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Bourgeois Ethics Again: The Conduct
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Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61

RORY G. CRITTEN

ABSTRACT: This essay focuses on the interrelationship of the romances and the conduct poems contained in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 (ca. 1500). Drawing on the work of Felicity Riddy, it examines the contrasting ways in which these texts articulate a particular bourgeois ethos. Tensions that arise from their different approaches to this phenomenon are read as evidence of an attitude towards the matter of good conduct that is at once more searching and more provisional than that which has typically been attributed to the milieu in which Ashmole 61 was copied and read.

At least since the publication of Jonathan Nicholls's 1985 monograph, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet*, medievalists have known that the romances and the conduct texts that they study draw on a shared sense of how the individual should comport himself or herself both at home and in the world at large.¹ As we shall see, reading texts from these genres in tandem still has the potential to open up new interpretations of Middle English romances because the conduct works establish a historically viable frame of reference within which the deeds of a

This essay grew out of a class on Ashmole 61 that I taught at the University of Göttingen in the Spring term of 2013. I am grateful to the participants in that course for many stimulating conversations about this manuscript and its contents. I would also like to express my thanks to Arthur Russell, who offered thoughtful and encouraging comments on an early draft of my work, and to my anonymous readers at *The Chaucer Review*.

1. Jonathan Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge, 1985).

given hero may be evaluated. In this essay, however, I would like to suggest that the converse can also be true, namely that romances and the actions of their protagonists can reflect back upon conduct works, highlighting not only the utility but also the limitations of the worldview they espouse. Since the dynamic interrelationship between these kinds of texts is clearest when they appear alongside each other in the same manuscript, my focus here will be on the late medieval codex that is now Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61, a book that contains five romances and five conduct poems. What I will be arguing here is that there is a fundamental difference between the ways in which these works articulate a particular “bourgeois ethos.”² Whereas this ethos is straightforwardly asserted in the conduct texts anthologized in Ashmole 61, the manuscript’s romances manifest a more ambivalent attitude towards the same cluster of precepts and ideals, casting doubt on both their practicability and their desirability. The contrast between the different modes of argumentation and presentation pursued by these texts is felt with varying degrees of intensity across Ashmole 61, not least because the romances included in the manuscript often appear to have been selected and edited to reflect the preoccupations of the conduct works alongside which they are anthologized. Tensions persist in and between the diverse representations of idealized living found in this book, however, and Ashmole 61 may thus be read for evidence of an attitude towards the matter of desirable conduct that is at once more searching and more provisional than that which has typically been attributed to the milieu in which it was copied and read.

Thanks to the pioneering endeavors of Lynne S. Blanchfield and George Shuffelton, much of the codicological work that must precede a study of this kind has already been done. Ashmole 61 has been identified as the work of one scribe, who signs himself “Rat[h]e” at nineteen points in his book. Rate appears to have compiled the codex sequentially: his texts run across eleven of the twelve quire boundaries in this thirteen-quire paper manuscript.³ Only Ashmole’s first quire could stand apart as an independent unit, but this quire must have been positioned at the opening of the book early in its construction since the texts it contains—*Saint Eustace*, *Right as a Ram’s Horn*, *How the Wise Man Taught His Son*, and *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*

2. I borrow this term, which I discuss at greater length below, from Felicity Riddy’s article, “Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text,” *Speculum* 71 (1996): 66–86.

3. I rely on Bruce Barker-Benfield’s collation, which is reported in George Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo, 2008), 2.

(items 1–4)⁴—are listed as the first works on the damaged table of contents in Rate's hand that is at the front of the manuscript. On the grounds of watermarks found in the last quire of Ashmole 61, the book's completion can be dated to not earlier than 1488; the absence of Secretary forms in Rate's script other than the single-chambered *a* suggests that his copying took place at the latest in the first decade of the sixteenth century, and Shuffelton accordingly dates the codex to "c. 1500."⁵ Dialectal analysis locates the scribe of Ashmole 61 in northeast Leicestershire.⁶ Rate was not a common name there or throughout England in the fifteenth century, but archival research has turned up a brief list of potential copyists who fit this regional, temporal, and onomastic profile.⁷

Rate's scribal work and his compilation were undoubtedly conditioned by the availability of exemplars, and it is apparently for this reason that in her catalogue entry for Ashmole 61 Gisela Guddat-Figge asserts that, save for a few interconnected series of texts, its "arrangement of items seems arbitrary and without a preplanned order."⁸ Nevertheless, the works that Rate compiles—all of them in Middle English verse⁹—demonstrate a consistent interest in domestic and devotional life. As Blanchfield points out, this pattern suggests that Rate did not simply copy into his book any text that came to hand.¹⁰ Furthermore, since the same interest in domestic and devotional

4. The texts in Ashmole 61 are referred to by title, item number, and line numbers as given in Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61.

5. Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61, 3.

6. See Linguistic Profile no. 71 in *An Electronic Version of A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, ed. Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, rev. Michael Benskin and Margaret Laing, at <http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme.html>.

7. See Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61, 4 (discussed below).

8. Gisela Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances* (Munich, 1976), 251. Guddat-Figge goes on to remark that "the romances do not fit well into their textual environment," an observation that I propose to develop here. Michael Johnston echoes Guddat-Figge's assessment of Ashmole 61 when he writes that its compilation is "seemingly random" and "remarkably haphazard" in his recent article, "Two Leicestershire Romance Codices: Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.2.38 and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61," *Journal of the Early Book Society* 15 (2012): 85–100, at 86, 90.

9. Rate copies three Latin epigrams (items 9, 11a, 11b), perhaps as late additions to the codex (compare Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61, 448). A handful of Rate's texts also contain brief citations from canonical works in Latin (most notably item 32, Maidstone's *Seven Penitential Psalms*, and item 33, the *Stimulus Conscience Minor*).

10. See Lynne S. Blanchfield, "The Romances in MS Ashmole 61: An Idiosyncratic Scribe," in Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol Meale, eds., *Romance in Medieval England* (Cambridge, U.K., 1991), 65–87, at 66. For the suggestion that the manuscript's texts fall into four loosely organized thematic groupings, see too Lynne S. Blanchfield, "Rate Revisited: The Compilation of Narrative Works in MS Ashmole 61," in Jennifer Fellows, Rosalind Field, Gillian Rogers, and Judith Weiss, eds., *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative Presented to Maldwyn Mills* (Cardiff, 1996), 208–20.

life that appears to have governed Rate's compilation policy is evident in the textual variants preserved in the individual items in Ashmole 61, Blanchfield tentatively attributes these variants to him.¹¹ Thus unlike many contemporary manuscripts, which are the product of the work of several different hands, Ashmole 61 would appear to constitute an unusually clear reflection of the interests and preoccupations of one medieval man.¹² The chances of the manuscript being received in this fashion are moderately enhanced by a series of distinctive ink drawings of flowers and fish that Rate produced throughout the book and that Murray J. Evans suggests "may have been used to bind by visual continuity, and even give a personal stamp to, what otherwise would appear to be an undifferentiated sequence of items."¹³ Be this as it may, it was of course not only readers of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* who could "Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (I 3177), thereby avoiding the parts of a book that pleased them less; as Shuffelton has pointed out, it may also be that the audience who encountered Ashmole's texts in oral performance was fragmented, that different texts were read out to different groups of people.¹⁴

11. In support of her hypothesis, Blanchfield cites Pamela Robinson's assertion that "when a compiler's selection of material is governed by a particular interest or criterion and when the nature of the variants found in each of the texts within his compilation illustrates the same criterion one may argue that he is the copyist responsible for introducing the variants" ("The Romances," 68). Recent discussions of scribal practice have stressed the fidelity with which many scribes copied, and in the ensuing discussion of Ashmole 61, wherever I have suggested that Rate may be responsible for a variant in one of his texts, the alternative explanation that the variant in question was simply taken over from a now-lost redaction of the source is of course always also available. Nevertheless, as Blanchfield points out, since hesitation in accepting Rate's influence on his texts "presupposes an inordinate degree of lost material" and since "the commitment to detecting his presence within the texts" can bring to light "prevailing patterns" among their variants ("The Romances," 68), this essay subscribes to and develops Blanchfield's designation (following Alan Bliss) of Rate as an "idiosyncratic scribe." On scribal fidelity, compare Daniel Wakelin, "Writing the Words," in Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin, eds., *The Production of Books in England 1350–1500* (Cambridge, U.K., 2011), 34–58.

