



Title: Clerk Jankyn *At Hom to Bord / With My Gossib*
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[(essay date March 1985) *In the following essay, Carruthers refutes many commonly held assertions about the nature of the Wife of Bath's relationship with Jankyn. By analyzing fourteenth-century English usage, Carruthers identifies Jankyn as the relative of a close friend (one who is godparent to one of Alisoun's children), not as a stranger who merely boards in town. Through this interpretation, Carruthers argues, the Wife's change from manipulating spouse to manipulated spouse has richer irony.*]

In her fond description of past *jolitee*, the Wife of Bath recalls with particular pleasure her young fifth husband:

He som tyme was a clerk of Oxenford,
 And hadde left scole, and wente at hom to bord
 With my gossib, dwellynge in oure toun;
 God have hir soule! hir name was Alisoun.
 (D. 527-530)¹

Interpretive consensus concerning the circumstances of Jankyn's return would indicate that, having gone to Oxford for a few years, he came back to the region where he had been raised and boarded with a local lady, who was also Alisoun's dear friend and aide in idle talk and sexual exploits. The general misapprehension is reflected even by the editors of the *Middle English Dictionary*, who cite this particular use of the phrase *at hom* to illustrate the meaning "in or to one's native town" (s.v. *hom*, 3a [c]). Unfortunately, this paraphrase is based upon the modern meanings of the nouns in lines 528-9; full and thoughtful consideration of the lexicographical content of this description, and its historical context, will not support this interpretation of Chaucer's text, nor the meaning now commonly assigned to the clause "wente at hom to bord / With my gossib."

The Wife of Bath, we are told in *The General Prologue*, is not from Bath, but "of biside Bathe," that is from near (but not in) Bath.² Bath itself was a small town even by medieval standards; only forty-four acres were enclosed by the city walls, although a larger area around the city (known as *Bath forinsecum* or *forum*) was included in the revenue farm granted to the Bishop of Bath and Wells from the time of Edward I.³ It is difficult, given the localization of the Wife's dwelling in the *Prologue* portrait, to account for the presence of a boarding-house or inn where Jankyn may be supposed to have been a boarder. We recall that the two clerks in *The Reeve's Tale* when marooned for the night in the village of Trumpington were unable to lodge at an inn and stayed (for payment) with the miller and his family, even though Trumpington was near (*biside*) Cambridge. Trumpington is of the order of

magnitude of villages "biside Bathe." But the probable interpretation of this line does not depend (nor could it) upon speculation concerning the magnitude of Chaucer's fictional village. Better comprehension of what the words used in this phrase mean will clarify it; their mimetic status is directly reflective of lexicographical evidence.

In trying to determine historically the meaning of any word there is an inevitably large area of uncertainty involved, a philological variant of the Heisenberg principle, for in the very act of semantic reconstruction one must also partly misconstrue. We are forced to determine what most words meant in the past chiefly by a process of determining what they did not mean, with the attendant problems which such a method entails. And when we have delimited an area of possible meaning, we are then able only to map out a range of probability and likelihood within that often broad area, derived from a word's occurrences in evidence whose existence is due to the accidents of its transmission. As uncertain a process as historical philology is, however, the range of meaning which it restores is real, in the sense that one cannot simply disregard those probabilities in interpreting a text. The essay which follows seeks to restore a tiny fragment of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* from too many readings which have done just that. What the clause under examination most probably means is that clerk Jankyn came back to his own house (not just his home-town) and ate his meals (i.e. lived) at home with his family, a member of which was a close friend of the Wife's and a baptismal sponsor for one of her children. This paraphrase expresses the commonest meanings in the fourteenth century of the three nouns I wish to examine in this essay: *hom*, *bord*, and *godsib* (*gossib*).

The phrase *at hom* means "at or to one's native house" as Chaucer uses it. *Ham* in Old English always means a dwelling, a particular place, best translated by Latin *domus*, *domicilium*, *villa*, *mansio*, *praedium* (Bosworth-Toller, *A Dictionary of Old English and Supplement*, s.v. *ham*; cf. s.v.--*ham*, *ham*). The gradual extension of the word's meaning from "one's native dwelling" to "native region" vaguely and generally conceived, and then to pure metaphor (as in "Home is where the heart is") is difficult to pinpoint within any period, as a note in the *Oxford English Dictionary* warns (*OED*, s.v. *home*). The phrase *at hom* is the Middle English development of the Old English adverbial accusative *ham* with verbs of motion. Perhaps especially in this conservative phrase, therefore, ME. *hom* continued to carry its restricted, original meaning of "one's own house" (to which one was going).

