct books, therefore, represent interesting documentary evidence for a history of sexuality and of class-based sexual norms.

*Le menagier de Paris* constructs such class-based contours of desire in the bourgeois world in which it operates and recreates in some enchanting detail – like other works of its kind, *The book of the Knight of the Tower*, or *How the goodwife taught her daughter* (Caxton: 1971; Furnivall 1868). Extant in three 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscripts, the compilation was edited and published for the first time in 1846 as a "traité de morale et d'économie domestique" (Pichon 1846). It has since received minor attention, some partial modernizations into French and English<sup>3</sup> but has not been fully edited and translated into modern English, a deficiency that may soon be remedied by a colleague (Professor Gina L. Greco, Portland State University, Dept. of Foreign Languages) and myself who are now engaged in such a project. The only English translation with any claims to completeness, by Eileen Power in 1928, indeed, despite its size, turns out to be substantially abridged. Also, Power renders it into an archaic, although charming ("ye olde") English in an attempt most likely to capture the flavor of the medieval diction and appeal to the readers of her generation. My co-editor and myself are convinced that in order to historicize our reading practices, a translation of the whole text is important, despite its length, and its containing a long excursus or two into materials the author simply copied into his book, such as the whole of the story of Mellibee, the long poem "Le chemin de pauvreté et de la richesse", and seemingly endless recipes for exotic medieval dishes. A vast text of interesting design, there is a rich lode to mine in *Le menagier* of the material that a medieval householder found worth keeping for posterity, for daily consultation, and for the edification of his wife and servants.

Certainly, books by male authors for female audiences often tell us less about the women audience than they do about the male authors.<sup>4</sup> The issue of what women should want and how they are to comport themselves seems fraught with anxiety for *Le menagier's* avuncular author, the aging husband of a teenaged wife. His book of keeping house is also a book about keeping women – in their place. Compiled ostensibly for the education of a young wife, this intent is somewhat belied by its digressions for the benefit of the steward, Maître Jehan le Dispenser, on the care and diseases of horses and the ordering of foodstuffs, and for the young wife's companion-governess-housekeeper, Dame Agnes le Beguine, who is requested to take a hand in the ordering from tradesmen, the supervision of the wife, and the care of the house and animals. But by far the most interesting of the audiences created within the text is that of the young wife's

<sup>3</sup> Brereton – Ferrer (eds.) (1981) with a forward by Beryl Smalley is the modern French edition, abridged. See also Bayard (1991) for a brief modern English mélange from the moral treatise section of *Le menagier*.

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting perspective on religious texts for medieval women and correspondences between religious/enclosed men and women see Bartlett (1995).

NEXT husband, whom the old man wishes to impress with his wife-training skills, as well as with his learning, his wide reading and his moral rectitude. A passage from the prologue, addressing the wife as “dear sister”, presents the reasons for writing his book:

Although, as I said, it is not appropriate for me to ask much of you for myself, I would nonetheless wish you to know in depth about virtue, honor and duty, not so much for myself but so that you can better serve another husband, if you have one after me, or so that you can instruct your daughters, friends or others, if you wish and if they need it. The more you are knowledgeable, the more honor you will receive, and the more your parents, myself, and the others who raised you, will be praised. And for your honor and love, and not for my service (for only common service, or less, is appropriate for me), and because I have tender compassion for you who have for so long been without father and mother, or any nearby kinswomen, or anyone else from whom you could seek advice concerning your private needs, except myself, for whom you have been removed from your family and birthplace, I have often and repeatedly wondered if I could myself find an easy and general introduction which could guide you in your care [OF= peine] and work, so that you could teach yourself, without burdening myself with the task described above.

(*The book of housekeeping*, in progress)

This possible future husband’s praise and approbation, actively sought and discussed throughout the sections on the moral training of the wife, constructs a homosocial bond between the two men, with the re-made woman as the pledge of the transfer of power and honor between them.<sup>5</sup> The continuance of the cultural model perpetrated by the first husband is secured, and, further, the wife must indoctrinate her own children, from either husband, according to the book’s precepts of female obedience to male authority. In an intriguing elision, the *Menagier* author displaces the notion of her obeying *him* to her obedience to her husband-that-will-be, who might expect such submission. This wife comes complete with an Owner’s Manual.