12. What we are manifestly not dealing with here, for example, is a collection of booklets that were bound together some time after their production, almost certainly independently of their scribes, as is the case for the Middle English miscellanies examined by Linne R. Mooney in her "Scribes and Booklets of Trinity College Cambridge, Manuscripts R.3.19 and R.3.21," in A. J. Minnis, ed., *Middle English Poetry, Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall* (Woodbridge, 2001), 241–66.

13. Murray J. Evans, *Rereading Middle English Romance: Manuscript Layout, Decoration, and the Rhetoric of Composite Structure* (Montreal, 1995), 72. For the similar suggestion that these drawings "reflect a conception of the 'whole book,'" see Julia Boffey and John J. Thompson, "Anthologies and Miscellanies: Production and Choice of Texts," in Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall, eds., *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375–1475* (Cambridge, U.K., 1989), 279–315, at 298.

14. It appears unlikely that the younger public addressed in Ashmole's conduct texts would also have been the target audience of a poem like *The Adulterous Falmouth Squire* (item 35b), for instance (this work features a son's vision of his father hanging by his genitals in hell and confessing his repeated marital infidelity). See George Shuffelton, "Is There a Minstrel in the House?: Domestic Entertainment in Late Medieval England," *Philological Quarterly* 87 (2008): 51–76, at 59.

Still, the demonstrable co-identity of the scribe and compiler of Ashmole 61 justifies an approach to this book as a cultural artifact that reflects the broad range of attitudes towards the matter of good conduct that were potentially available to its users at a particular time (ca. 1500) and place (in or near Leicester). Even if medieval readers and audiences of the manuscript did not encounter this codex's texts *en bloc*, the twenty-first-century scholar who reads them in this fashion stands to gain a better picture of the world that gave life to them and that they in turn helped to shape.

I begin, then, with an examination of the conduct texts in Ashmole 61, which, with one exception, are grouped towards the opening of the manuscript. These are *How the Wise Man Taught His Son*, *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, *Stans Puer ad Mensam*, *Dame Courtesy*, and the *Dietary* (items 3, 4, 7, 8, 31, respectively).¹⁵ These poems contain advice on topics ranging from the importance of basic acts of daily devotion and good behavior in church to the maintenance of successful marital relationships, diet and table manners, and the correct running of the household. Besides these thematic concerns, the conduct texts in Ashmole 61 have in common that they subscribe to a strict sense of social hierarchy while at the same time advertising the individual's capacity to self-fashion and thereby to improve his or her standing in the world. *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* and *Stans Puer ad Mensam*, for instance, go to great lengths to stress the importance of knowing one's place: the daughter must love her future husband "aboven all thinge" (4.34), stay at home (4.77), and avoid the company of men (4.83–90); the "chylde" addressed in *Stans Puer ad Mensam* (7.7) must always wait to be seated before a meal (7.74), mustn't give away food without permission (7.100), and should always let their betters take the nicer side of the bed (7.214–17). At the same time, the narrating voices of these poems present the route to success as the correct performance of a particular part. They preface their advice with the conditional phrases "and thou wylle be a wyfe" (4.5) and "if thou . . . / thinke in thiselwe that thou wold be a man" (7.28–29), indicating that these two identities—"wyfe" and "man"—are roles that must be learned and not the self-evident products of human biology. The prosperity that is promised upon the successful completion of

15. Shuffelton reports Blanchfield's suggestion in her doctoral dissertation that the placement of the *Dietary* may reflect its perceived relevance to an adult audience, whereas items 3, 4, 7, and 8 address children (*Codex Ashmole* 61, 529). Items 7 and 31 have a Lydgate connection. For Lydgate's versions of these texts, see Henry Noble MacCracken, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, 2 vols., EETS e.s. 107, o.s. 192 (London, 1911–34), 2:702–7, 739–44. Item 8 is extant only in Ashmole 61 and may be Rate's own composition (compare Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61, 445).

the course of behavioral training recommended in these texts is thus open to all: “The child that is curtas, be he pore or ryche, / It schall hym awayll” (7.17–18).¹⁶

Reading these texts as a group, one soon detects that good conduct means different things for men and for women.¹⁷ In *How the Wise Man Taught His Son*, the son is told not to trust too deeply in the effective potential of his own work:

“For all that ever a man doth here
With bysenes and travell bothe,
All this is, withouten were,
Not bot for mete and drynke and clothe;
More getys he not, withouten hothe.”

(3.77–81)

The wise man goes on to warn his son against the vice of covetousness (3.85–86) and exhorts him to scorn worldly wealth (3.90); he should instead spend his time thinking on the inevitability of his coming death (3.93–100). The *Dietary*, also addressed to a male audience (compare 31.5), likewise discourages greed, particularly at the table, and counsels moderation in all things: “Temperat dyet and temperate traveyle” (31.11).

In *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, by contrast, the daughter is advised to remain in a state of constant vigilance over the affairs of her household, particularly if her husband is absent:

“Loke what most nede is to don,
And sett thi men therto ryght sone.
That thing that is befor don dede,
Redy it is when thou hast nede.
And if thy lord be fro home,
Lat not thy meneyé idell gone.

16. In reality, the prospects for upward social mobility in late medieval England may have been rather less bright than promises such as this suggest. See Philippa C. Maddern, “Social Mobility,” in Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, eds., *A Social History of England, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, U.K., 2006), 113–33.

17. On the differences in content and pedagogical approach between late medieval conduct texts addressed to boys and girls, see further Anna Dronzek, “Gendered Theories of Education in Fifteenth-Century Conduct Books,” in Kathleen Ashley and Robert L. A. Clark, eds., *Medieval Conduct* (Minneapolis, 2001), 135–59.

And loke thou wele who do hys dede;
 Quyte hym therafter to his mede.”

(4.129–36)

This last set of instructions positions the daughter as the future wife of an at least modestly wealthy man—one who has a “meneyé” (household) that must be rewarded—and this impression is corroborated elsewhere when it becomes apparent that the temptations of sumptuous dress may be a real threat to her success (4.119–22). At the same time, however, the daughter is encouraged to pitch in with the baking when the going gets tough, thereby implicating a middle class rather than an exclusively noble or gentry audience for the work:

“And if that thy nede be grete,
 And in the country corne be stryde,
 Make an houswyfe on thyselfe:
 Thy bred thou bake for houswyfys helthe.”