Chaucer rarely uses the word *hom* in a context where it may refer to something besides one's native dwelling. The one apparent instance is in *Truth*: "Her is non hoom, her nis but wildernesse" (17). But the use of *ham* to refer to the dwellings of spirits has several precedents in Old English--indeed, the idea that both Heaven and Hell contain dwellings for souls is Biblical. The use of *hom* to establish the Christian teaching that one belongs in Heaven is well attested from Old English as a particular use in a strictly limited context. Indeed, such a paradoxical usage of the word depends upon and thus emphasizes its primary meaning of "one's native (earthly) house."

Two other occurrences in Chaucer are perhaps ambiguous. The Parson is praised in *The General Prologue* for not seeking advancement; he "dwelte at hoom, and kepte wel his folde" (A.512). Here the phrase probably refers to his whole native parish rather than simply his own house, although even in this instance the more restricted meaning is certainly included. Similarly, Criseyde praises Troilus because he "bereth hym here at hom so gently" (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 2.187), including surely the whole area of Troy city, not just Troilus' own house, although her words also include that. It is interesting to note in this regard that *-ham* as a place-name element in Old English probably referred to a whole group of dwellings in an area, whereas *ham* (with a short vowel) referred to a single 'home.' To the extent that such a distinction existed in Old English, however, and the evidence, as Bosworth-Toller suggests, is not overwhelming, it was certainly lost by the Norman Conquest. But the conflation of these two meanings may be residually reflected in Chaucer's use of *hom* in these instances to refer both to a particular house and to it and those around it in a limited area (Troy, the Parson's parish).

Other than these instances, the one specialized, the other ambiguous, when Chaucer uses the word *hom* in the prepositional phrase *at hom*, he means "native dwelling." Three examples will suffice to make this point, although many others could be adduced. In *The Clerk's Tale*, Griselda vows to see the procession of the marquise, but first "wol I fonde / To doon at hoom" (E.283-284); in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Calchas bemoans his loss of "a

doughter that I lefte, allas! / Slepyng at hom" (4.92-93); and earlier in the Wife's *Prologue*, she complains to her niggardly old husband, "I sitte at hoom, I have no thrifty clooth" (D.238).

But more trouble, I suspect, has been given to modern readers by the phrase *to bord* than by *at hom*. *Bord* is a word that has become restricted in its meaning in this type of context since Chaucer's time, even as *hom* has been extended. In the fourteenth century, *bord* was a noun meaning "meals," as in the phrase "bed and board," a transfer of the original meaning, "table," itself extended from "wooden plank (used as a table)." The meaning "pay money for meals at a fixed rate" had not yet arisen, nor had the word developed a verb form. *OED*'s earliest citations for this meaning (and for the verb) are from the sixteenth century. Such phrases as *maken bord* or *gon to bord* mean simply "to eat meals," as in this sentence from *The Book of Margery Kempe*: "he led hem wjth hym to be place per he went to boorde" (102/31),⁴ or this from a fourteenth-century *Ancrene Riwe* (ms. Pepys 2498, Magdalene College, Cambridge):⁵ "Summe ances maken her boord wip her gestes" (183/7-8), both cited by *MED* (s.v. *bord*, 5[c]). John, the carpenter in *The Miller's Tale* "that gestes heeld to bord" (A.3188), probably collected money from them but that implication is made by the word *gestes* (and confirmed by the use fifteen lines later of *hostelrye* to refer to John's house) not by the word *bord*.⁶ Chaucer uses *geste(s)* here in its original meaning of "stranger," as he does in *Troilus and Criseyde* 2.1111: "Ther is right now come into town a gest, / A Greek espie." That *gestes* also customarily paid is implied in the following lines from *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* concerning the priest who was "so servysable / Unto the wyf, where as he was at table, / That she wolde suffre hym no thyng for to paye / For bord ne clothyng" (G.1014-1017). But that one can *bord* in one's own house (*at hom*) is indicated by many examples in Chaucer, among them this line from the *Wife's Prologue*: "I wolde nat spare hem at hir owene bord" (D.421). When Jankyn is said to have gone *to bord at hom*, the words mean that he lived with his family.