However genial the narrator’s tone may be in places, and it is, his recital of moral and domestic schooling reifies women as a sort of domestic animal in need of obedience training and surveillance by himself and his minions. This manual naturalizes the brutality of men, while blaming women for it, and places the severest strictures against women’s anger – righteous or not. The structure of his book, observable from the synopsis which follows, can be seen as an inclusive one of management: the management of a wife’s body and soul and her duties towards her husband, the management of the garden (growing a wife =

growing a garden), controlling the servants, the horses, the hawks, the larder, the management of cooking and the amusement of guests. It moves from prescribing the inner life of her soul (the first section begins with prayers and a manual of the Seven Deadly Sins and their remedies) to her outward behavior and then to the way in which her household reflects this regulated nature of the wife.

The organization of *Le menagier*, as the author states in his preface:

I<sup>st</sup> section: moral treatise on ideals of womanly behavior – piety, dress, chastity, control of the gaze, 7 deadly sins, fidelity, obedience [at great length!], care of the husband’s person, care of the husband’s secrets and reputation

II<sup>nd</sup> section: household management, incl. gardening; hiring and treating servants; medical care of horses; purchase of food; arrangement of feasts; menus of great feasts he either attended or heard about; and an elaborate, detailed cookbook

III<sup>rd</sup> section (incomplete in extant MSS): parlor games for indoor amusement, dice, chess – now lost or never finished according to his plan; treatise on hawking, falconry (an outdoor sport for ladies); book of riddles and arithmetic games – now lost or never completed

According to this plan, the final section of the book as we have it is incomplete. The missing disquisition on games might have been a happy addition for scholars, but it would not disturb the dark contours of this picture of a wife in charge of the pleasure of others. She needs to know games to be entertaining to her husband and to his guests. As a falcon on a tether, eager to return to its master; as a horse, large and dangerous, yet bred to the bridle and docile with proper training, the plan of the book on household management in order to please her husband equates women, garden, horse, falcon. Even the huge section of recipes for complex and aristocratic dishes and menus for lavish parties seems of a piece with the medieval concern for reading as eating, *ruminatio*, where the digested book becomes part of the reader. It is a “recipe for a good wife”, a recipe for a husband’s pleasure. The first treatise, on wifely behavior, on which I base most of this present discussion, inscribes a transformative model whereby the wife assimilates the text by imitating the feminine virtues therein and turning away from the *exempla in malo* of bad women – of which there are many. The author wants his wife to read, to chew on (he often directs her to think about this or that), to digest, to *become* the book, to be morally good and fiscally prudent with his resources, treating him well in his body, keeping fleas out of his bed, and easing his mind of having to deal with wifely obstreperousness and error and threats to his reputation. Reinforcing this association of eating and the book, the author connects women with gluttony and sins of the mouth in his section on

<sup>5</sup> Eerily reminiscent of the bonds and promises between men in Chaucer’s “Franklin’s Tale”.

spiritual management and confession. The good wife is pious, submissive, obedient and attentive, even when she feels upset, or the request from her husband is blatantly wrong or ridiculous.

*Le menagier de Paris* displays the husband's *capital*, organized, his inheritance of spiritual and moral precepts for his wife, a kind of moral ledger book. A businesslike approach to the construction of a legacy and of his wife's life, the book represents a concrete documentation of his moral and culinary code, like a ledger where debits and credits were registered. In fact, he uses images of the "tally" in his book, arguing that the wife must not trust her own or her tradesmen's memories, that life is smoother if all accounts are written down. Images of profit and loss abound, the language of economics, of men wagering, show this bourgeois authorial voice to be deeply concerned with commerce, money and goods. Despite its relationship to the matter and genre of clerical moral and spiritual treatises such as the *Ancrene wisse*, the book of *Le menagier* manifests itself in its details as a secular, class-specific document. The author's agenda too, heuristic and even pastoral on the surface, and beginning conventionally enough with provisions for the religious life of his wife such as prayers and daily devotions, turns to promoting his own fame as a tamer of women to his successor, the one who next weds his young darling upon his death, who will benefit from his expert instructions on her comportment and adept inculcation of the desirable traits in a woman of her social status. HIS honor, HIS reputation remain paramount in the instructions to the wife to be dutiful, chaste and morally above rebuke. Time after time the new husband is invoked as the reason for his including some directive or other of wifely submission to a tyrannical husband. In the course of his manual, the author rehearses the misogynistic platitudes about women familiar to those of us who study medieval women: women talk too much, women cannot keep secrets, women are easily led astray and lustful, women have poor judgment of the characters of others without the aid of men's guidance, women are by nature prone to power-hunger and evil:

