

## Authority in Middle English Proverb Literature

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Proverbs are one method by which an ideology can be taught. They are pithy, memorable phrases and sentences that encapsulate guidance for behaviour in ethical situations or a particular view of the way the world functions or ought to function. If an individual saying becomes proverbial, it becomes part of the "common sense" and ideology of the culture in which it is used, a means by which people can be made to behave and perceive according to verbal reflexes, without recourse to thought (Cram 90-92). But if any piece of language is to affect the way people think and behave, it has to have authority. Folk proverbs carry their own authority within themselves. They do not need a source attribution for their validity; if everyone in the speech community recognises them as 'proverbial,' then the tradition behind them in itself gives them authority. Political and religious institutions, especially authoritarian ones, have long been aware of the power of the proverb to influence behaviour. In the medieval church, this acknowledgment sometimes took the form of the collection of popular proverbs by the clergy for the use of all,<sup>1</sup> and at other times was manifested in the use of vernacular proverbs in the text of Latin sermons (Wenzel 80). But another possible reaction is to create new 'proverbs' which are more conducive to the ideology of the institution, in contrast to the undependable and sometimes ambiguous morality of folk proverbs, either by composing them or by finding them in written sources. Dictators like Mao Zedong have attempted to proverbialise their own sayings, which the populace is forcibly taught to mouth and bear in mind, so that it will behave and perceive in ways that are acceptable to authority. There is evidence that the English church also attempted to create its own body of proverbs during the Middle English period, for a substantial body of literature survives from that time which consists of lists of proverbial advice. Much of this literature appears to be an attempt to make use of the concept of the proverb, which had an oral tradition that went back to pre-literate,

and pre-Christian times, but in a way more reliably conducive to a world-view and behaviour consistent with Christian dogma. These sayings were not really proverbial in the traditional sense, but more like direct, straight-forward instruction or advice. However, they seem nevertheless to have been regarded as 'proverbs' at the time, whether they originated with the church or not (Louis). In any case, because the new proverbs lacked the automatic authority of popular proverbs, they had to be framed in contexts which attempted to substitute a different kind of moral authority for the 'proverbial' utterances. These legitimising contexts were basically three: the domestic circumstance of a parent instructing a child; the more public situation of a ruler or philosopher instructing the people; and *florilegia*-like collections in which numerous utterances are attributed to various figures of history.

Our subject, then, is the collections of proverbs and precepts that survive from the period 1100-1485, with a focus on the contexts in which they are sometimes framed, in order to assess what at this time were perceived to be the proper circumstances within which moral advice should be taught. Of course, this type of context is not common to all proverbial works from the period, and in fact some consist of mere lists of sayings and injunctions, with no context at all. In other cases, as we shall see, the framing device may only be alphabetical order (presumably to facilitate memorisation), or is somewhat token and hardly a thoroughly integrated part of the piece. In general, it is true that many of these collections only have a literary context in the most generous sense of the term, and many would argue that "pretext" is a more appropriate term. In many cases, the supposed motivation for the unorganised lists of advice disappears less than one rhyming couplet into the poem. However, even these thin veneers of literary unity are important clues to attitude, for they tell us the circumstances under which such advice might conceivably have been ingested in the Middle Ages.

### *Proverbial Works of Parental Authority*

Many of the medieval collections of proverbs and precepts are collected together under the pretext of parental instruction. It appears that this type of framing device for proverbial lore has in fact a long history in the literatures of the past, especially in Near Eastern and Old Irish culture (Hansen 41-4).<sup>2</sup> This context for the use of proverbs is common to many cultures, and appears to be an inherent part of the politics of proverbs, as a discourse situation in which the speaker puts him/herself into a superior position *vis à vis* the listener (Arora 5-6). An example from Old English is the poem

called *Precepts*, or *A Father's Instructions to his Son*. Among the works in Middle English, one notes a few important variables. First, the degree to which the framing device is exploited, or is merely a half-hearted pretext, varies according to the individual work. Secondly, some of the advice in these works is of a very specific and practical nature, while other advice is less straightforward and more metaphorical. These variables do in fact seem to work in tandem with each other: in general, the greater the use of the framing device, the more straightforward and specific the advice proffered. We will examine first the framing devices in these poems, then the content.

At one extreme, we have the so-called "ABC Moralities," of which there are two in Middle English. In the first of these poems, which begins "Att my begynning Criste me spede,"<sup>3</sup> the framing device, such as it is, is not introduced from the beginning, for the primary aim of putting the sayings in alphabetical order takes precedence. However, the parent/offspring nature of the situation appears in the manner in which some of the advice is given. The second stanza reads,

Bewarre, my sonne, off hadde-i-wiste;  
 itt ys harde to knowe whome thou may truste.  
 A trustye frende ys harde to fynde,  
 for hadde-i-wyste commethe euer by-hynde (ll. 5-8).