(4.147–50)¹⁸

The nature of the advice given in Ashmole’s other conduct texts can also tell us something about the audiences to whom they were directed. The *Dietary* implicitly posits a middling readership comparable to that evoked in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* where it contains advice against pursuing conflicts not only with one’s “better” but also with one’s “suget” and one’s “neyghbors” (31.36–37). The addressee of *How the Wise Man Taught His Son* is presented as the fifteen-year-old heir to his father’s estate (3.9–16); the implied beneficiaries of the advice given in *Stans Puer ad Mensam* are children of indeterminate social status, as we have seen; and *Dame Courtesy* is directed to the attention of “chylder yong / At the scowle that byde not long” (8.147–48). One piece of advice given in this last text—that it is not always good to spy on servants (8.60)—suggests that such children might not always have come from poorer families.

The conduct poems in Ashmole 61 would thus appear to find their common destination in the late medieval middle class household: *How the Wise*

18. As Shuffelton points out, these lines are not present in the other extant copies of *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* (Codex Ashmole 61, 431), for which see *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter, The Good Wyfe Wold A Pylgremage, The Thewis of Gud Women*, ed. Tauno F. Mustanoja (Helsinki, 1948). This passage may be Rate’s own addition to the text.

Man Taught His Son, *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, and the *Dietary* imagine the various responsibilities of those men and women who will at some point head the house, or who already do, whereas *Stans Puer ad Mensam* and *Dame Courtesy* figure forth the roles and the ambitions of their servants and children, or future children.¹⁹ The interests of the household are warmly recommended to all of these addressees. In *How the Wise Man Taught His Son* and *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, future husbands and wives are advised to work hard to keep the peace between them, avoiding harsh words (compare 3.41–52 and 4.35–44).²⁰ *Stans Puer ad Mensam* and *Dame Courtesy* prescribe the orderly behavior to be observed when the household's members eat, sleep, and talk together, and *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* and the *Dietary* warn against the squandering of the household's wealth. These poems have been mined for information about the culture that they propose to regulate. In the spirit of careful self-restraint and the regulation of the household counseled in the *Dietary*, for instance, Claire Sponsler has located evidence of a "shift from an ethos of aristocratic conspicuous public consumption to one of private moderation," which, she suggests, "testifies to the awakening powers of the self-fashioning bourgeois consumer."²¹ In her analysis of *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, Felicity Riddy detects an older but related influence at work, which she calls the "bourgeois ethos," a term that I have adapted in the title of this essay. This is the ethos "of the burghesses, the citizens or the freemen of urban society, the people who enjoyed privileges in relation to trade, the law, and the tenure of property."²² The conservatism of these people shapes *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*,

19. These categories are blurred somewhat by the late medieval practice of sending children outside their family homes in order to complete their basic education in service. See further Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (Yale, 2001), 309.

20. Comparing Rate's text of *How the Wise Man Taught His Son* with Rudolf Fischer's reconstructed archetype of this version of the poem, it is notable that two stanzas are absent in the Ashmole text that elaborate a less equitable relationship between husband and wife, discouraging the son from automatically taking his future wife's word over that of other members of his household (Fischer's stanza 11) and stressing the necessity that he exert mastery over her (Fischer's stanza 14). Rate may have omitted these stanzas deliberately. See *How the Wyse Man Taught Hys Sone*, ed. Rudolf Fischer (Erlangen, 1889), 42–49.

21. Claire Sponsler, "Eating Lessons: Lydgate's 'Dietary' and Consumer Conduct," in Ashley and Clark, eds., *Medieval Conduct*, 1–22, at 19. As Shuffelton notes, however, the *Dietary* could not have achieved the popularity that it appears to have enjoyed if it had not had deep roots in the surviving tradition of Roman Stoicism and in Christianity's emphasis on the balance between feasting and fasting (the *Dietary* survives in fifty-seven manuscripts and in prints edited by Caxton, de Worde, and Pynson). See Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole 61*, 528–29.

22. Riddy, "Mother Knows Best," 67.

Riddy argues, a text that, she posits, is designed to protect the interests of urban family fathers.²³

As Riddy readily concedes, the freedom of a given town did not constitute a homogenous group. Access to free status might be achieved either by birth, by completing an apprenticeship, or by payment in return for formal admission; wives who traded *femme sole* and widows who took over their husbands' businesses were also eligible to join the franchise. The proportion of townspeople admitted to the freedom could vary from town to town, from fifty percent (York) to just over thirty percent (Exeter), and while the Middle English word typically used to describe these people—*burgeis*—could have the specialized meaning of freeman, citizen, or master craftsman well into the fifteenth century, the term is also found earlier being used simply to describe a substantial townsman or townswoman.²⁴ Nevertheless, by the end of the Middle Ages, the interests of this disparate class of influential city-dwellers had clearly coalesced insofar as its members had succeeded in promoting what Richard Britnell has termed a "commercial morality," a "burgess-centred" ethic whereby the rules of the market were conflated with notions of good Christian conduct in ways that helped to shore up the position of the urban wealthy.²⁵ At the heart of this new order lay the late medieval bourgeois household, the fundamental locus of middle class living and working and, frequently, also a place of trade.²⁶ The late medieval bourgeois household has been found to possess its own material culture, distinct from comparable rural property,²⁷

23. Riddy, "Mother Knows Best," 74–76.

24. See Riddy, Felicity, "Burgeis' Domesticity in Late-Medieval England," in Maryanne Kowaleski and P. J. P. Goldberg, eds., *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge, U.K., 2008), 14–36, at 18. To make matters more complex still, as Horrox reminds us, the boundaries of the late medieval town were porous. For instance, wealthy city-dwelling merchants might acquire lands and interests outside their towns, while members of the rural gentry could decide to take up urban residence. See Rosemary Horrox, "The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century," in John A. F. Thomson, ed., *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988), 22–44.

25. Richard Britnell, "Town Life," in Horrox and Ormrod, eds., *A Social History of England*, 134–78, at 163–68.

26. See Christopher Dyer, "The Hidden Trade of the Middle Ages: Evidence from the West Midlands of England," in his *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (London, 1994), 283–303.

27. See P. J. P. Goldberg, "The Fashioning of Bourgeois Domesticity in Later Medieval England: A Material Culture Perspective," in Kowaleski and Goldberg, eds., *Medieval Domesticity*, 124–44. In his recent essay on late medieval and early modern conduct literature, Michael Foster argues that the class difference most frequently observed in the texts he studies is "the contrast between middle and noble classes in urban spaces on the one hand and the agrarian poor on the other." See Michael Foster, "From Courtesy to Urbanity in Late Medieval England," *Parergon* 29 (2012): 27–46, at 28. In this connection it is perhaps worth noting that the addressee of Rade's *Stans Puer ad Mensam* is repeatedly warned against behavior that might lead him to be misidentified as a "cherle" (7.83, 129).

and, as we have begun to see, its symbolic resonances ran deep. To return to Riddy's essay on *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*:

In the bourgeois ethos the household seems to have represented a distinctive complex of values—stability, piety, hierarchy, diligence, ambition, and respectability—all of which were crucial to the success of those craft and trade groups who were in place in the towns by the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.²⁸

In combination with the focus on moderation identified by Sponsler in the *Dietary*, the same complex of values defines the conduct texts preserved in Ashmole 61. This coincidence makes sense, for Rate's book would appear to have its roots in the very bourgeois household context that Sponsler and Riddy describe. As Shuffelton notes, the format of the codex, which comprises 162 paper folios and measures 418 × 140 mm., resembles "surviving medieval ledgers used by merchants or guilds for entering accounts,"²⁹ and all but one of the potential candidates for Rate's identity put forward by both Shuffelton and Blanchfield belong to the merchant class. A William Ratt, for example, left a will dated 1522 that is now kept in the Leicester Record Office's Register Book of Wills for the years 1512–26, and this would seem to be the same man cited in the 1509–10 list of the free citizens of Leicester. A William Rotte is listed as having rented a building from Leicester's Corpus Christi Guild in 1494–95, and he may be identical with the man of the same name registered in a local guild of ironmongers in 1480.³⁰ The recent discovery of a William Race in the 1491 ordination list of Bishop Russell of Lincoln provides a further candidate for Rate's identity, given the occasional confusion of *c* and *t* in medieval scripts, and this leaves open the possibility that the scribe of Ashmole 61 was a cleric in minor orders, perhaps a household chaplain attached to a middle class family, as Blanchfield has posited.³¹ The fluency of Rate's copying combined with the high number of errors in his texts suggests that while

28. Riddy, "Mother Knows Best," 67–68.

29. Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61, 2.

30. Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61, 4. Blanchfield draws a parallel between the Leicester Corpus Christi Guild's Badge of Cognizance and the heraldic shield with a cross and five suns that Rate sketches at the end of his copy of the *Short Charter of Christ* (item 29), perhaps strengthening the connection between Ashmole's scribe and this organization ("The Romances," 84).

31. See Blanchfield, "The Romances," 80. On William Race, see Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61, 4n21. Since this Race is listed among those of "primam tonsuram" and since he never appears in the lists again, he presumably did not advance to the priesthood. See too Riddy's comments on the clerical interests at work in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, in "Mother Knows Best," 73–74.

he must have received some elementary training in writing, he did not work professionally as a scribe, and this is a profile that accords with both the lower clerical and the mercantile hypotheses as to his origins. The imperfection of Rate's work is also a feature of the book that points to its being produced "for the scribe's own use,"³² most likely within a family context, as would accord with the thematic interests of its texts and their variants.³³

The bourgeois ethics expounded in the conduct texts in Ashmole 61 pervade the codex. The *Morning Prayer* and the *Prayer to Mary* (items 13, 15) anthologized in the manuscript indicate an acceptance of the precepts laid down in the conduct works, for instance, where they include supplications that their speakers might be kept from wicked fellowship (13.11, 15.17–18) and loose talk (13.13–14), and that they might be aided in their attempts to eat and drink "mesurably" (13.17–20; compare 3.33–40, 4.67–68, 8.93–94, 31.75–76). Exercises for a continual meditation upon the inevitability of death of the kind that the wise man recommends to his son are provided in the *Stimulus Consciencie Minor* (item 33), and the prudent use and oversight of one's wealth that is counseled in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* and in the *Dietary* is a concern that looks likely to have motivated Rate's inclusion of the popular *Rules for Purchasing Land* (item 10). The language of tenancy and legal ownership deployed in that text also infuses both the *Short Charter of Christ* (item 29) and the description of Adam's fall in *The King and His Four Daughters* (26.115–222). Finally, the stress placed on the importance of mutual respect in marriage in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* and *How the Wise Man Taught His Son* is paralleled elsewhere in Ashmole 61 where the manuscript's texts dissert upon the sanctity of wedlock and the various punishments that attend jealousy of one's spouse, extramarital sex, and the sin of adultery (see, in particular, *The Jealous Wife*, *The Incestuous Daughter*, and Rate's amalgamation of *The Sinner's Lament* and *The Adulterous Falmouth Squire* [items 22, 23, 35a–35b, respectively]).

An interest in the bourgeois ethical topics of property, moderation, marriage, and family life also animates the five romances anthologized in

32. Blanchfield, "The Romances," 80. Compare Johnston's assessment that "a professional scribe producing a book would hardly have signed his own name repeatedly or drawn a series of what are presumably esoteric illustrations in a volume meant for someone else, suggesting that Rate probably made [Ashmole 61] for his own household's consumption," in "Two Leicestershire Romance Codices," 90.

33. See Blanchfield, "The Romances," 79, and compare the earlier description of the manuscript as "a collection of moral and didactic pieces, courtesy poems, and romances, selected and edited . . . for family reading," in Malcolm Parkes, "The Literacy of the Laity," in David Daiches and Anthony Thorlby, eds., *Literature and Western Civilization: The Mediaeval World* (London, 1973), 555–77, at 569.

Ashmole 61: *Sir Isumbras*, *The Erle of Tolous*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Sir Orfeo* (items 5, 19, 20, 24, 39, respectively). Like the addressee in *How the Wise Man Taught His Son*, the hero in *Sir Isumbras* must learn the correct value of worldly wealth: it is on account of his “pride of gold and gode” (5.45) that Isumbras is visited with the afflictions narrated in this romance. The root of the hero’s pride may be detected in the romance’s initial description of Isumbras, where we are told that he was strong, good-looking, and generous, that he had the most beautiful wife, and that he had three fair sons (5.7–30). As Dieter Mehl argues, while such a description undoubtedly draws on several well-established conventions, these gifts appear to be responsible for making Isumbras oblivious of God’s grace: “Thou haste forgette what thou was” (5.44) announces the bird who confronts the hero at the opening of the romance.³⁴ As such *Sir Isumbras* may serve as a warning against the trappings of knight-hood that, like the *Dietary*, confirms the attractions of moderate living as a prophylactic against deadly sin. In the subsequent loss of clothes, food, money, and family members that the hero undergoes, Isumbras is called upon to do without precisely those things that led him astray. He learns the true worth of money the hard way when he is forced by the sultan who abducts his wife to accept gold in exchange for her (5.298–303), and he is finally rewarded for the successful acquittal of his trials when his fortunes are restored to him and his scattered family is reunited at the close of the narrative.

The Ashmole copy of *Sir Cleges* also reflects the concerns and prejudices of its neighbor conduct texts quite closely. Of particular interest in this poem is the characterization of Cleges’s wife, dame Clarys, who is presented consistently as a free and resourceful agent within the confines of her relationship to her husband. She is presented as his partner in almsgiving and charitable work (24.31–36), and she consoles him upon their destitution, cooking the family Christmas dinner herself when the funds for the more lavish yuletide celebrations that have ruined them evaporate (24.120–38). She provides the correct, favorable interpretation of Cleges’s discovery of unseasonal cherries on Christmas morning (24.212–17), and it is she who suggests that Cleges should take the cherries to Uther Pendragon’s court in the hope of securing their restoration (24.219–26). In these respects, it would seem, Clarys’s portrayal in *Sir Cleges* conforms to the ideal of helpful female conduct expressed in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*. The correspondence between these two poems is all the more striking when we consider the relationship

34. See Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (1968; repr. London, 2011), 94.

between the version of *Sir Cleges* in Ashmole 61 and that preserved in the only other manuscript to contain a copy of the work, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.1.11. For if Rate is responsible for the variants in his version of *Sir Cleges*, then it would seem that he worked self-consciously to bring his copy of the romance further into line with the model of femininity elaborated in the conduct text that he had copied earlier.³⁵ The moments in the Ashmole text where Clarys is presented as Cleges's partner in almsgiving and as a cook are absent in the Advocates redaction, as are the lines which detail her correct interpretation of the meaning of the cherries. There are likewise lines in the Ashmole copy of the work that stress the togetherness of husband and wife where this concern passes unremarked in the Advocates version. Compare

With hym there wold dwell non
But he and his childyrn too;
Than was his hart in mech woo,
And he made mech mone.

And yt be-fell on Crestemas evyn,
The kynge be-thowȝt hym full evyn;
He dwellyd be Kardyfe syde.