The least understood of the three nouns in the phrases used by Chaucer to place clerk Jankyn is *godsib*, perhaps just because it seems to us so evident. Every Chaucerian knows that the noun *godsib* (*gossib*) originally referred to some sort of relationship like that denoted now by *godparent* or *godchild*, but altered its meaning to what the *OED* defines as "a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk" (s.v. *gossip*, 3), via the transitional meaning of "familiar acquaintance, friend, chum" (s.v. *gossip*, 2). But it is important to realize that the earliest citations in *OED* for the word's fully debased meanings are from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the fourteenth century, the ordinary reference of *godsib* was still to a baptismal sponsor.

Moreover, Middle English *godsib* meant not "one's own godparent," but "the godparent of one's child." In the Middle English *Lai le Fraine*, two knights who are great friends each marry, and the lady of one gives birth to twin boys, whereupon her husband sends a messenger to his best friend to "say he schal mi gossibbe be" (42).⁷ Chaucer's Parson, defining the types of lechery, says that "certes, parentele is in two maneres, outhur goostly or fleshly; goostly, as for to deelen with his godsibbes. For right so as he that engendreth a child is his fleshly fader, right so is his godfader his fader espritueel. For which a womman may in no lasse synne assemblen with hire godsib than with hire owene fleshly brother" (I.907-908). The comparison adduced by the Parson to a "fleshly brother" makes clear what variety of spiritual relationship is being referred to; a *godsib* is one's contemporary, the generational relationship denoted by the element *-sib*, (*OED*, s.v. *sib*). Dame Alice has at least one male *godsib* as well:

And if I have a gossib or a freend,
Withoute gilt, thou chidest as a feend,
If that I walke or pleye unto his hous!
(D.243-245)

It is interesting that although the *Middle English Dictionary* gives "one's sponsor at baptism or confirmation, a godparent" (s.v. *godsib*, 1[a]) as a distinctive meaning of *godsib*, none of the citations given by the editors unambiguously supports this meaning. Indeed in several, including the lines we are studying from the *Wife's*

Prologue, the reference is clearly to a contemporary person, rather than an elder or a child. Alisoun's "gossib" is not her own godmother, nor even just a friend, but a friend who is (as the lines cited from *Lai le Fraine* and *The Parson's Tale* indicate) a sponsor of her child.⁸ The clue given by this word should at least give pause to those who confidently build interpretations based upon the Wife's "evident" childlessness. I have argued the danger of assuming this view before,⁹ since Chaucer's text neither makes nor should be expected to make any statement one way or the other on the matter, but the lexicographical evidence of *godsib* adds cogent force to my earlier warning.

Sponsorship was defined doctrinally as a kind of binding kinship ritually granted through the sacrament of baptism, but as genuine as the kinship of blood. The medieval Church had severe strictures against marriage between individuals related in this way, extending, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, as far as marriage between children of godfathers and godmothers.¹⁰ Canonically, however, only the sponsor and the person officiating contract the bond with the baptised person which constitutes an invalidating (diriment) impediment to marriage. Thus, *godsib*, like *godparent*, was considered to be a real form of kinship, regarded seriously as such by the Church, and serving to bind ties among medieval families. The relation of *godsib* could be used to cement profitable alliances as well as personal friendships (as in *Lai le Fraine*), and *godsibs* served a variety of useful functions performed also by blood-kin, including helping to arrange marriages. The *Paston Letters* reflect a careful choice and use of *godsibs* in a variety of matters.¹¹ Part of the irony in Alisoun's courtship of Jankyn "for love and no riches," depends on our perceiving the expectation her neighbors would have had for Jankyn's future when his family became allied through the tie of *godsib* to the village's wealthiest widow. Alice implies that she had to use her wiles and snares to land Jankyn all by herself, but her *godsib*'s function during their meetings was more than just that of chaperone. Jankyn's family could hardly have hoped for a better result from their spiritual kinship; indeed the Wife's situation with respect to Jankyn, an ironic reversal of her earlier family-arranged marriages, makes all the more poignant and absurd her initial romantic hopes for this fifth alliance.