A later stanza also addresses a juvenile reader (although of course the word "childe" could also refer to a young man):

Othes, my childe, loke thou non swere,  
 nor false wyttensse loke thou non beire (ll. 53-4).

However, fifteen of the twenty stanzas of the poem make no overt mention of a child or offspring being addressed, nor is there anything in the initial words of the poem to suggest the advice is so intended. Indeed, the first stanza is uncharacteristically directed inward:

Att my begynning Criste me spede  
 in grace and vertue to procede,  
 soo that I may through vertue & grace  
 fenishe my matter to my purpasse (ll. 1-4).

On the other hand, most of the proverbs can still be seen as having a potentially

condescending tone, and the intermittent reminders of the audience do have the cumulative effect of drawing a picture of parental advice.

The other "ABC Morality" occurs in the margins of a printed copy of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De proprietatibus rerum*.<sup>4</sup> Like its compatriot, this ABC poem consists of a series of quatrains, each giving advice on a moral issue and beginning with succeeding letters of the alphabet. Although it is very similar in much of its wording, the poem less certainly belongs to the category of parental advice, for only one of the surviving nineteen stanzas refers to a definite audience:

Beware my son ever of had I wylt  
 hard ys to know who oen may trust  
 A trusty freynd ys hard to fyend  
 non ys more fain than oen unkyend (ll. 13-16).

However, it does have a prologue which, although not mentioning parental advice, seems to show that the form of the poem suggests it was originally addressed to children, although adults are being asked to pay heed as well:

Here foloyth a proper trefyse  
 Althoughe yt goo by a b c  
 yet in yt gud reason ys  
 Rede yt over and ye shall se (ll. 1-4).

In fact, the wording seems to indicate that the medieval attitude to alphabetisation was similar to our own, that is, that it is a pedagogical device suitable for young children.

There is one other extant poem from the Middle English period that has textually much in common, although it too has minimal framing material. Called "A Father's Counsel to his Son" in *IMEV*,<sup>5</sup> but labelled simply "Proverbus" in the manuscript, the poem is neither alphabetised nor introduced with a framing device. It is even uncertain that each pair of couplets is intended to form a stanza, as some advice appears to overlap from one couplet to the next, but other advice seems to be restricted to one rhyme. The motivation for including this poem as parental advice lies in the fact that in three cases the maxims are addressed to "Son" or "My son," although once the term "Man" is used as well. There is some textual overlap between this poem and the ABC Moralities, which more clearly have a juvenile audience. This overlap might lead us to

suspect that a parental tone is intended here as well.

With these poems, which refer to the audience as an offspring in incidental nouns of address, we must be careful, for such terms of address do not unambiguously denote a parent-child relationship. In the Middle Ages (as in some cases in our own time), "son" or "daughter" could also be used by non-parental elders, such as schoolmasters, or priests. There is in fact a fourteenth-century poem in which the purveyor of advice is identified in the manuscript as a "Doctor" (i.e. teacher), but who nevertheless addresses his charges as "Dowȝteryn," "My childre," and "Sones."<sup>6</sup> In any case, proverbs are often spoken from the point of view of an elder and superior, whether literally a parent or not.

More definitely-drawn situations in which parental advice is proffered do occur in other poems. The most detailed example is the poem entitled *How a Wyse Man Tauȝht hys Sone*, which exists in six manuscript copies.<sup>7</sup> One version begins with an explicit description of the intent of the poem:

Lordynges, and ȝe wyll here  
 How A wyse man tauȝht hys sone,  
 Take god hede to þis matere,  
 And fynd to lerne it yff ȝe canne. *fynd: try*  
 þis songe for ȝonge men was be-gone,  
 To make them trew and stedfaste;  
 For ȝerne þat is euylle spone, *erne: eagerly*  
 Euylle it comes out at þe laste.