(Advocates *Cleges*, lines 81–87)

with

With hym ther left not one.
To duell with hym ther left no mo
Bot *hys wyfe* and his chylder two.
Than made he mekyll mone.
It fell on a Crystenmes Eve
Syr Clegys and his wyfe
They duellyd by Cardyff syde.

(Ashmole *Cleges*, 24.78–84; my emphasis)

35. For the text of *Sir Cleges* in Advocates 19.1.11, from which I will cite presently, see A. Treichel's parallel edition of the poem in "Sir Cleges: Eine mitttelenglische Romanze," *Englische Studien* 22 (1896): 345–89. Treichel demonstrates that neither manuscript can have served as an exemplar for the other (at 361–64).

Blanchfield points out that unique readings in the Ashmole text of *Sir Isumbras* also stress the togetherness of the family (compare 5.800–10).³⁶ These variants complement the scenes across the various versions of both *Sir Isumbras* and *Sir Cleges* in which the experience of children is described particularly vividly (compare 5.166–68, 310–12 and 24.151–56).

Still, despite the natural affinities between these romances and the conduct texts in Ashmole 61, and despite the variant readings that draw Ashmole's texts of *Sir Isumbras* and *Sir Cleges* even closer into the orbit of these works, there remain several discrepancies between *Sir Isumbras* and *Sir Cleges* and the conduct texts that ensure that the transition between them is not entirely smooth. For example, although Shuffelton commends Cleges's generosity because he gives not just to noblemen, as other spendthrift knights do, but to anyone in need,³⁷ it is unlikely that a strict adherent to the principles codified in the *Dietary* would have likewise approved. In this text, we are advised against holding parties and eating meals late (31.49–50), and, above all, we are conjured to live within our means: "After thi rent mayntayn thi housolde" (31.60). It may be that Rate attempted to tone down the description of Cleges's largesse that he found in the copy of the romance that he used as his exemplar. Lines that have survived in Advocates 19.1.11 describing the extravagance of the protagonist's Christmas parties—"As ryall in all thyng, / As he hade ben a kynge" (Advocates 19.1.11, lines 40–41)—are absent in Rate's version, and whereas the relationship between Cleges's generosity and his subsequent impoverishment is clearly cast as a causal one in the Advocates text, Rate's version of the poem presents the relationship between the two states in terms of time. While it is quite possible that this last variant in Rate's version was simply due to a slip of the pen or the eye, the texts of *Sir Cleges* met by readers of the Advocates and the Ashmole manuscripts are subtly differentiated through it. Compare

Ten yere sech fest he helde
In the worschepe of Mari myld
And for hym, þat dyed on the rode.
Be that his good began to slake
For the gret festes that he dede make.
(Advocates *Cleges*, lines 55–59; my emphasis)

36. See Blanchfield, "The Romances," 74, and compare Gustav Schleich's critical edition of *Sir Isumbras* in "Sir Ysumbras: Eine englische Romanze des 14. Jahrhunderts," *Palaestra* 15 (1901): 1–128 (lines 781–92).

37. See Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole* 61, 491.

with

Ten yere or twelve sych festys thei held
 In worschype of hym that all weld
 And for us dyghed upon the rode.
Be than his gode began to slake,
 Sych festys he gan make.
 (Ashmole *Cleges*, 24.52–56, my emphasis)

The fact of Cleges's self-ruining generosity remains undeniable, however, and the overwhelmingly positive tones in which this is described (compare 24.15–24, 37–42), as well as the positive outcome of his tale, may be read as a challenge to the fiscal restraint counseled in the *Dietary*.

We might wonder, too, how the public and military profile of Isumbras's wife squares with the recommendation that women stay at home in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*. After the sultan has taken her from her husband, we read that he crowns Isumbras's wife with his own hands, naming her "quene of all hys lond" (5.332). He then sends her home to his country accompanied by a "ryche charter" (5.334) detailing his sanctioning of her new role, perhaps as regent. When Isumbras arrives at her court after killing her abductor, we can see that she has assumed total control of his property. Most surprisingly, at the close the text, Isumbras's wife persuades Isumbras to allow her to fight against the huge Saracen horde that assembles when the hero attempts to impose Christianity upon the lands formerly held by the sultan:

"Lord," sche seyde, "if I were dyght
 In hernes as I were a knyght,
 With thee wold I fare.
 And bothe same late us wend,
 Sen God this grace hath us send;
 I byde to lyve no more."
 (5.757–62)

Isumbras's wife is duly decked out "as sche were a knyght" and, spear and shield in hand, she rides off with her husband to confront the Saracens, "thirti thousand and mo" of them (5.763–66). Her success in this attire not only highlights the narrowness of the role conceived for women in texts like *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, where the daughter's future existence is

set firmly in the shadow of her husband-to-be; it also calls into question the mutual exclusivity of the roles prescribed for men and women that is taken for granted in this text and in *How the Wise Man Taught His Son*.

There is no reason, of course, why the romances and the conduct texts in Ashmole 61 should agree on absolutely every point, and, given the consistency of Rate's tastes as a compiler and the variants preserved in his texts, we might feel justified in concluding that his book is primarily concerned with expressing and condoning the bourgeois ethos outlined above.³⁸ As I have begun to demonstrate, however, such a conclusion ignores the tendency of the romances to explore contrary attitudes. Riddy has argued that *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* may be read as a register of the insecurities surrounding the controllability of women and their allegiance to the bourgeois household.³⁹ As is the case with the conduct texts in Ashmole 61, I would like to suggest, this manuscript's romances can be read as a record of prevailing cultural anxieties, in particular those pertaining to the bourgeois ethos that I have described.⁴⁰ The crucial difference between these two genres is that whereas a poem like *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* attempts to shut down discussion of the troublesome issues that lurk between the lines of its text, Ashmole's romances invite consideration of the ways in which divergences from the behavioral norms codified in the manuscript's conduct literature might be experienced and articulated.

It will be apparent that my thinking about Middle English romance is indebted to the work of Nicola McDonald, and, in particular, to her description of the genre as "the pre-eminent imaginary space in medieval English literature . . . in which the transgression of cultural boundaries is both embodied and explored."⁴¹ I am also inspired by Rosalind Field's assertions that the "function of romance" is to "provoke questions," and that our enjoyment of these texts depends on an ability to "recognize that [their] purpose may lie in the

38. Compare the assertion that the romances and the conduct texts in Ashmole 61 "work together" with the other items in the manuscript "to encourage a particular version of active and influential bourgeois womanhood," in Myra J. Seaman, "Late-Medieval Conduct Literature," in Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt, eds., *The History of British Women's Writing, 700–1500* (Houndmills, 2012), 121–30, at 128–29.

39. See Riddy, "Mother Knows Best," 74–76, 85–86.

40. Here too Riddy has led the way. She addresses the general tendency of Middle English romances to interrogate contemporary family values in her "Middle English Romance: Family, Marriage, Intimacy," in Roberta L. Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, U.K., 2000), 235–52.

