In the following essay, Robertson attempts to properly define the Wife of Bath’s financial and occupational positions in regards to her landholdings, class standing, education, and marriageability.

Embedded in the Wife’s Prologue are various statements concerning transfers of land and wealth that may be indicative of her legal status. She is sometimes thought of as a freeholder under the common law, or, alternatively, as a borough tenant. I should like to suggest here that she was probably thought of in Chaucer’s time as a rural clothier, and that her Prologue may indicate further that she was a bondwoman. Although the social distinction between freeholders and villeins was disappearing in the later fourteenth century when social status in rural communities depended on wealth rather than on legal distinctions, and when increasing numbers of villeins were more wealthy than some of their neighboring freeholders, unfree status would have been consistent with the iconographic overtones of the Wife’s character. I believe that Chaucer was careful about such matters and hope to demonstrate further instances of this concern. Whether the conclusion concerning status is found acceptable or not, however, the following discussion should help to shed some light for Chaucerians on the character of the late medieval cloth industry, afford an explanation for the Wife’s concern about land, and suggest a reasonable explanation for her obvious and even ostentatious wealth.

With reference to her first three “good” husbands, who were “riche and olde,” she says, “They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor” (204), so that she held these husbands “hooly” in her hand, and pleased them only for her “profit” and “ese” (211-224). Nevertheless she complains, as if to all three of them in one person,

“why hydestow, with sorwe,
The keyes of thy chest awey fro me?
It is my good as wel as thyn, pardee!”
(308-310)

And she further asserts that her husband (sc. husbands) cannot be “maister of my body and of my good,” and will forego one of them. Indeed, she charged for her services, demanding “raunson” for them (411), and endured their lust for “wynnyng” (406), thus converting her Pauline “marriage debt” (153) into a means of prostitution, apparently for the sake of ostentatious dress, a common target for moral censure both in prose and verse during
the fourteenth century (cf. *Parson's Tale*, 932-34). There is a seeming inconsistency here, for if her husbands had given her their land and wealth, why did she need access to their chests (used to keep cash and documents, since there were no banks)? Is her claim that the money is hers valid? Or is she simply reflecting the "Theophrastian" opinion that a wife will always claim "half part" of her husband's goods (*Merchant's Tale*, 1299-1300)?

Before seeking to answer these questions, we might review very briefly a few points of English law. In the first place, no one "owned" land. He or she held it of someone else in some sort of tenure; and the person of whom it was held, traditionally a "lord," although in the complex tenurial relationships of the late Middle Ages not necessarily a person of higher status, in turn held it of someone else, the ultimate lord being the king. Those who held directly of the king were called "tenants in chief" of the crown. But the king did not "own" land either, so that we can say that there was no such thing as the "ownership" of land in medieval England. In France there were "lordless" or "alodial" lands, but not in England. An individual might be "seized" of land, which meant that he occupied it either in person or through someone else; or a manorial lord might be "seized" of land occupied by his tenants, the terms of whose occupancy and rights of inheritance were governed by local custom, or, at times, by special grant. Under the circumstances, unlike personal property such as beds, robes, drapes, cups, silverware, gold and silver, pots, pans, other kitchen utensils, kerchiefs, stocks of wood, etc., land could not be devised or willed to someone else. There were exceptions in burgage tenure in some towns, where land could be devised even to a person who was neither a direct nor a collateral heir, and among villeins on some manors.

In spite of this situation, land was the most secure and popular form of investment, and even merchants, after accumulating cash from trade, often exchanged it for land or purchased landed estates for retirement. Land was then evaluated not for features like pleasant views, flower gardens, proximity to beaches, schools, churches, or markets, but for the annual income that might be expected from it. That is, medieval documents do not ordinarily evaluate land in terms of sale price, but indicate that such and such land was worth so much a year. And when sale prices were determined, they were often awkwardly managed, although during the fifteenth century a purchase price amounting to twenty years' income became common. During the fourteenth century, tenants in need of cash might be expected to make sacrifices, and there were land brokers in London, like Sir John Philpot, ready to arrange transactions.

Free land might be held in "fee simple," like the land acquired by the Sergeant of the Law (*General Prologue* 319), and such land had the advantage of liquidity because, with some exceptions on certain manors, it was freely alienable. But it was not highly suitable for the formation of estates, since collateral heirs could claim an interest in it, so that some landholders in the late Middle Ages sought to convert tenures in fee simple into tenures in fee tail, usually tail male, so that a male heir could not alienate it but was forced to retain it for his own male heir. On the other hand, especially after the fifteenth century had begun to show its own economic peculiarities, there were those who sought to avoid the restrictions of entailments. Under the common law, primogeniture was the ordinary rule where male heirs were concerned except that in Kent and here and there elsewhere the custom of "gavelkind" prevailed, in accordance with which all sons shared equally in an inheritance. In some boroughs and in villein tenure on some manors "borough English" prevailed, in accordance with which the youngest son inherited. Under the common law, females might inherit in instances where there was no male heir; and if there were more than one, land, or even a manor house, and other tenurial rights, like the right to take the profits of a hundred courts, were divided equally among them. If the land given to the Wife by her "good" husbands was land subject to the common law, it must not have been encumbered by reversions, remainders, or entailments, for the marriages were without issue and she says that she retained it after they died (630-31), in effect buying her fifth husband with it, just as her good husbands had purchased her when they were old; and then, finally, she implies that she recovered it. All this would have been a little awkward.