For when the husbands see that their wives cease being dutiful and gain too much power, and that no good will come from enduring their actions, these women are, all of a sudden, by the rightful will of their husbands, cast down like Lucifer, who was lord of the angels of Paradise.

(*A medieval home companion*: 70)

Biblical examples of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachael demonstrate the good wife to be a humble adjunct to her better half. Numerous instances in this narrative recreate for us a good woman who resembles a dog, a bird, a horse, in her obedience and loyalty to her "master". Tales of loyal dogs who guard the graves or bodies of their dead masters provide ample evidence of the devotion of beasts. The treatise on obedience to the husband, by far the most elaborate section (al-

though all the book is actually about obedience), stresses the analogy between women and beasts and birds of prey, who are taught to love their owners and naturally love their mates:

Now have you seen diverse strange examples, which are true and visible to the eye, by such examples you see that the birds of the sky and the shy wild creatures and even the ravening beasts have the sense perfectly to love and be intimate with their owners and those that are kind to them, and to be strange with others; wherefore for a better and stronger reason women, to whom God has given natural sense and who are reasonable, ought to have a perfect and solemn love for their husbands; and so I pray you to be very loving and intimate with your husband who shall be.

(*The book of housekeeping*: I, vi)

Remembering that Ovid's *Art of love* repeatedly refers to women with equine metaphors, so this is an ancient trope, we see from *Le menagier's* treatise on the fine points of a horse and its care in health and sickness the book's recurring imagery of woman-as-horse. Here are the 18 points of a good horse, including, it seems, what medieval men found attractive in women and horses alike. A horse should have:

Three of the points of a fox, to wit, short upright ears; good coat and strong and stiff; bushy tail. Four of a hare, to wit narrow head, wide awake, light in movement, fleet and swift in going. Four of an ox, to wit haunches large, wide and open, large cod, large eyes jutting forth from the head, and low jointed. Of an ass three: good feet, strong backbone, debonnair manners. Four of a maid, to wit, fine mane, fine chest, fine thighs and large buttocks.

(*The goodman*: 323, note to page 220).

From the section on the 7 deadly sins, against female lechery, the narrator notes: "for by temperance is the body mastered, even as a horse by the bridle" (*The goodman*: 91). And,

In prayer God looketh for a humble and devout heart and takith no heed of outward show nor of ostentatious bearing, like to that of those bold and foolish women, who go their ways in ribald wise, with their necks stretched forth like unto a stag in flight, looking this way and that like unto a runaway horse.

(*The goodman*: 92)

*Le menagier's* discourse on proper wifely deportment is echoed in the works of Chaucer and other popular medieval literary and religious authors. And, some of the words about pleasing your man and keeping his home and clothes clean sound eerily like today's supermarket advice books, *Glamour* magazine, or a medieval Martha Stewart:

Therefore, dear sister, I pray you to bewitch and bewitch again the husband whom you will have, preserve him from a badly covered house and a smoky chimney, and be not quarrelsome with him, but be sweet, amiable, and peaceful. Mind that in winter he has a good fire without smoke, and that he is well couched and covered between your breasts, and there bewitch him.