41. Nicola McDonald, "A Polemical Introduction," in Nicola McDonald, ed., *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance* (Manchester, U.K., 2004), 1–21, at 16.

debate, not in the achievement of answers.”⁴² These are, moreover, statements that invite us to recognize that the concerns of the romances in Ashmole 61 will extend far beyond the matter of bourgeois comportment per se; indeed, audiences might have appreciated these texts precisely because they transported them to a world far removed from the humdrum concerns codified in contemporaneous conduct literature. As Raluca Radulescu has demonstrated, a text like *Sir Isumbras* taps into contemporary political history, potentially provoking critiques of royal power as well as of bourgeois avarice,⁴³ and the concern about the corrupting influence of wealth that I have isolated in this text is unlikely to have been of direct personal relevance to the group of servants in the household of Thomas Bouchier, archbishop of Canterbury (1454–86), whose enjoyment of the work “a-monge ffrendes ssyttyng at the ffeest” Michael Johnston has recovered in his study of Oxford, University College MS 142.⁴⁴ For the current discussion of bourgeois ethics, however, it will be sufficient to note that the cohabitation of Ashmole’s romances with texts like the *Dietary* and *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* suggests that the users of this manuscript could think outside the rules established in the conduct poems, that they could conceive of good conduct as a shifting idea whose correct manifestation might change from one situation to the next and whose reward might not be universally available or self-evident.⁴⁵ It is with these propositions in mind that I want now to examine the contribution made to Ashmole 61 by *Lybeaus Desconus*, *The Erle of Tolous*, and *Sir Orfeo*,

42. Rosalind Field, “Popular Romance: The Materials and the Problems,” in Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton, eds., *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance* (Woodbridge, 2009), 9–30, at 20.

43. See Raluca Radulescu, “Pious Middle English Romances Turned Political: Reading *Sir Isumbras*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Robert of Sicily* in Fifteenth-Century England,” *Viator* 41 (2010): 333–60, at 337–50.

44. See Michael Johnston, “New Evidence for the Social Reach of ‘Popular Romance’: The Books of Household Servants,” *Viator* 43 (2012): 303–32, at 313–22.

45. This essay thus offers a view on the late medieval response to conduct texts that contrasts with that espoused by Sponsler, who finds that the rhetoric of poems such as *How the Wise Man Taught His Son* and *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* leaves little scope for resistant readings. See Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis, 1997), 69. It also collects evidence suggesting a late medieval sensitivity to the variety within and among conceptions of good behavior that Nicholls passes over (“the ideals of courtesy changed little throughout the period covered by this dissertation. It is not until Erasmus . . . that a varying pattern of courtesy, as well as an historical dimension of its practices, is acknowledged and recognised” [*The Matter of Courtesy*, 77]). Most obviously, where it considers the links between the modes of behavior prescribed in Ashmole’s conduct texts and their potential reception by late medieval men and women, my analysis constitutes an instantiation of the approach advocated by Kathleen Ashley and Robert L. A. Clark, “Medieval Conduct: Text, Theories, Practices,” in their *Medieval Conduct*, ix–xx.

three romances that expose with increasing intensity the troubling underside of the world described in the conduct texts.

As James Wade has remarked, *Lybeaus Desconus* is a romance in which matters of the heart and of the loins are treated markedly more casually than they are elsewhere in Ashmole 61: Lybeaus enjoys a night of “grete solace” (20.474) with his female companion, Elyn, after which he abandons her in order to enjoy the affections first of a sorceress, Lady Denamowre, and then of the woman he has been engaged to rescue, the Lady of Synadon.⁴⁶ The appeal of this swashbuckling narrative most probably resides in its fast-paced action and, in particular, in its battle scenes. These are varied, ranging from single and dual combat to fights with giants, formal engagements with other knights, a bloodbath involving a dozen assailants, and the climactic encounter with the sorcerer-clerks who have imprisoned the romance’s damsel in distress. Sparks fly off helmets in these episodes; arms, a leg, and a horse’s head are lopped off; the hero is attacked with a boar-spit and, when that breaks, a tree. Lybeaus’s rashness is repeatedly pointed out by his interlocutors (compare 20.792–97, 877–84, 1111–12), but this is doubtless a quality that the audience is expected to revel in rather than to censure. Lybeaus’s almost total disinterest in the codes of gallant conduct and his constant recourse to brute violence distinguish him from the heroes of the other romances in Ashmole 61. In this context, *Lybeaus Desconus* may perhaps accordingly best be interpreted as an illustration of the pleasures of a disobedience that ultimately reinforces rather than undoes the standard on which its transgressive thrill depends.⁴⁷

But at the same time it is worth noting Lybeaus’s family background. He is conceived out of wedlock when Gawain has sex with, and perhaps rapes, the hero’s mother “by a forest syde” (20.9). Lybeaus grows up to have a terrible temper, and on account of his savageness his mother tries to keep him from becoming a knight (20.16–24). He soon leaves her behind, however, stealing a dead knight’s armor and taking himself off to Arthur’s court. While the reunion scene between Gawain, the hero, and his mother at the end of the poem provides the most obvious link between Rate’s interest in the

46. See James Wade, “Ungallant Knights,” in Neil Cartlidge, ed., *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, U.K., 2012), 201–18, at 203–11.

47. Compare Shuffelton, who suggests that *Lybeaus Desconus* “flatter[s] the ambitions of renegade youth” (“Is There a Minstrel,” 59). See too the nuanced interpretation of romance as an inherently conservative genre advanced by James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution, 1350–1547* (Oxford, 2002), 270–83. As will become increasingly clear, I am more confident than Simpson about the capacity of individual romances to break the cycle of transgression and reintegration that he describes.

integrity of the family and the plot of *Lybeaus Desconus*,⁴⁸ this moment is briefly recounted, and the long-harbored pain and guilt that might accompany such an encounter are left uncommented upon (compare 20.2191–2227). Nevertheless, the awkward family portrait of Gawain, Lybeaus, and his mother that we are left with at the close of the romance might be thought to constitute a photonegative image of the idealized family, bound through marriage, that we encounter in the conduct texts and in *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Isumbras*: Gawain, the absent father, finally naming his son; Lybeaus, the tear-away child, fixated on his father, begging his belated blessing; the unnamed single mother, red in the face and a stranger at court, relegated to the periphery immediately after she has united the men who abandoned her.

The specter of extramarital sex and its difficult repercussions that looms over *Lybeaus Desconus* constitutes a more intensely felt threat in *The Erle of Tolous*, a poem that shares none of the superficial casualness of its neighbor romance's attitude towards love conduct. Its portrayal of the relationship between the earl and the empress represents an uneasy compromise between the conventionally free depiction of love outside marriage found in the Old French Breton lai and the stricter apprehension of the importance of wedlock manifested in the Middle English versions of these texts.⁴⁹ At the beginning of the romance, we are instructed to focus on the character of the empress:

Leve lordys, I schall yow tell
Of a case that some tyme fell
Fer in a unkuth land:
How a lady had gret myscheffe,
And how sche keverde of her greve.

(19.7–11)

Her chastity is stressed (19.40–41) and her commitment to her husband is demonstrated by her attempts to persuade him to return the earl's confiscated

48. Having pointed out that this ending is neither unique to Ashmole 61 nor common to all the extant copies of the text, Blanchfield concludes that "this tenuous family connection must have recommended the romance to Rate" ("The Romances," 67).

49. For an account of the salient differences between these traditions, see Amanda Hopkins, "Female Vulnerability as Catalyst in the Middle English Breton Lays," in Phillipa Hardman, ed., *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, U.K., 2002), 43–58. I am not sure, however, that what Hopkins calls the "masculinising of sexual desire" (54) has been so perfectly achieved in the case of *The Erle of Tolous* as she suggests.

lands and to make peace with him (19.44–45, 136–41). But we soon see her parading herself in her chapel for the benefit of the hero. Having fallen in love with the empress from afar, the earl has promised to release his prisoner, Tralabas, the emperor's uncle, if he will help him to catch a "syght" (19.210) of the empress. While Tralabas never intends to keep his side of the bargain, hoping instead to ensure the earl's downfall by luring him back into the emperor's court, the empress insists that Tralabas fulfill his promise, and she dresses magnificently for the ensuing occasion: "Wonder rychely sche was clede, / In gold and ryche perré" (19.326–27). She makes sure that the earl gets a good look:

Sche stode styll in that place;
All displayd was here face
For love of that knyght.