Under the common law, a principle of "Baron et Femme" (not completely abolished until 1935) operated, in accordance with which all a wife's holdings both in land and personal property, including cash, vested in her husband. A husband could not rightfully alienate his wife's land without her consent, but he could dispose of
personal property as he pleased. But the Wife of Bath must not have been subject to this rule, since the "tresoor" of her old husbands was attractive to her, and she managed, apparently without too much difficulty, to make extravagantly expensive pilgrimages (GP 463-67). That is, if their cash had vested in them immediately after their marriage, there would have been little point in their offering it to her in the first place. Moreover, she says that since they had given her their land she could govern them as she pleased, demanding "gaye thynges fro the fayre" (221) and chiding them unmercifully. Under the common law, she had no claim to any of the contents of any husband's "chest." To continue for a moment with matters of common law, if a husband survived his wife, he was entitled to only half of her land during his lifetime "by Curtesy of England" (abolished as to fee simple in 1925), provided, as the old authorities said, that "a cry was heard within four walls," i.e., that a living child had been born of the union. It did not matter whether the child survived. A widow, regardless of the dower specified "at church door," where in the Sarum Rite a husband endowed his wife with all his worldly goods, could claim only a third of her husband's holdings in land during her lifetime. Meanwhile, under the common law a wife could incur debts only as an agent of her husband, not on her own behalf. The attitude of the royal courts was well expressed by Chief Justice Charleton of the Common Bench in 1388: "A writ of account was never maintainable against a woman, because a man would not have such a writ ensealed in the chancery against any woman, and it is the folly of a man that he should deliver any money to a woman for her to account for it." But widows in burgage tenure sometimes (but not in all boroughs) inherited all their husband's holdings, including tenements, shops, and manufacturing facilities, and could be expected, with the aid of children, apprentices, and servants, to carry on the trade. And widows in customary (servile or villein) tenure often entered the holdings of their deceased husbands, sometimes even alienating them on their own behalf after they had remarried. In other words, there were some ways in which women in burgage or servile tenure enjoyed more freedom than their legal and (often but not always) social superiors. The evidence of the Wife's Prologue so far adduced makes one of these alternatives almost a certainty.

To continue with the Prologue, however, there are no references to land in connection with the fourth husband, the "revelour." Both he and the Wife were young, and their difficulties matters of jealousy rather than of tenure or of access to cash. We do know that she went on one of her costly pilgrimages to Jerusalem during this marriage, so that she must have had access to cash without selling her favors. In fact, her husband died at her return (495), an indication that he had managed the trade during her absence. She was happy to be rid of him and was niggardly with his funeral expenses, an indication, perhaps, that he had made no will or that he had little or nothing to dispose of in his own name. To her fifth husband, Jankyn, the Oxford student and parish clerk with legs and feet "clene and faire," she gave, as we have seen, "al the lond and fee" she had accumulated. Here "fee" probably means "heritable interest," and not simply "wealth." Under the common law, this gift would not have affected Jankyn's rights during her lifetime except his right to alienate without her consent. In any event, having grown old and having under some kind of jurisdiction guaranteed his inheritance, she naturally becomes suspicious that he may be awaiting her demise with some impatience in order to enjoy the profits of her land for himself and to attract a younger wife, perhaps with legs and feet like his own. Hence her complaint,

"And for my land thus hastow mordred me?"

(801)

But since Jankyn lost his benefit of clergy when he married a widow, her suspicions about his ultimate intentions if not of his murderous inclinations were probably correct. His clergy would not have protected him from being hanged or outlawed if he had indeed murdered her, and all his lands, held in any form of tenure, as well as his chattels, would have escheated to the crown, a fact that adds a certain sting to the complaint. He might have been able to purchase a royal pardon, but this procedure would have been risky unless he had an influential patron. However, the accusation worked, seasoned with a little sentimental appeal (802), and the Wife recovered her control over her land, presumably including the "fee," and wealth (814), as well as a kind of "maistrie" she had not quite succeeded in obtaining over her first four husbands, the first three of whom complained bitterly, while the fourth had a wandering eye. If the land was free land, or even if it was held in burgage tenure in some boroughs,
Jankyn was left with the dubious prospect of "Curtesy of England," and this only if he was successful at literal "engendrure."

