Wives, Widows and Wimples
Theme 1: Nature or Nurture

Document 1
WLC/LM/6, f. 201r: Heldris de Cornuaille, 'Le Roman de Silence', lines 2500-2530 (early 13th century, French)
Transcription by Gavin Cole. Translation by Theresa Tyers

Apries xii . ans
si uint nature
Ki le blasme forment et coze
Distli chi a estrange coze
Ki te deduis al fuer demalle
Et uas sialuent et al halle
Car une special forme ai
Dont a mes . ii . mains te formai
Et labialte quai tant cele
Ai tolte entoi amoncellee
. M . gens me tienten por escarse
Por labialte dont tu ies farse
Car io ai de . M . gens retraite
Labialte dont tu ies refaite
. M . femes a enceste uie
Ki detoi ont moulant grant en vie
Por lebialtet queles i uoient
Car puet scelestre eles i croient
Tel cose quen toi nen a mie
Et tels est ore moulant tamie
Qui te haroit detolt lecuer
Sell detoi sauoit lefuer
Quele sen tenroit amalballie
Que sesperance estroit fallie
Tu me fais certes grant laidue
Nedois pas enbos conuerser
Lancier . netraire . ne berser
Tol toi de chi cho dist nature
Va enlacambre a la costure
Cho uiolte de nature lius
Tu ne nes pas sicilentius

After twelve years Nature came along
Who accused Silence harshly and scolded her.
She said, 'This is a strange thing
That you amuse yourself like a man,
Going out in the wind and the scorching sun
When I had a special image of you,
When, with my own two hands, I formed you
And with all the beauty I had in store
I have drawn so much of it together in you.
One thousand people accuse me of being miserly
For the beauty with which you are filled to the brim.
I have taken away from one thousand people
The beauty of which you were also made.
There are one thousand women today
Who desire you very much
For the beauty that they see there
For in you being so convincing (as a man) they believe
That you have something that, indeed, you have not.
And because of this they who now love you greatly,
Those (same women) who would hate you with all their hearts
If they really knew how you were made - They would feel themselves to be maltreated
In that all their hopes and expectations came to an end.
You certainly insult me and do me a great wrong
In leading your life in such a way.
You must not go into the woods to meet with others
Jousting, hawking or hunting with a bow,
Away with you from all of this, said Nature.
Go to the (bed)-chamber and stitch a seam
That is what Nature wishes you to do
You are not Silentius.
Moult lefist bien ens en larainne
Entre . ii . rens alaquaintainne
Ainc feme nefu maines laniere
Decontoier entel maniere
Kil ueist ioster sans mantel
Et iescu porter encantiel
Et faire donques lademise
Lalance sor lefaltre mise
Dire peust que noreture
Puet moult ourer contre nature
Quant ele aprent si et escolte
Atel us . feme . et tendre . et mole
Tels chevaliers par li i uierse
Que seil letenist enuierse
Et il peust lafain saouior
Que grant honte enpeust auoir
Que feme tendre fainte et malle
Kirien na dome fors lehalle
Et fors les dras et contenance
Leust abatu desa lance

He did well in the tournament out on the lists
Between the two runs and the quintain. ¹
Never had there been a woman less reluctant
To mix and converse in such a manner.
Whoever saw him jousting, out there without his cloak,
His shield held en cantiel just before his sword hilt and such his scabbard was protected²
And then at the unseating (of his opponent)
The lance he sets at rest upon the falter³,
They may well say that Nurture can do much work to overcome Nature
When she can teach such accomplishments
To such a soft and tender woman.
Many a knight who was thrown by him [Silence],
Had he only been aware
And may at last have known the truth,
What dreadful shame he would have felt
That a woman (so) tender, weak and soft
And who, except complexion, possessed nothing of being a male,
With the clothing and the bearing of a man,
Could have struck him down with her lance.

¹ The Oxford English Dictionary gives quintain (1440) a similar meaning to a target. However, quintaine (1180) in the Dictionairre de l'Ancien Français gives a jousting dummy serving as a target when practising with a lance. The names probably dates back to the traditions of the Roman army who used 'dummies' made up of five pieces of armour.
² The shield thus worn appears to have been termed 'ecu en cantiel'. The shield which is large and hollow and charged with ermine ... is suspended from a very long guige in front of the left thigh, immediately behind the sword hilt, thus covering the upper part of the scabbard. Rev. W. Bramston, A History of the Abbey Church of Minster, Isle of Sheppey, Kent. (1896).
³ faltre: a piece of felt on the saddle where the lance is placed when at rest.
Document 3

MS 66/1: Extract from an extent of the manor of Langar and Barnstone, Nottinghamshire (c.1340, Latin)