Thus, the relationship denoted by *godsib* in the fourteenth century, is an adult one, between friends of the same generation, who sponsor each others' children, a coparenting of spirit as well as blood. A godfather or godmother, by contrast, is called just that. The *MED* cites another manual of sins like *The Parson's Tale*, the fifteenth century allegorical treatise called *Jacob's Well*, which cautions against what it describes vividly as the seventh depth of the slime-pit (*wose*) of lechery, "betwen a man & his gossybe or between godfadyr & goddau 3ter or be[twen] a chyldren of godfadyr & godmodyr" (*Jacob's Well*, 162/6).¹² The *Middle English Dictionary* editors use this quotation as evidence for *godsib* meaning "godparent," but the relationship of "co-parent (in a spiritual bond)" is denoted, distinguished clearly in the quoted text from a "godparent/godchild" relationship.

The fact that close friends were often chosen to be one's children's sponsors is reflected by a secondary meaning of *godsib* in later Middle English, that of 'friend, pal,' especially as a word of address. Thus, Gluttony in *Piers Plowman* is greeted by Betty the brewster as "gossib" (B.5.302), and one of the cautionary tales in *The Book of the Knight of Latour-Landry* turns on the ability of a roper's deceitful wife to enlist her reliable "gossip" in duping her husband.¹³ But neither of these instances clearly excludes the use of the word *godsib* to mean "baptismal sponsor for one's children." The best description of the role of gossips at a medieval baptism remains that of H. S. Bennett in *The Pastons and Their England*. Basing his account upon the conventionalized witnesses found in *post-mortem* inquests, Bennett describes how the midwife took the baby to church for christening, the godparents having been summoned, accompanied by the usual crowd of neighbors (like marriages and all processions, baptisms formed a standard part of parish entertainment), how the ceremony was described afterwards to the mother by the midwife and gossips upon their return from church, and how the remainder of the day was spent in feasting the gossips and neighbors.¹⁴ The *post-mortem* inquests reflect the conventions of the landed classes, since they were held to determine the age of an heir to a tenant-in-chief.¹⁵ The majority from this period which I have examined and which name the baptismal sponsors, name three: two men (usually including a religious who is often the officiating cleric) and a woman in the case of a male child; and two women and a man in the case of a female.¹⁶ The sacrament itself encouraged one sponsor, and allowed two, although several of the age-proofs

mention only the priest who did the baptism (his spiritual kinship to the child was conferred by the sacrament). In a small village, the network of kinship formed through the *godsib* tie could have been quite extensive.

Let me summarize what lines 527-530 of the *Wife's Prologue* tell us about clerk Jankyn: he is from a local family "of biside Bathe," sent off to Oxford for a short time but now returned home to live with his family (and work for little reward as parish clerk). The Wife of Bath is closely connected through the tie of *godsib* with one of Jankyn's close female relatives, most likely his mother, since she is the female relative commonly found *at hom*. Furthermore, the mothers of medieval families customarily had charge of arranging the marriages for their offspring (with the father's final approval), and Alisoun's wealth, once the impediment of her fourth husband is removed, would make her a most attractive candidate. The very coziness and familiarity of the arrangements implied in lines 527-530 help to set up Alisoun's eventual comic fall when Jankyn proves to be less tractable than he at first seems. Our understanding of these arrangements is essential to our ability to interpret with some correctness what the text suggests the circumstances of Alisoun's fifth marriage to be, and the rich social context evoked by the *experience* recounted in her *Prologue*.