In so far as "engendrure" is concerned, there is no indication in her Prologue that the Wife had succeeded in literal obedience to the commandment to "wexe and multiplye," having in mind as she did her own gloss on this text,\(^{17}\) as well as her own view of the nature of the "fruyt of mariage" (114). We may assume, therefore, that the Wife's recovery of her fee effectively removed any temptation Jankyn might have suffered. Perhaps a glance at the nature of land transfers under the common law will provide further clues as to the kind of tenure she enjoyed. Traditionally, seisin of land was transferred by a formal ceremony called "livery of seisin" in the presence of witnesses who could testify that the ceremony had been properly carried out. Since the testimony of witnesses was becoming subject to vicissitudes of one kind or another, livery was often supplemented by a written charter. Jankyn, a parish clerk like Absolon in the Miller's Tale, could probably make a "chartre of lond" (3327). Charters were more secure if they were indentured; that is, two copies were made on either half of a skin that was cut apart on a jagged line and a copy given to each party. If the two parts fit, the charter was considered valid. But charters could be stolen or forged, and the most secure method of transfer was by "fine" that involved a fictitious lawsuit and the inscription of a triple indenture, the one at the bottom of the skin, or the "foot," being left as a court record. Surviving "feet of fines," as they are called, are important historical records.\(^{18}\) In view of the Wife's adversary relationship with her husbands, only the last of these methods would have been completely safe. But it is difficult to imagine her undertaking the necessary legal procedures to acquire seisin from her first three husbands, to transfer such seisin to Jankyn, and finally to recover it, for under the common law a husband could not transfer land directly to his wife, nor a wife to a husband, and neither could be the heir of the other, since in this matter they were "one person." But there were ways of circumventing these restrictions. Thus the establishment of joint tenure between husband and wife through a final concord would insure a life estate to the survivor, although the Wife speaks of "gifts" rather than joint tenancies.

Possible explanations are available for the gifts or transfers. The first three husbands might well have enfeoffed the Wife with land or tenements of one kind or another, perhaps as a pre-condition of marriage, although if they took part in the trade, as the Wife's pilgrimages suggest that they did, and as the fourth husband almost certainly did, it is difficult to see how they lost control over their monetary wealth or tangible goods. Again, the Wife may have enfeoffed Jankyn with her tenements through a third party, and then later persuaded him to re-enfeoff her, again through a third party, perhaps this time with a final concord for security. No such procedures are mentioned in the text, but Chaucer may have thought that his audience would assume them. The assumption, sometimes made, that Jankyn's loss of control was simply an informal or personal arrangement does not account for the implications of "lond and fee," and hardly removes the tempting prospect that young man once had before him. And in all of the above instances in which the husband took part in the trade, a kind of joint tenure would have been implied during life with a strong social bias in favor of the husband. Again, if charters or other documents were involved in any of the land transactions mentioned in the Prologue, why does Chaucer fail to mention them? In the Merchant's Tale, where free holdings were involved, Januarie urges May to make charters granting her all his heritage (2171-75).

Boroughs varied enormously in character, administration, and custom. The tenements in a borough might be partly or entirely under manorial, baronial, ecclesiastical, or royal jurisdiction, and customs might vary in different parts of a single borough. In some, alienation was restricted by retrait lignager, or by the right of a kinsman to a kind of option to purchase.\(^{19}\) Most boroughs contained adjacent arable lands that could be alienated separately, but ordinarily the most prosperous burgage tenants held little arable. Rents from burgage tenements could be traded in themselves, their value ranging from 6d. to £4, but on the average between 5s. and 10s. Tenants held for life, by long lease, at will, remainder in fee, and "by Curtesy of England," the most common type of holding being by long lease.\(^{20}\) It is unlikely that in a town near Bath rents would fall in the upper range of the above figures, and if the Wife depended on holdings such as these for three pilgrimages to Jerusalem, not to mention lesser journeys hardly undertaken with much penitential abstinence, her holdings must have been so extensive as

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/printdoc.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=RELEVANCE&pr... 9/30/2013
Finally, it has become conventional to assume that the Wife's place of origin "biseide Bathe" implies the parish of St. Michael's "juxta Bathon," where there are said to have been weavers. But this is a conjecture, and Chaucer's phrase could just as well imply any village near Bath or simply a birthplace, as does the name "Alicia Bathe" in the records of Castle Combe mentioned below. E. M. Carus-Wilson indicated over twenty years ago that the Wife of Bath should be thought of as a "west-country clothier,"21 participating in an industry that was expanding in the region using rural labor, mostly female,22 and creating substantial wealth for its "managerial" participants, the clothiers. One of the most striking features of the rising cloth industry was its rural character. Thus R. A. Donkin tells us that "the most significant development was the gradual shift in the distribution of cloth-making away from the old-established towns and towards a much larger number of smaller places, many in fact mere villages. The gilds of textile workers in the older centres naturally tried to monopolise manufacture, but in the end they failed."23 And R. E. Glasscock, writing specifically about the fourteenth century, says that "cloth-making was spreading rapidly in the rural areas made possible by the spread of the fulling mill, and encouraged by urban entrepreneurs who, free from the restrictions of town gilds, could produce cloth more cheaply in rural areas."24 It should be added that gilds were becoming wary about women in the trade, and that they ordinarily enjoyed great power in town governments. It seems quite likely that Chaucer and his audience were well aware of these trends, and that most members of the audience would have concluded immediately that the Wife's prosperity was the result of her participation in the thriving rural cloth industry, not as a mere weaver, a proper companion for haberdashers, carpenters, dyers, and makers of tapestries in parish fraternities, but as a clothier, and certainly not as the holder of a large portion of the tenements in a suburb of Bath. But is what we are told about land transactions in the Wife's Prologue consistent with customary (unfree) tenure? Land in customary tenure, in which a holding did not involve seisin on the part of the tenant, was transferred in manorial courts,25 where each transfer or entry might involve a fine set by the court that was profitable for the lord. In many areas customary tenure had become in effect "copyhold" tenure, so named because the tenant kept a copy of the court record involving his land for himself. But copyhold tenure, which remained distinct from freehold tenure until 1925, did not alter the legal status of the copyholder in the Middle Ages. That is, a "native" or villein of his or her lord remained a native or villein. So long as the manorial steward, who presided over the court for his lord, maintained his rents, land transfers involving new entry fines were advantageous. An example will illustrate these principles more vividly than an abstract discussion.