(19.334–36)

"Thrys sche turned hyre abowte," the text continues, "For that lord schuld here se" (19.346, 348). Enchanted by this spectacle, the hero, who has disguised himself as a hermit for the event, resolves to beg her for alms. She responds by giving him forty gold florins and one of her rings (19.386–90). A good part of the remainder of the romance is given over to an attempt to iron out this apparent indiscretion, which the earl comes to interpret as a possible blot on her moral character. Thus when the empress is framed for adultery by her bodyguards and must be rescued by the earl, he does not assume her innocence from the outset: "He wold aventer hys lyfe" to save her, the romance reads, "If he may wyte that sche be trew" (19.923–24). There then occurs an odd sequence of events in which the earl attempts to reassure himself of the empress's innocence. He is dissatisfied with the assertions of her guiltlessness that he elicits both from the merchant with whom he travels back into the emperor's lands (19.939–44) and from her uncle and confessor, an abbot with whom the earl stays prior to the judicial combat called to decide the heroine's fate (19.1020–28). Finally, the hero disguises himself as a monk in order to hear the empress's confession for himself that the only sin that troubles her is that she once gave him a ring (19.1065–70).

On one level, *The Erle of Tolous* clearly complements the bourgeois ethos expressed throughout Ashmole 61 insofar as the empress's strict adherence to the courtly doctrine of "treuth" as opposed to the more modern notion of prudence is shown to augment her difficulties.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the fussing about the empress's ring and about her motives for giving it to the earl—did she do it "In es of hym and for no syn," as her uncle claims (19.1027), or did she do it "for love of that knyght," the sentiment that motivated her cat-walk for him in her chapel?—suggests that there exists a deeper insecurity in this text regarding the knowability of women's minds and the security with which women can be contained by wedlock. The empress, of course, remains married to the emperor throughout the action narrated in the romance and, although he ignores her advice at the outset of the poem, he seems genuinely to love her (compare 19.802–28). Only twenty-odd lines from the romance's close does the emperor conveniently die of natural causes, making way for the empress's marriage to the earl, their prolific procreation, and the establishment of their line.

Sir Orfeo, finally, is also a text that is deeply concerned with the quality of a relationship between two lovers. We are encouraged to focus on this aspect of the poem from its opening in the form it assumes in Ashmole 61. Unlike the other two extant copies of this poem, which are preserved in Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck manuscript) and London, British Library MS Harley 3810, Rate's text of *Sir Orfeo* strikes an amorous note by beginning with a typical spring scene:

Mery tyme is in Aperelle,
 That mekyll schewys of manys wylle.
 In feldys and medewys flowrys spryng;
 In grovys and wodys foules syng.
 Than wex yong men jolyffe,

50. Compare Arlyn Diamond's assertion that "if [the empress] speaks for *trowthe*, the narrative itself, with its repetition of lies and treacheries, speaks for prudence, a virtue unnamed within the text but indispensable in the unstable and treacherous world that it portrays," in "*The Erle of Tolous: The Price of Virtue*," in Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickson, eds., *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation* (Cambridge, U.K., 2000), 83–92, at 84.

And than proudyth man and wyffe.

(39.1–6)⁵¹

One other variant towards the opening of the Ashmole version of *Sir Orfeo* sharpens the audience's focus on the love relationship between its protagonists: Rate's version of the poem insists that its heroes are "weddyd" (39.111) where in the Auchinleck and Harley 3810 redactions of the text they are merely said to be "to-gider."⁵² I zoom in on this last detail because I wish to argue that it is the reappraisal of marriage in *Sir Orfeo* that constitutes its salient characteristic in the form and in the context in which it appears in Ashmole 61. Whereas *The Erle of Tolous* worries about the integrity of wedlock without ever seriously questioning it, I suggest, *Sir Orfeo* constitutes a powerful critique of the institution of marriage whose nature and whose worth are straightforwardly asserted elsewhere in this codex. The interpretation of the poem that I sketch out here is indebted to A. C. Spearing, who has questioned traditional explications of the poem that argue that a moral deficiency in one or both of the romance's protagonists acts as the poem's narrative catalyst. Instead, Spearing contends, the poem exposes the female experience of patriarchy, which it represents through the trope of madness. This is a reading of *Sir Orfeo* in which the heroine's garden becomes a dark reflection of her marriage, "a cultivated space, at once protective and constricting," and a locus that ultimately betokens "the delectable and vulnerable female body enclosed by man for his proper use and cultivation."⁵³

That "something drives Heurodis to escape from her husband's kingdom and her marriage"⁵⁴ is the understanding of the heroine's crisis to which the poem itself explicitly points when we read of her crying "As sche wold up and go hyr weye" after she has seen the fairy king (39.84). This interpretation of the poem would seem to fit even better with the Ashmole text than with the Auchinleck version of the romance that Spearing cites. Where earlier in the narrative the Auchinleck text states that Heurodis's maids told Orfeo's

51. In his edition of the poem, A. J. Bliss identifies this passage as a borrowing from *Arthur and Merlin*, a poem that also appears in the Auchinleck manuscript. See A. J. Bliss, ed. *Sir Orfeo*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1966), xvi. Regarding the relationship between the three extant versions of *Sir Orfeo*, Bliss concludes that the Ashmole 61 and Harley 3810 texts of the romance are dependent on a common ancestor "either descended from or coeval with" the Auchinleck text (xv). The Auchinleck and Harley 3810 texts of *Sir Orfeo* are cited from Bliss's edition.

52. Auchinleck *Orfeo*, line 121; compare Harley *Orfeo*, line 119.

53. A. C. Spearing, "Sir Orfeo: Madness and Gender," in Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (Harlow, 2000), 258–72, at 267, 268.

54. Spearing, "Sir Orfeo: Madness and Gender," 267.

courtiers “þat her quen awede wold, / & bad hem go & hir at-hold” (Auchinleck *Orfeo*, lines 87–88), in the Ashmole text the maids do not mention madness, reporting only the words that we will later read, “How that the quen *away wold*,” and asking the hero’s courtiers to “*com hyr to behold*” (39.75–76, my emphasis). The variant in line 75 of the Ashmole *Orfeo* underlines the desire for flight to which Meroudys, as Rate calls his heroine, is subjected, while at the same time divesting the description of her self-mutilation of the gloss it receives in line 87 of the Auchinleck text: “þat her quen awede wold” (that their queen was going mad). The suggestion is, I think, that her crisis may be more reasonable than has sometimes been thought, at least in this version of the romance.⁵⁵ In this connection, it is notable too that perhaps the most important variant reading in Ashmole’s text also moves the narrative a step back from the realm of the marvelously psychotic: in Rate’s text of *Sir Orfeo*, Meroudys describes receiving her summons to meet the fairy king when she is awake, not when she is dreaming.⁵⁶ The variant in Ashmole’s line 76 (“com hyr to behold”) provides a pointer to Meroudys’s/Heurodis’s particular discomfort, namely the total lack of privacy from which she suffers at Orfeo’s court. The first reaction of the queen’s maids when the heroine begins to scratch at her face and tear her clothes is not to attend her but instead to summon more witnesses to her crisis, regardless of rank: they call “both knyght and sueyn” to come to her (39.74). “Sexty knyghtys and yit mo” accompanied by “fele ladys therto” then come to the queen “hastely” and take her to her bed, where she is forcibly restrained “both feyr and faste” (39.77–82). When Orfeo finally arrives, he compounds the press about his wife with his personal retinue of “knyghtys tenne” (39.86).⁵⁷

Successive critics have found in *Sir Orfeo* the ultimate demonstration of marital love, but such readings ignore or are forced to look for alternative interpretations of the poem’s forthright descriptions of its protagonists’ inability to communicate with each other, not only in the scene where their paths cross in the wilderness (compare 39.320–32) but also in the prehistory of their relationship that is sketched out in their brief interaction after the

55. Harley 3810 agrees with Ashmole’s line 75, giving “þat her quene away wolde go” at its line 85, but, for Ashmole’s line 84, Harley 3810 gives “& rent hur-self as sche wer wode” at its line 94.