(*A medieval home companion*: 64)

While Power finds in the narrator sympathy, tenderness, and the “mellow sadness of an autumn evening”, at best, the tone recreates that of fatherly advice (but he, we must remember, was *not* her father); at worst it reminds one of the grim and threatening surveillance which Foucault ascribes to Bentham’s model of the Panopticon prison, with everyone watching everyone else, and leading to the interiorization of surveillance. Such a machine of discipline and surveillance brings to life the Foucauldian notion of maximizing the output through labor, and the surveillance machine where every instance of surveillance produces an instance of power. When read along this discursive line, *Le menagier* can be a very disturbing book indeed. All those with access to the household book – at first at least Dame Agnes and Maître Jehan, and later any subsequent children of the wife, the wife’s kin who are mentioned in the book as knowing well what constitutes proper behavior, perhaps the admirers of the book who might copy it, the author’s secretary, and the imagined future husband. All these readers may oversee the wife’s enacting of the author’s wishes for her behavior. This entire crowd grows privy to the knowledge of the confusing and conflated roles the wife must assume and internalize and of how well she does that job over time. Women as Mary, Martha, daughter; pious and observant church-member; obedient, silent, and submissive wife; seductive, faithful, long-suffering and attentive lover; moral example for her female servants to emulate; teacher to her children and to young females in her charge; “boss” to her servants and tradesmen; housekeeper, cleaner; doctor/nurturer for her household help and pets, veterinarian/animal husbandwoman to her horses and farm animals; overseer of the larder and kitchen; economizer with the family finances; gardener and cook; aristocratic lady at play with her falcons and her husband’s guests – describe a veritable medieval compendium of available female roles. As it stands, the book would bear witness, those implied readers would bear witness, to what the wife was told by her husband, and they would know when she was not up to the mark. The whole audience is rhetorically implicated (as the wife would surely ascertain) in the system of surveillance over the young woman, whether her husband was home or not, whether she was at their country house or in the house in Paris, whether he was dead or not. The author insists that the outer cleanliness of the husband’s dress and his bed, she must keep him fresh, warm and clean, reflects on a wife’s good character. So, the audience would even be able to *see* an outward manifestation of her goodness in the person of her husband. The imag-

ined audience consists of a dazzling array of those who would attest to the posited next husband, whom she would acquire in the fullness of time, of how well she fulfilled the paradigms of desire set forth in the volume her present husband had so laboriously prepared for that purpose and for the purpose of male pleasure in a well-run household with a well-behaved wife. Moreover, the author is not, of course, introducing his wife to anything she does not already know about codes of conduct or gender roles, religious precepts or class strictures. He tells her the examples he presents “be given you rather for the tale, than for the teaching” (*The book of housekeeping*, in progress). By reminding her of the society’s system of repression of women and taking as his mandate her own wish, as he states in his prologue, not to be reprimanded by him in public when she is in error, he undertakes to codify for her the rules of female domesticity. Moreover, in a commercial mode, he prepares a sort of legal document as evidence of his pact with her. Here is their contract as he describes it:

Being only 15 years old the week we were married, you asked that I be indulgent about your youth and lack of experience until you had seen and learned more; you categorically promised to listen carefully and to apply yourself wholeheartedly to maintaining my pleasure and love (as you so wisely said following advice from, I do believe, someone more wise than yourself), beseeching me humbly in our bed, as I remember, that for the love of God I not correct you harshly in front of either strangers or our servants, but that I correct you each night, or on a daily basis, in our bedroom, and that I remind you of your errors or foolishness of the day or past days and that I chastise you, if I wished. And you said that you would not lack to improve yourself according to my teaching and correction, and you would do everything in your power to behave according to my wishes. I was very pleased, and praised and thanked you, for what you said and I have since remembered it often.

(*The book of housekeeping*, in progress)

We might imagine here some scene of her pouting, perhaps a show of temper at his upbraiding her, and reluctance in bed, then the striking of the bargain. While the intent here seems to call for a *private* and conjugal book, the resulting material is a very public document indeed, given its inscribed multiple audience.