Before we turn to the example, one more question that probably arose in the minds of Chaucer's audience, at least momentarily, should be considered. Why were the good old husbands willing to give up all their land and wealth in order to marry Alisoun? It is true that older men often find the prospect of fresh young wives attractive, as the Tales of the Miller and the Merchant sufficiently indicate, just as older women sometimes long for "Housbondes meke, yonge, and fressh abedde." Perhaps the first of her husbands succumbed to a lure of this kind. But to account for two more in succession in this way, especially in a society in which a woman's treatment as the Tales of the Miller and the Merchant sufficiently indicate, just as older women sometimes long for "Housbondes meke, yonge, and fressh abedde." Perhaps the first of her husbands succumbed to a lure of this kind. But to account for two more in succession in this way, especially in a society in which a woman's treatment of her husband was likely to be well-known, and in which most persons were practical rather than romantic, is to strain the imagination. There were ways of satisfying "human needs," as we now like to call them, that did not demand the kind of sacrifice contemplated by young Aurelius in the Franklin's Tale. We should expect, therefore, that the Wife had something more profitable than her "propre yifte" (103, 608) to attract these old men, in spite of her obvious confidence in its powers. It did not, we notice, occupy the exclusive attention of her fourth husband, who "hadde a paramour" (454). But he married her nevertheless, probably to gain access to something else. That Chaucer does not tell us specifically what this "something else" was probably results from his very characteristic technique of indirection, allowing the audience just sufficient information to puzzle them a little before the answer dawns on them. The solution to this problem, as well as to the legal problems adduced above, may become apparent in our example.

The example in question is that of a native of her lord or bondwoman at Castle Combe in Wiltshire. First, by way of background, a rental of the manor in 1340 reveals the presence of a fulling mill on an acre of land held by a
free tenant, John Daniel, who paid an annual rent of 20s. for it, but like all the other free tenants except one, a 
miller who held a virgate of land and a grain mill, he was a tenant "at the will of the lord," whose holding did not 
pass to his heirs. In 1352 the lord abandoned the cultivation of his demesne for his own use and commuted the 
obligations of the customary tenants (villeins, natives, bondmen) to money rents. In the seventies one Thomas 
Touker (a name meaning "fuller") took over the fulling mill and became one of the first clothiers in Castle Combe. 
The industry prospered in the area, and continued to do so in the fifteenth century.

Our bondwoman, Margery Haynes, appears together with a list of her holdings in a manorial extent of 1454. First, as the widow of Edward Walcote, known as Jones, she held a tenement and a virgate of land in customary 
tenure for which she owed a rent of 10s., the obligation to serve as reeve or other official (or to pay a fine for not 
serving when elected by the court), and heriot (an obligation to the lord at the tenant's death, usually consisting of 
his best horse in servile tenure or a horse with trappings in free tenure, or in either instance a fine agreed upon 
between the tenant and the steward). Several virgates on the manor were said in the extent to contain 24 acres, 
so that we may assume that Margery's was of about this size, allowing for some flexibility in the meaning of acre 
and remembering that virgates might vary in area on a single manor. Margery is also listed, as the widow of 
William Haynes, her first husband, among the servile cottagers. In this category, ordinarily the most humble of all 
on agricultural manors, she held a cottage in South Street where she resided for 2s. In addition she held a close 
with a dovecote (probably the old manorial dovecote) and an adjacent "solo" or workshed for 4s. 6d., a tenement 
in the gatehouse of the manor at the market with an adjacent curtilage or garden for 20d., and a larger cottage 
near the cemetery for 4s. 10d. But her most important holding, still as a servile cottager, was a plot of three acres 
serving as a "milling-place." It contained three mills: a grain mill, a fulling mill, and a mill called a "Gyggemille" (a 
gig mill for teaseling cloth). As the extent puts it, "de eadem Margeria molendina sumptibus suis propriis 
sustentabit." Accompanying the mills was what must have been a large cottage in West Street, perhaps the 
original residence, valued at 5s. rent. For the mills and cottage together she paid 19s.10d., since a milling place 
was rated at 14s.10d., or about the equivalent of a virgate of land in accordance with manorial custom. In this 
respect manorial custom failed to account for industrial development, since the three mills, as we shall see, 
produced an income far greater than that from a virgate of agricultural land. It is of incidental interest that two 
other servile cottagers, both male, held fulling mills. One paid 20s. for a mill and a cottage; the other paid 21s. for 
his mill, a cottage, and a parcel of land.