56. Compare 39.131–37 with Auchinleck *Orfeo*, lines 133–38, and Harley *Orfeo*, lines 131–36.

57. Compare Auchinleck *Orfeo*, lines 83–100, and Harley *Orfeo*, lines 69–99.

heroine's crisis.⁵⁸ The shock that Orfeo expresses upon meeting his restrained wife is linked to her vocality. "My leffe wyff, what ayles thee?" he asks,

"Thou that hast be so styлле,
Why cryest thou wonder schylle?
And ever thou aft be meke and myld,
Thou arte becom wode and wyld."

(39.88–92)

Later the heroine asserts that they have never fought since they were wed (39.110–11). If Spearing had been looking for the root of the heroine's dissatisfaction with her married life, he might have found it here; for it appears that, in spite of all their talk of love—"Were thou arte I wold be with thee," and so forth (39.117)—Orfeo's marriage was conducted from an emotional and intellectual distance even before the heroine's ravishment at the opening of the romance. On this reading, *Sir Orfeo* is the story of a marriage that fails despite husband and wife doing everything they can to stick together. Their incompatibility cannot be brooked, notwithstanding Orfeo's superhuman efforts and paramythical success. In contrast with the fate of the couples who are united or reunited at the close of *Sir Isumbras* and *The Erle of Tolous*, Orfeo and his wife remain emphatically childless (compare 39.586–89). At his death, the hero's inheritance passes out of his line to his steward, and a story that might have ended happily ever after is instead overshadowed by the tragedy of a dynasty: Orfeo's line ends here. He has no sons or daughters, no one to instruct in the ways of the world, no reason to insist upon the integrity of his heritage.⁵⁹

Where I have suggested that *Sir Isumbras* and *Sir Cleges* highlight the limitations of the models of female domestication and fiscal responsibility elaborated in the conduct poems, *Lybeaus Desconus*, *The Erle of Tolous*, and *Sir Orfeo* may thus be understood to testify to the troubling persistence of difference, disorder, and sadness in the world that poems such as *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* and the *Dietary* propose to regulate. If I have emphasized the darker side of the last three romances, I hope that I have at

58. Derek Pearsall, for instance, interprets the protagonists' inability to communicate as an effect of Heurodis's compromised mental state, a reading that, I have demonstrated, is less readily available in the Ashmole copy of the poem than in the Auchinleck version on which Pearsall bases his analysis. See Derek Pearsall, "Madness in *Sir Orfeo*," in Fellows et al., eds., *Romance Reading on the Book*, 51–63.

59. On the significance of Orfeo and Heurodis's childlessness, see further Oren Falk, "The Son of Orfeo: Kingship and Compromise in a Middle English Romance," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 30 (2000): 247–74.

least been able to demonstrate the capacity of these poems to trouble the ethical preconceptions of the other works anthologized in Ashmole 61. The texts collected in this manuscript treat the same topics, but they do not speak in concord; instead, their anthologization presents itself as an historical event in which we can catch a glimpse of the full repertoire of a culture's conflicted attitudes towards the matter of good conduct.⁶⁰ As a final observation, we might note that the tension caused by the juxtaposition of the romances and the conduct texts in Ashmole 61 is not entirely unique to this manuscript. A small group of other well-known late medieval codices also presents Middle English romances and conduct works side by side in similar concentrations, indicating that these texts were more widely felt to constitute two different sides of the same conceptual coin. Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1 (the Heege manuscript), part I of London, British Library MS Cotton Caligula A. ii, and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C. 86 each share several texts in common with Ashmole 61 and present themselves as obvious parallels to this book.⁶¹ Since their construction is more complexly layered than that of Ashmole 61, and since our knowledge of their origins is cloudier, the precise nature of the cultural interventions that these manuscripts make is often harder to gauge than is the case with

60. Derek Pearsall has rightly warned literary critics and book historians that it is "all too possible . . . to overestimate the activity of the controlling or guiding intelligence of the scribe-compiler in the making of late medieval English secular miscellanies" ("The Whole Book: Late Medieval English Manuscripts and their Modern Interpreters," in Stephen Kelly and John J. Thompson, eds., *Imagining the Book* [Turnhout, 2005], 17–29, at 29). Despite my interest in Rate's editorial agency, I hope that I have escaped this pitfall by paying equal attention to some instances in Ashmole 61 where the manuscript's individual items appear to be at odds with each other; these instances, I have suggested, may be understood to reveal tensions at the heart of the conception of good conduct shared by Rate and his audience. Tuning our ears to the discord often produced by late medieval compilation practices might provide an attractive alternative to the attempts to impose ideological and aesthetic unity on secular miscellanies that Pearsall critiques. For a fresh account of the literary-critical potential of studies of medieval *compilatio*, see Arthur Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages: Compilations of Medieval London* (Chicago, 2013). Particularly suggestive with regard to the foregoing comment is Bahr's application of Paul Strohm's idea of the textual unconscious to a reading of codicological form (*Fragments*, 107–15).

61. For a convenient summary of the contents of these manuscripts, see the relevant entries in Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue*. On Rate's acquisition of his exemplars and the implication of Ashmole 61 in a network of manuscripts that may include some of these books, see the brief comments in Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole 61*, 7–8. On the relationship between Ashmole 61 and Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.2.38, a romance manuscript that shares some texts in common with Rate's book, see Johnston, "Two Romance Codices."

Rate's book.⁶² Armed with a better appreciation of the dynamic interrelation of the conduct texts and the romances in Ashmole 61, however, we might now begin to reconsider the variety of ways in which notions of conduct could be conceived and challenged across a variety of late medieval books, texts, and milieus. For if the conduct texts copied into Ashmole 61 anticipate the twenty-first-century preoccupation with middle class self-making, the romances with which they sometimes traveled remind us of the profound critique and painful results to which such a narrow understanding of living can give rise.

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62. On these manuscripts, see Phillipa Hardman, intro., *The Heege Manuscript: A Facsimile of National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1* (Leeds, 2000); John J. Thompson, "Looking Behind the Book: MS Cotton Caligula A. ii. part 1, and the Experience of Its Texts," in Fellows et al., eds., *Romance Reading on the Book*, 171–87; and Julia Boffey and Carol M. Meale, "Selecting the Text: Rawlinson C. 86 and Some Other Books for London Readers," in Felicity Riddy, ed., *Regionalism in Late-Medieval Manuscripts and Texts: Essays Celebrating the Publication of A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (Woodbridge, 1991), 143–69.