As we have seen from the horse images, the diction of *Le menagier* overwhelmingly reinforces the themes of obedience and submission to the will of the husband. Rhetorically, the author does retreat on occasion from his program of indoctrination of his wife to remark that of course she, who is so good, does not need such advice and that he and she are putative equals. But, he says, he includes stories of the harm women do and can come to through their weak natures because it is fittingly articulated in such a book, and so that she will have pedagogical ammunition for the instruction of her children and servants in the

right moral paths. He defers to her class, seemingly above his, and her kinsmen and women who will judge him by her behavior. He acquaints the young wife with the edifying books he possesses including the *Bible*, the *Golden Legend*, the *Apocalypse*, a *Life of the Fathers*, “and diverse other good books in French” which she as mistress of the house may read at her pleasure. Using as his authority Petrus Comestor, the author argues the old saw that the subjection of women to men comes from Eve’s sin: “And all other women that sprang and shall spring from her have had and shall have to suffer and obey all that their husbands would, and shall be forced to do their commandments” (*The goodman*: 141).

The examples of bad women which the author has gleaned from his reading and, it seems, from his own experience abound: gossips, drunks, uppity wives who will not be ruled by their husbands, women who fail tests of virtue they are put to by their husbands and, interestingly, their husbands’ friends in many instances. The narrative evinces a kind of community zeal to uncover whose wife is “bad” and put her husband to shame. In fact one of the worst sins is for a woman to shame her husband publicly.<sup>6</sup> (Although, from his preface, the author does not seem earlier to have imagined shaming his wife publicly to be wrong). He cites scripture as his authority for the “natural” law of female submission to the male. On the testing of wives, even to the betting on women like betting on horses, the author excuses husbands, and compares them to God, who out of love tested his people:

For see you, God thus assayed his friends and servants [Adam and Eve, Lot and his family] in full small things, as the one for an apple, the other for looking backwards, and so it is no marvel that husbands, who of their bounty have set all their heart and all their joy and delight in their wives and have put all other loves behind them, should take pleasure in their obedience, and in loving jests and other ways not harmful should assay them.

(*The goodman*: 150)

One particularly gruesome example from the lengthy section on wifely humility and obedience concerns a young wife whose elderly husband was not so-lacing her sexually. The author prefaces it by saying that the story of an old man with a young wife is not far-fetched: “... for never shall you see a man so old that he does not willingly take a young wife”. When the wife in the story consults her mother about her problem, her mother admonishes her not to take a lover for fear of the horrific wrath of an old husband: “‘Daughter’, said the mother, ‘If thou do so, he will hold you in great despite, for certes there is no revenge so great as that of an old man, wherefore believe me and do it not, for

<sup>6</sup> See also the “Saga of the Mantle” (Wilhelm 1984) where all the men of the court test their wives; female sexuality is public property, it seems.

never wilt thou be able to appease thy husband.” Nevertheless, the daughter decides to test the old man’s capacity for anger at her by first chopping down his favorite fruit tree for firewood, then killing his favorite greyhound before his eyes, both of which the old man overlooks, since she glibly excuses herself for these transgressions. Her mother, however, is not so sanguine when consulted once more. The daughter having decided that a priest for a lover is best, as they have need of secrecy, her mother again remonstrates: “for never shalt thou see vengeance so foul nor so cruel as an old man’s vengeance...”<sup>7</sup>

But the last time the wife tests the old husband, by mistakenly-on-purpose upsetting the table and all the food at a feast he was giving for prominent citizens of the realm, he tells her she must be a victim of “bad blood” for “the three evil tricks you have played upon me” and decides to have her bled. The result is that she is cruelly bled in both arms while she swoons and cries for mercy, but to no avail. On her deathbed, she is visited by her mother: “Ha! mother, I am dead; my lord hath bled me so hard that I trow well that never shall I enjoy my body”. Her mother repeats her warning about the dreadful vengeance of an old man, and adds that she had taught her daughter better, to honor her husband. Dying, the daughter concurs that had been good counsel.

I love this dark tale because it seems so secular and so much the subtext, the point of all the book: beware of this old man and his appearance of paternalism. He may forgive you some indiscretions, but he is vigilant and owns your body and your blood – which is not for your enjoyment, but for his. Several other narrative incidents show that the husband-that-is or the husband-that-will-come may under no circumstances be displeased, or there will be punishment of a particularly nasty sort, in a blame-the-victim logic:

If you be less obedient, and your chambermaid, by good disposition or by service or otherwise, showeth him such obedience that he leaveth you and committeth unto her those duties which he should commit to you, and committeth naught to you, but leaveth you aside, what will your friends say? And what will your heart feel when it perceiveth this? And when he shall have transferred his pleasure there, how shall you withdraw it afterwards? Certes, it will be in no wise in your power.