Margery's first husband died in 1435, leaving at his death chattels valued by his friends and relatives appointed by 
the court to make an inquest at the enormous sum of 3,000 marks (£2,000), or twice what Aurelius in Chaucer's 
Franklin's Tale was worth. But the homage of the manor (the men obliged to attend court)—as Scrope, the 
historian of Castle Combe and editor of its documents, suggests—"liable to similar imposts and naturally desirous 
to mitigate their rigour," testified that after debts, funeral expenses, and charitable bequests (like that of £20 for 
the fabric of the church and bell tower of Castle Combe) had been paid, the remainder would amount to only 200 
marks. In any event, in 1436 the court imposed an entry fine of £40 so that Margery could retain the remainder of 
er her husband's goods. Her son Thomas, apparently of age, was granted £43 12s. 4d. for his own use, £26 for his 
father's burial and anniversaries, and 60s. for the repair of a mill. This last grant suggests that he may have been 
associated with his mother in the trade. But it is noteworthy that the widow, not the son, was regarded as the heir 
to the business. Shortly thereafter Margery married Edward Jones, who brought his virgate and tenement with 
him, and she was fined what looks like a wildly extravagant merchet (fee for permission to marry, only 6s. 8d. 
elsewhere in the court rolls of Castle Combe, and often much less than this on agricultural manors in the 
fourteenth century), combined with an entrance fee, amounting altogether to £100. Scrope observes sagely that, 
in spite of these fines, "she appears to have offered a tempting prize." Indeed, Jones became fairly prosperous, 
for in 1439 we find him paying £10 5s. 7d. for some of the goods left in the confiscated estate of a deceased 
rector, including a silver gilt goblet, two silver cups, a dozen spoons, a silver belt, a feather bed, and other less 
luxurious items.
However that may be, Jones did not gain immediate control of his new wife's holdings. In fact, he found it necessary to pay a fine of £60 in 1442 for a part of Margery's holdings, one of the cottages now being called a "shopa." And by this time the holdings included fishing rights at Gatecombe and Longbridge. Scrope and E. M. Carus-Wilson disagree on the nature of this fine, the latter stating that it was an addition to the £40 already paid to make up the £100 demanded at the time of the marriage. But this is still a very large sum. The relationship between Margery and her husband was apparently satisfactory for a time, and the records suggest a form of joint tenancy. But in the following year we find Margery again paying £60 in the manorial court "ut possideat bona sua mobilia, pannos laneos, lanum [sic], mader pro tincturis, ac tenementa et molendina suae quae reputantur valere die obitus sui mille marcas." Jones may have died, although his name appears in a court record of 1453. It is noteworthy that the steward and his court had the usual difficulty in placing an evaluation on the holdings, but they were now once more firmly in Margery's hands, where they remained, as we have seen in the manorial extent of 1454. To conclude our story, Margery died in 1455. Her holdings passed to her son, Thomas Haynes, a reliable man who served as bailiff in 1457-58, for an entry fee of only £4. Perhaps the court felt that the substantial fines already charged were almost enough. Happily, Thomas was manumitted in 1463 for £20.

Looking back over these events, we can see that Margery was a singularly wealthy woman, in spite of being a bondwoman. Her mills undoubtedly supplied a generous income, and the fulling mill and gig mill must have been especially profitable, since they would serve the needs of some of her fellow clothiers as well as her own. The documents indicate, as we have seen, that she had facilities for dyeing as well as for fulling and teaseling, and the further fact that she owned a stock of wool suggests that some of the tenements listed among her holdings were occupied by servants, mostly female, in addition to her two French man-servants, working at the various steps in cloth manufacture. One can almost visualize the fulled red and white broadcloths, colors favored by her lord, Sir John Fastolf, who supplied cloth for uniforms, stretched out in strips four-and-a-half or six feet wide and seventy-two feet long on frames equipped with tenterhooks near the stream that ran through the village, which was situated in a narrow valley, awaiting their turn at the gig mill and the finishing ministrations of the shearers. Or we may imagine Margery standing before her cottage with one of her French servants chatting with the royal ulnager (an inspector of cloths) as cartloads of cloths folded and tacked by women make their way laboriously out of the village toward the highroad. The cloths of the Wife of Bath (at least in the imaginations of Chaucer's audience) would have been destined for Bristol, a thriving cloth port in the late fourteenth century. Chaucer, who was not a "realist," affords us no descriptions of the Wife's daily business concerns, but it is likely that most members of his audience needed no reminders and were thoroughly familiar with the sight of women sorting, carding, and spinning. They had seen weavers at their looms, heard the clatter of fulling mills, and experienced the unpleasant odors of dye vats. Through open doorways they had seen the look of concentration on the faces of shearers poising their long blades over cloths laid out on tables as they labored to create an even nap. To return to Castle Combe, it is likely that some of the women listed as cottagers in the manorial extent who were less fortunate than Margery, although one held a dyehouse, worked for Margery and other clothiers to pay their rents and sustain themselves. One of them, amusingly enough, called herself "Alicia Bathe." The dovecote probably provided food for Margery's table as well as profits substantially beyond its rent of 4s. 6d. And the fishing rights, much coveted in the Middle Ages when fish was an extremely popular food, not merely Lenten fare, had similar advantages. Castle Combe boasted good trout.