Transcription by Kathryn Summerwill. Translation by Professor L.V.D. Owen, in 'Three Nottinghamshire Manorial Records', Thoroton Society Record Series Vol XI, Pt. II (1946)

Tenentes toftorum in bondaggio

Matillda de Herdeby tenet j toftum in bondagio et reddit per annum . iij . solidos . vj denarios , terminis ut supra
Et dabat auxilium secundum numerum animalium suorum
Et debet meterium in Autum pno ad Magna precaria domini cum tota familia excepta . uxore domus Et valet operis illius diei per estimacione iij denarios
et habebit j repastum et valet j denarius et sic valet opus illius diei ultra repastam j . denarius . Et dabit pro quolibet pullano masculino . iij . denarios . pro tolleneto
Et valet tollenetum per annum . [...] Et dabit pannagium porcorum bis per annum . ut supra et valet pannagium per annum [...] Et dabit Merchetum et LeyrWytm pro filiis suis.

[Cottars]

Bondage tenants of tofts.

Matillda de Herdeby has 1 toft in bondage and pays 2s 6d per annum at the terms as above [Christmas, Lent, Pentecost and Michaelmas]. And she owes an aid of the above mentioned number of her animals [not specifically mentioned, a sum of money in proportion to the number of animals she owns]. And she owes harvest work in autumn at the chief service of the lord with her whole family except the housewife. And the value of the work of that day shall be assessed at 2d. And she shall have one meal to be valued at 1d. And the afternoon’s work shall be valued at 1d. And she shall give as toll for every male foal 4d. The value of this toll per annum is [blank]. And she shall provide pannage for swine twice in the year as stated and the pannage shall be valued at [blank]. And she shall pay merchet and leywrite for her daughters.

Document 4

WLC/LM/8, ff. 31v-32r : John Gower, ‘Confessio Amantis’, Book 2, lines 644-652 and 678-713, The Tale of Constance (composed c.1393, English)

Transcription and translation by Pamela Doohan

Þe moder which þe saudan bare
Was þan a lyue and þoght þis
Vnto hir selue . if so it is
My son hir wedd i þis manere
Þan haþ compassed
Be sleight how þat she may begile
Hir sone . and fell wiþinne a while ...

She made so þat whan Constance
Was come forþ wiþ þe romeynes

The mother of the sultan was still alive then, and thought this to herself: ‘If it is so, that my son would marry her in this manner, then I have lost my joy here, for my estate [both socially and politically] shall thus be lessened.’

Thus thinking, she contrived how she might deceive and beguile her son. And within a while fell ...

... When Constance came forth with the Romans, their clerics and citizens, the
Of clerkes and of Citeyeins
A riche feste she hem made
And most when þat þei weren glade
Wip fals couyne which she hadd
Hir clos envie þær she spradd
And alþo þat hadde be
Or in aperte or in priuete
Of conseil to þe mariage
She sleghe hem in a sodein rage
Endlonge and brode as þei ben sett
So þat it myght noght be lett
Hir owen sone was noght quite
Bot diede upon þe same plite
Bot what þe hihe godd wol spare
It may for no peril mysfare
þis worþi maiden which was þere
Stode þan as who seiþ dede for fere
To se þe feste how þat it stode
Which all was torned in to blode
þe disshe forþ wiþ the copp and all
Bebled þei weren ouer all
She seihe hem die on euery side
No wondre þogh she wept and cried
Makend many a woful mone
Whan al was sleyn bot she allone
þis olde fende þis sarageine
Lete take anone þis Constantine
Wip al þe gode she þidire brought
And haþ ordeined as she þoght
A naked ship wip out stiere
In which þe gude and she in fere
Vitailed ful for þeres fyue
Wher þat þe wynde it wold dryue
She putt vpon þe wawes wylde
mother had made them a rich feast. And when they were at their most joyful, she spread her secret envy with false conspiracy, and she slaughtered those that had been in agreement to the marriage, either openly or in private, everyone along the table as they were seated, in a sudden rage; her own son was not unpunished, but died in the same way as the others.

But what the high God will spare will not come to any peril. This worthy maiden [Constance] stood then, as they say, scared to death. [It was awful] to see how the feast was before, which was now all turned to blood. The dishes, the cups, together with everything, were covered with blood. She saw them die on every side - no wonder that she wept and cried, making many a woeful moan.

When all but her alone were slain, this old devil, the Saracen [the mother], commanded her men to take the maiden, this Constantine [Constance], with all the goods she had brought there. She arranged and devised, as she thought, a bare ship without a rudder, to put the girl and enough possessions and provisions for five years together, to wherever the wind would drive it, and she put it upon the wild waves.