(*The goodman*: 142)

The narrator further admonishes her that men will seek obedience elsewhere, bestowing their embraces upon “evil and dishonest women who obey them in all things, and cleave to these evil women who know how to keep quiet,” while the wives “lay upon their husbands the blame which truly is upon themselves” (*The goodman*: 151).

<sup>7</sup> Power (1928: 162, 166; I, vi) – author here is quoting a story from the *Seven sages of Rome*.



The showpiece and center of the section on wifely obedience, the prolix retelling of Petrarch's story of Griselda, provides the supreme example of a submissive wife. Griselda, says the author, "had no desire of her own, but laid all to her husband's will" (*The goodman*: 126). Typical of the concerns of the book, the story emphasizes the link of clothing to social standing, since poor Griselda must be clothed richly in order to be worthy of Walter the Marquis, and later must be stripped of her raiment when Walter repudiates her and sends her back to her impoverished father, "for nothing", says Walter to Griselda in this version of the story, "that befalleth man or woman in this world can last forever" (*The goodman*: 128). The exemplum teaches that virtue is better than having fancy clothes, and obedience to the husband as to God is ultimately rewarded. It is noteworthy too that the author revises the Griselda story to emphasize what a fine household manager Griselda is (Krueger 2001: 62). Within the tale, Griselda bids her women to obey their husbands. Yet, says the author, this lesson does not really apply to *his* wife: "I am no marquis nor have I taken in you a shepherdess ... it is not for me to assault nor to assay you thus, nor in like manner" (*The goodman*: 37). He even apologizes for the cruelty of the tale, which after all, he says, he simply re-tells from a wiser man's story.

However, while he may say she's not implicated in his depiction of Griselda as the model of obedience, the author follows that tale with numerous *exempla in malo* which construct the ideal wife exactly AS Griselda. While he tells her that she need not follow Griselda's example, in fact he even poses that in an ideal marriage the partners are equal, the wife he creates in his long followup to Griselda's story IS Griselda. For instance, the tale is succeeded by a story warning against female arrogance and disobedience. A woman suffers burning by civic authorities for her pride and non-compliance with her husband's wishes. More examples follow of wifely disobedience in great and trivial matters, rebelliousness, arrogance, slyness and pride as the sources of great ill to themselves and others. The book castigates women who pick and choose which of their husbands' commandments they wish to comply with, and threatens, like the old man who bled his wife to death, that men do not forget such insubordination: "the stain of the disobedience remains long time afterward so deep in the husband's heart, that he will remember it at another time, when the wife thinketh that there is peace and that the husband hath forgotten it. So, let woman avoid this perilous danger [and obey]" (*The goodman*: 144-5). Obedience, even to an injunction to a wrong act would be praiseworthy in a wife, he says, because submission to the husband trumps all other laws (*The goodman*: 146).

*Le menagier's* author not only dictates right *behavior*, but inculcates right *reading* of his cautionary tales. He glosses the exempla for his wife, allowing no variant readings of, for example, the tale of Griselda, in effect teaching her to read morally and ruminatively, that falcon returning to the tether. Total submis-

sion to the text is the desired outcome. Nonetheless, there are places in the text for the author's anxiety about his wife's response to surface, and maybe we glimpse his straining to maintain the status quo. He is, for example, worried about the prolixity of his compendium, lest it weary her.

For it might be that I should charge you with so much that you would have cause to hold me unreasonable and that my counsel should lay upon you so many things and so grievous that you would despair of the too great burden, thinking to shame and anger me, because you could neither bear nor perform everything.

(*The goodman*: 193)

We are allowed to wonder: might she abandon the book in a fit of teenaged pique and boredom, tossing it aside as the moralistic ramblings of an old fool with whom she must share a bed, not listening, not complying readily? Accordingly, he allows her to take a break from reading while the treatise on horses is inserted for M. Jehan to study. Would she turn into one of the uppity females he cautions her against if he transgresses her patience? After all, in the anecdotes he relates we have seen that many "bad" women are impatient women with short fuses. He assumes her docility and rhetorically "offers" his book, yet the barely veiled threats, the tales of oppression and the patriarchal fraternity in which she is trapped are all too omnipresent.