The example of Margery thus clarifies the probable nature of the Wife's land transactions and demonstrates the peculiar attractiveness of her land to her husbands. We are not told what facilities she had as a clothier. But the basic holding that made prosperity in cloth-making possible was ordinarily a fulling mill. Chaucer's audience might well have envisaged a dyehouse and other facilities, including work-sheds, but they may have spontaneously imagined also poor cottagers laboring at home, or even more substantial persons who preferred the daily wages of industry to the smaller and less certain monetary rewards of agricultural labor. A "milling-place" might be small in area, but the cash flow to be expected from it would have been far greater than that from many acres of agricultural land, or from a large number of borough tenements. It was probably this, rather than that other busy "milling-place" she mentions, that attracted her old husbands whose desire to increase their wealth made them willing to give their land and treasure to have access to it, and, where Jankyn was concerned, to fortify his
patience with an elderly wife who was, to borrow a phrase, “ful of hoker and of bisemare.” Whether the first husband brought her the cloth business or whether she inherited it we do not know, and the question is not important. The fact that the first three husbands were rich by country standards need not surprise us. Many villeins, especially those experienced as reeves, were able to take up holdings left vacant by the series of pestilences after 1349 and to manage them well, or to take over demesnes or parts of demesnes abandoned for rents by their lords. Throughout most of England, individual peasant holdings were growing larger. Thus there were bondmen who had more to offer than Edward Jones brought to Margery, and the general regard for land as an investment would have made these holdings tempting to the Wife. Finally, if the Wife's pilgrimages puzzle us, chevage, or the fine paid by a villein to leave the manor, was often light. It amounted to 20d. at the most at Castle Combe, where it was often less, and this would have been a very small preliminary expense for a trip to Cologne, Rome, or Jerusalem. Chaucer's picture of Alisoun's wealth, wandering, and intense interest in fleshly satisfaction is a caricature designed to exemplify certain concomitant trends in his society. In so far as wealth is concerned, the trend indicated is accurate, for by the early sixteenth century a clothier, like Thomas Spring of Lavenham, might be many times wealthier than either Margery Haynes or the fictitious Wife of Bath.

It is probably quite safe to conclude that Chaucer meant his audience to think of the Wife of Bath as a rural clothier from the west country and quite possibly as a bondwoman. The assumption that she was a free tenant either under the common law or under borough custom offers legal difficulties in explaining her land transactions and her ability to control her holdings after marriage. However, when we think of the Wife of Bath, we must resist the temptation that so often presents itself to literary historians to locate her in space and time rather than as something in the minds of Chaucer's audience. She is in effect a series of clues whose significance depends on the experience, the attitudes, the expectations, and the ideals of those who heard them. There is no real reason to think that either Chaucer or the members of his audience had any special prejudice against unfree tenants, but in view of the nature of the Wife's Prologue, the first part of which is a kind of mock Lollard "lay sermon" in which she elevates the flesh and deprecates the spirit at the expense of the New Law and of St. Paul especially, the implication that she was a bondwoman would have been singularly appropriate in the light of Gal. 4, 22ff., where it is said, "But he who was of the bondwoman, was born according to the flesh," and "we are not the children of the bondwoman, but of the free: by the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free." This commonplace distinction, which would have been familiar to even the most unlettered among Chaucer's listeners, may indeed be the basis for the Clerk's figure of the "secte" of the Wife of Bath, whose adherents in avid pursuit of fleshly satisfactions flourish because the "gold" or wisdom in them is corrupted by the "brass" of Venus, so that they cannot like Griselda (originally a poor cottager) sustain the "sharpe scourges of adversitee" with which Christians were said to be providentially tested. Chaucer's portrait probably represents, as I have sought to show elsewhere, a satire on the acquisitiveness of some of his contemporaries, the disruption of traditional hierarchies, the breakdown of established communities, and a concomitant decline in mores, all attributable in part, and especially in certain areas, to the rise of the cloth industry. In this connection, it may not be irrelevant to point out that the court at Castle Combe discovered bordellos in the village in 1416, 1419, and 1424, a surprising multiplicity of such facilities in a small community, where some apparently shared the general outlook of the Wife of Bath. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that, although Chaucer's humorous satire is basically moral and displays a learned use of traditional materials from a wide variety of sources, it is directed toward specific conditions and problems of his own time and place. Unless we come to understand more about these conditions, we can hardly appreciate the "relevance" of what he had to say to the immediate interests and concerns of his audience. We shall miss also the skill and agility with which he wields his satiric weapons.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Professor J. R. Strayer for reading this paper in an earlier form and making useful suggestions about legal matters. Any errors remaining are, however, my own. My colleague Gail Gibson also furnished valuable references and criticisms. Robinson's text of Chaucer is used in this article (The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957]).