Notes

1. All textual references are to F. N. Robinson, ed. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd edition (Boston, 1957)
2. On the significance of this crucial detail of her portrait, see my article, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," *PMLA* 94 (1979), 209-222.
3. J. Byrchmore, "Medieval and Elizabethan Bath," *The Book of Bath* (Bath, 1925), p. 59; see also Austin J. King and B. H. Watts, *The Municipal Records of Bath, 1189-1604* (London 1885), especially pp. 12-27, for an account of earliest charters and other records of the town. They note (p. 27) that Bath "was a very considerable centre of the West of England wollen trade," a weaver's shuttle forming part of the arms of the priory.
4. S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen, eds., *The Book of Margery Kempe, EETS* o.s. 212 (London, 1940).
5. A. Zettersten, ed., *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe, EETS* o.s. 274 (London, 1976).
6. John's house is called both an *hostelrye* (A.3203) and an *in* (A.3622).
7. M. Wattie, ed., *The Middle English Lai le Fraine*, Smith College Studies in Modern Language, 10 (Northampton, Mass: Smith College, 1929); see also line 50.
8. The case of *godsib* affords a particularly clear instance of the philological uncertainty principle at work. Even after ruling out its evidently unmedieval meanings, as I have just done, there is still the uncertainty left in the fact that while the word *godsib* denotes a relationship of sponsorship among individuals of the same generation, it does not seem to refine further whether the relationship referred to in a given context is that of (a) two godparents of the same child; (b) the parent of a child one is sponsor to; or (c) the sponsor of one's own child. All three refinements are possible instances of *godsib*-hood. In glossing Alisoun's casual reference to "my gossib" as 'the sponsor of her child,' I give the most probable meaning of the word as used in the surviving evidence of the fourteenth century in contexts like this one, for while there are several instances of individuals addressing as *mi godsib* a person who is certainly a sponsor for one of their own children, there are none I have found in which either of the other two varieties of *godsib* is as certainly intended.
9. See my article, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions," 221, note 31.
10. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica, Supplement* Q. 56; cf. the quotation from *Jacob's Well* which occurs later in this essay. The canonical status of the spiritual kinship conferred by baptismal sponsorship is defined in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. *sponsors* (New York, 1967-74).

11. For example, in a 1475 petition to Edward IV begging his aid in recovering the manor of Caister, John Paston II refers to an earlier successful intercession by his "gossib þe Bisshop of Wynchestrē"; Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, (London, 1971), l.488.
12. A. Brandeis, ed., *Jacob's Well, EETS* o.s. 115 (London, 1900).
13. References are to G. Kane and E. T. Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version* (London, 1975), and to Thomas Wright, ed., *The Book of the Knight of Latour-Landry, EETS* o.s. 33 (London, 1906).
14. H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England* (1922; rpt. Cambridge, 1968), p. 194.
15. Edgar B. Graves, *A Bibliography of English History to 1485* (London, 1975), p. 627.
16. Of one representative group of 18 such proofs of age, fourteen list the heir's baptismal sponsors. All fourteen give three names; in the case of the thirteen males, the pattern is invariably two men and one woman, whereas in the case of the one female heir two women and a man are listed: William D. Cooper, ed., "Proofs of Age of Sussex Families, temp. Edw. II to Edw. IV," *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (Sussex Archaeological Society) 12 (1860), pp. 23-44. The form of these proofs was quite conventional in nature--see the separate notes by R. C. Fowler and M. T. Martin, *English Historical Review* 22 (1907), 101-103, 526-527; certainly the number of sponsors, their gender and social class would seem to have become conventional among the gentry subjects of the recorded inquests by the fifteenth century, for the earlier proofs display greater variation. The extent to which this change reflects the growth of a social convention or the development of an official formula cannot, of course, be exactly determined; undoubtedly some combination of the two factors is involved. A translation of most such proofs is to be found, *passim.*, in the *Calendar of Inquisitions Post-Mortem (Henry III-Richard II)*, 15 vols. (London: H.M.S.O., 1904-70); by no means all list the baptismal sponsors, but of those which do, the pattern shown in the Sussex proofs prevails, although it is by no means universal. In about half the proofs from the early years of Edward III's reign, the fact of baptism is recorded with no sponsors' names given besides that of the priest; in several proofs for male heirs the two godfathers only are recorded, one being the officiating cleric who was always godfather (and thus *godsib* to the parents). In general, the later the date, the more apt one is to find the names of a full set of godparents listed in addition to the priest. Very few of these proofs from any period are for female children; fewer still list the names of their sponsors, but when they do the names are usually those of women. One can deduce from this pattern of evidence a custom of naming male sponsors for male children, females for females, and on occasion, the naming of a full set of godparents for children of both sexes, this last practice becoming more frequent in the documents as one moves into the fifteenth century.

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