Now I do not want to adopt an entirely Foucauldian position on this text. All hortatory works, texts designed for the instruction of children and Mama's lectures on why you should not run into the street, are in fact remarkably alike in tone to *Le menagier's* lectures about why wifely compliance is necessary – for your own good. And, we cannot fault a medieval man for being disdainful of a 15 years old having sway over him in his own house. More complexly, one can uncover power relations as the determining factor here, yet we might also spy opportunities for subversion by its audience. The young wife might escape from the containment the book describes about fashion and deportment, scoffing at it privately. It might function as a useful book for spiritual enlightenment, for amusing reading of tales and mouth-watering recipes and menus, perhaps by an older-but-wiser wife, who could think it quite valid to indoctrinate her own children to obey *her* and through her their father as the head of the house. From the text peep disclaimers – that wives who are strong-willed, smart, and good will generally rule their husbands. The old husband might like being ruled by a lover/wife who tacitly submitted, but actually had the "maistrie" the way the hag at the end of the Wife of Bath's tale becomes the woman the knight desires, but only after he's relinquished the rule to her. Of course, we have no way of ascertaining the first readers' reactions – pleasure or duty? Perhaps the young wife of the text did not examine too closely what she may have experienced as an obvi-



ous act of love from her husband. The old husband-narrator seems to think he has scoured his world to present to his wife something to ease her transition from a girl “under the yerde” to the chatelaine of a complicated household. All we have is the text, and its abundance, akin to the obviously abundant linen closets, gardens, stables and larders of the narrator’s household. The three extant manuscripts, in spite of the ample selection of recipes they contain, show no evidence of ever having been anywhere near a medieval kitchen. It may be that the book’s first audiences perceived it as instructive and valuable, preserving the period’s manners and mores. For example, the menus from aristocratic feasts which are included in the codex are not meant for the householder to emulate, but to admire. As Ashley and Clark argue in their introduction to *Medieval conduct*, the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century produced the phenomenon of the conduct book for women, a cultural artifact which is a “guide for literate readers to negotiate a new set of social possibilities” (Ashley and Clark 2002: x). My question is: How would the wife, or any young female reader, given this script, *perform* her text?

The double-voice narrator, genial patriarch *and* threatening tyrant, does not finish his book. Instead, the games he promises, the relief perhaps from so much sententiousness and the endless catalogues of sins, duties, dishes and ingredients, are not delivered. But even if the games had been included, little danger remains that the wife or any women for whom this text was copied and preserved might have misinterpreted the thrust of the book. I return to Mill’s notion of the smooth language of power and to John Bender’s words on Foucault: “If Foucault taught us anything, it is that power is never a fixed object but a multiplicity of relationships and techniques that have continuously to be reproduced, and therefore changed, in order to maintain themselves” (Bender 1992: 82-83). For all its spaciousness and even luxurious, exuberant description of vegetation, its admonitions to kindness to farm animals and servants, and its wealth of culinary delights, the governing of a wife in *Le menagier de Paris* is akin to the cultivation of a garden, the training of a servant, or the keeping of a horse or falcon: enclosure, obedience, pruning, curbing, domination. Not fully developing according to their nature, but domesticated. Make them flourish, tamed, blooming on command, feeding you, carrying your burdens, and, as shown in the book through its many examples and evidence from Scripture, their desire resides in loving you, despite whippings, because you are master, and that recreates the way of God and of Nature. The author proscribes anger and prescribes silent obedience as the way to female happiness, but of course he truly advocates male happiness. In his promulgation of the work as advantageous for her to read because it is not to be had elsewhere, the author says she may likely “well perform” her wifely duties “because of the aforesaid doctrine [his book] which will much advantage you; for other women never had the like.” (*The goodman*: 194). This interesting volume offers an array of wonderful

detail about life in the bourgeois households of late-medieval Paris, while concomitantly we may find in it grimmer matter which illuminates the medieval world of gender relations, anxieties about power, and female desire.

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