4. Barbara Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 197-98. Appendix IV of this work contains a record of the Abbey's purchases. During the second half of the fourteenth century, the price £66 13s. 4d. or 100 marks seems to have been curiously appropriate for a wide variety of holdings. See nos. 19, 20, 26, 27, 28, 30, 33, 36, 40, 43, 44. It was a convenient round sum, but it could purchase over 100 acres or a mill. Cf. the evaluations placed on the holdings of Margery Haynes, below. These, however, included chattels.


7. For a description of a manor house made necessary by the fact that it was to be divided equally between two daughters who inherited it, see Marion K. Dale, *Court Rolls of Chalgrave Manor 1278-1313*, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 28 (1950), xxxi-xxxii. The house with its grounds and outbuildings to which Sir Nigel de Loring retired after many campaigns in the field still sounds attractive.


10. Simpson, *Introduction*, p. 66. Professor Donald W. Sutherland, who generously read and commented on this article after it had been submitted, informs me that Simpson is here misleading, since husbands usually enjoyed all holdings of their deceased wives for life "by Curtesy."


19. Hemmone, "Burgage Tenure," *LQR*, 26 (1910), 344. This article appears in two sections of Vol. 26 and in one section of Vol. 27 of the *Review*.


21. "Trends in the Export of English Woolens in the Fourteenth Century," *EcHR*, 2, ser. 3 (1950-51), 177. This is an extremely important article by the foremost authority on the late-medieval English cloth industry.

22. A good literary example of an ordinary worker from another region and a later period is afforded by Mak's wife in the Wakefield *Second Shepherd's Play*. The same play contains in the complaint of the Second Shepherd (ed. Cawley, lines 55-108) a picture of hierarchical inversion under the Old Law as it perennially manifests itself similar to that so strongly recommended by the Wife. The solution, implicit in the Wife's Scriptural citations and explicit in the play lines 710ff.) is the same in both instances.


25. The observation of Thornton, *Clare*, p. 108, that "a great part of the business of the manorial court was in witnessing the transfer of unfree land" reflects a common situation, although on many manors minor temporary land transactions among servile tenants were often not recorded or even brought before the court if they did not interfere with rents and services.

26. For the rental, see G. Poulett Scrope, *History of the Manor and Ancient Barony of Castle Combe in the County of Wilts* (London, 1852), pp. 146-51. Oddly, one of the free tenants, a miller (p. 147), owed light agricultural services and a rooster and three hens on the Feast of St. Martin (11 Nov.) if he had a wife, or one rooster and one hen if he had no wife. He was also obliged to serve as reeve if elected, although this obligation, like the agricultural services and the chickens, was usually a villein obligation. But see Harvey, *Westminster Abbey*, p. 108.

27. Scrope, *Castle Combe*, pp. 81-82. For the benefit of students of literature unfamiliar with agricultural manors, it may be appropriate to explain that such manors were frequently, but not always, divided into demesne lands cultivated for the benefit of the lord of the manor (who might be resident, resident occasionally, or non-resident), who might consume or sell their produce, or do both, and the lands of his tenants, free or servile, or both. Villein tenants traditionally owed "customary" services (determined by local manorial custom) on the lord's demesne, such as plowing, harrowing, sowing, weeding, reaping, harvesting, stacking hay, etc. Such services were usually
divided into “works,” each work consisting of one-half a day's labor, the number of works owed in a year being determined roughly by the size of the tenant's holding, although other factors might intervene. Tenants with large holdings sometimes employed workers, who might be local cottagers or itinerant laborers, to perform their works. Villeins also paid rents, ordinarily less than those paid by free tenants but ordinarily about the same if the value placed on their works was added to them. In addition to their work on demesne lands, villeins might be required to perform a variety of miscellaneous services, like carting, carrying messages, spreading straw in manor houses, providing horse shoes or plow irons (if they were smiths), etc. They paid for agistment (pasturing pigs in the lord's park), repaired roads, and took their grain to the lord's mill. Some owed gifts of eggs, chickens, honey, fish, rushes, or other produce at specified times of the year. They might be required to attend the manorial court (which met traditionally "from three weeks to three weeks," but often less frequently in practice) and to act, if elected by the court, as one of the manorial servants: as reeve, messor (an office that varied depending on the character of the manor), plowman, miller, butcher, ponder, baker, dairy maid, etc. The number and nature of such offices varied from place to place. Those from more prosperous families might serve as jurors or ale-tasters. The extent and nature of villein obligations depended on a number of factors: the difference in area between demesne land and customary land, climate, soil, proximity to the sea, to marshes, or to rivers, etc. Some free tenants owed minor services like mending park fences or supervising villein workers. The salient feature of late-medieval England was its diversity, and, after the middle of the fourteenth century, its propensity for change. It is very difficult to generalize about "the medieval English peasant" during the years of Chaucer's maturity.

Diversity extended to land measurements. The following observations are suggestive rather than definitive. A knight's fee contained four, five, or, at times, eight hides or carucates of anywhere from 120 to 160 acres. In the north, a bovate was one-eighth of a hide; in the south, a yardland or virgate was one-fourth of a hide. One-fourth of a yardland was called a ferling. The word acre originally meant almost any strip of arable land. A traditional acre (except in Cornwall) is four perches wide and forty perches long (or a strip of similar area but of different dimensions), but perches varied locally from the King's perch of sixteen-and-a-half feet. A quarter of an acre is a rood. On many manors the virgate, which actually ranged in size from ten to sixty-eight acres, was the standard by which holdings were measured; that is, tenants were said to hold one or more virgates, a half virgate, a quarter virgate, or a cotland consisting of five acres more or less, or combinations of these units. There is thus no way of "defining" a virgate, for even if we are told that on a certain manor it consisted of thirty acres (a common measurement), unless measured acres are specified we still do not know its size. Moreover, English soils varied in friability, productivity, and suitability for various crops, sometimes on a single manor and very markedly in different parts of the country.

After the Black Death, there was an increasing tendency on the part of many lords to abandon the cultivation of their demesne lands for their own use, leasing those lands and substituting money rents for customary services and obligations. There was a general desire, both on the part of lords and on the part of agricultural workers, for ready cash. Hence, the leasing of demesnes by the lords and the demand for wages by the day and better food allowances on the part of agricultural workers, who were stimulated by opportunities for day work in industries, like the cutlery trade at Thaxted in Essex, or, above all, by the cloth industry generally, but especially in the west country around Bristol, in Suffolk, in Essex, and in various towns like High Wycombe (Bucks) on the road between London and Oxford. For the last, see L. J. Ashford, The History of the Borough of High Wycombe (London, 1960), pp. 40-41. The results were a breakdown of traditional manorial communities, many of which had been closely knit cooperative groups, with a consequent decline in mores, rising wages and prices, and a largely unsuccessful effort to control them on the part of the government through the justices of the peace. Meanwhile, after about 1360, on many manors families whose ancestors had occupied the same land for many generations disappeared, replaced by new tenants with larger holdings, interested chiefly in profit, a development that hardly cemented community solidarity. It is probably impossible to understand Chaucer's characters very well without keeping these general trends in mind, as well as their specific consequences, which are still being explored by historians.


34. *Ibid.*, pp. 245-46. It is possible that this may have been the son of the original Edward Jones.


36. McClenaghan, *Springs*, pp. 49, 73-78, 86-88. Thomas was lord of many manors in Suffolk and Norfolk, two in Essex, and one in Cambridgeshire. He also held other lands and tenements. His tomb still stands in Lavenham Church, and one may visit the Lady Chapel he provided and see the tower to which he made generous contributions.


38. See note 1, above, and the article "Chaucer and the 'Commune Profit': The Manor," to appear in a *Festschrift*.

39. *Castle Combe*, pp. 235, 236, 237. The first of these is said to have been in operation for five years "ad grave nocumentum." The proprietor was fined only 20d., but he was ordered to desist or pay a much larger fine.

40. Moral analysis of what we should call psychological, social, political, and economic problems is characteristic of the late Middle Ages, and is a Classical inheritance modified by specifically Christian ideals. I believe that a failure to recognize this fact and to face its implications has led to distortions and to stubborn misunderstandings, not to mention a neglect of much of Chaucer's humor, for the perception of the ridiculous depends on departures from accepted values. An illustration of the general principle is afforded by the list of books recommended to Charles VI by Philippe de Mézières. It emphasized the Scriptures and service books first, the *Ethics* and *Politics* of Aristotle, the *De regimine principum* of Aegidius Romanus, which was very popular in England, and included Augustine's *City of God* and the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury, with which Chaucer was familiar and which stresses the need for community integrity based on virtue. It is very probable that Chaucer's audience was spontaneously responsive to concepts like the distinction between spiritual servitude among "sons of the bondwoman" and what they regarded as true freedom. Cf. Chaucer, *ParsT*, 149: "... wel oghte man have desdayn of synne, sith that thurgh synne, ther as he was free, now is he maked bonde." The Wife is appropriately followed in the Tales by the Friar and the Summoner, who, far from furnishing a mere interlude in "the marriage group," illustrate the corruption of the administration of God's mercy and justice through a literal-minded desire for wealth and fleshly satisfaction of exactly the kind advocated with inadvertent ludicrousness by the Wife. Philippe's Order of the Passion, based firmly on moral grounds, was very influential at the English court. See J. J. N. Palmer, *England, France and Christendom* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 187-90. Chaucer's own admiration for one of Philippe's "evangelists," Otto de Granson, is obvious and needs no comment.

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