Yt was A wyse man had A chyld  
 Was fully xv wynter of Age,  
 Of maneres he was meke and myld,  
 Gentyll of body and of vsage;  
 By-cause he was his faderes Ayere,  
 His fader þus on þis langage  
 Tauȝht his sone wele and feyre,  
 Gentyll of kynd and of corage (ll. 1-16).<sup>8</sup>

This introduction demonstrates that the sort of advice given in the poem is meant to be passed on from a father to a son who is at an adolescent age, but nevertheless in the Middle Ages was expected to display a greater degree of maturity than is expected

today. It is also noteworthy that the speaker is characterised not only as a father, but (twice) as a wise man, and the audience is seen as young men in general. We thus see that the speaker is meant not only as a sign of domestic authority, but as one of public wisdom as well. As we shall see, the idea of the wise man as the dispenser of proverbial and other advice is one that carries over to the other contexts of proverbial and precept literature as well. However, if wisdom is the hallmark of the teacher, we should note that the listener and learner is also twice characterised by an epithet—the word "gentyll." Of course, this word may merely show the emulation of the manners of the aristocracy by the middle classes, but it also implies that a passive, accepting attitude on the part of the listener is as important to the learning process as the wisdom of the speaker.

Another framing technique that is used is what we may call the reiterative style, which, as we shall see, is more often associated with the proverbs of wise men rather than of parents. This is the repetition of a formula preceding the pronouncement of a proverb or precept. One of the texts of *How the Wise Man Taught his Son*<sup>9</sup> begins most stanzas with "And Sonne." This formulaic repetition may be seen as a means of reinforcing the relationship of dominance, of which the giving of proverbs and precepts forms a part.

Both an introductory framing setting and the reiterative style is used in *Myne Awen Dere Sone*,<sup>10</sup> a poem of 958 lines found only in British Library MS Cotton Vespasian D.xiii (f. 18). The poem opens with a sketch of the hypothetical situation:

Myne awen dere sone, and þou will lere,  
 Of syndry wittis and þou will here,  
 And how þat þou lyfe may lede,  
 Therfore to this buke I sall the schewe  
 How þou sall þyself knawe,  
 And dyuerse folyes to forsake  
 And witte and wisdom to þe take.  
 And if þou do this buke biddyng,  
 It sall the vayne to thy livyng,  
 And þerfore, for my benysoun,  
 Halde euere this buke in mensyoun (ll. 1-11).

vayne: avail

benysoun: blessing

This introduction is notable, however, for the fact that it does not have specific application to the parent-child relationship, a feature that continues throughout the

text of the poem. We should also note the exceptional reference to "this buke," indicating that the framing device is not merely the pretext for an imagined monologue. Indeed, the suggestion of a definite literary transmission of the teaching as opposed to an imaginary oral one is quite different from the usual in this type of literature. Unlike many of the other poems that start off with a framing device, this one also concludes with a reminder of the context:

Sere wittys, sone, hafe I here talde.      *Sere wittys*: several pieces of wisdom  
 And þou in herte will þame halde,  
 Grete honour þereof sall þou gete  
 Whare-euere þou come, and profet grete.  
 Sone, of my blissynge I the bede  
 Now to this buke þou take gude hede  
 And hafe it hartly in thy mynde:  
 þerein grete profet sall þou fynde;  
 And all þat herys or will it rede,  
 Goddis blissynge hafe thay to þer mede (ll. 949-58). *mede*: reward

If anything, however, this conclusion (especially the closing couplet) reinforces the impression that the advice in the poem is not necessarily restricted to the situation of the framing device. Moreover, the majority of the stanzas of the poem begin with a variation on the formula, "Another witte I sall teche the." And while this reiteration may seem monotonous, the noticeable thing is that the author has gone to some trouble to provide some variation at all, in contrast to the word-for-word formulas of the *Proverbs of Alfred* or the *Proverbs of Hendyng*. Some examples:

Another witte withowten fabel  
 I sall the lere full resonabell (ll. 63-4).  
 Another witte I will þe schewe;  
 þarfore take hede vnto my sawe (ll. 145-6).  
 Another witte I sall discrye  
 þat þou sall have gret profet by (ll. 657-8).

There are a number of such introductions that consist of less than a couplet, but the fact remains that the context of the advice is continually reinforced by a formula, and there is also an attempt by the speaker to provide at least partially interesting variation within the repetition.

In the fourteenth-century British Library MS Harley 7322, a series of proverbs in rhyming couplets, "The King's Letters to his Son," are introduced with a rubric:

Fulgencius in gestis romanorum: quidam rex duos habuit filios quorum senior cum patre in pallacio fuit; Iunior vero in castro pernoctavit periculo. cui pater litteras 5. transcripsit. prima erat ista, sic:

[Fulgencius in the *Gesta Romanorum*: a certain king had two sons, of whom the elder was with his father in the palace; the younger in truth spent the night in a dangerous camp. The father copied out five letters for the latter. The first was thus:]

sine & folye only for-sake;  
to clenness of lif, for mi oue tac.

*one tac*: take yourself

2a fuit ista, sic:

loue god boþe wit herte & þout.  
for to his licnesse þou art wrout.

3a erat ista, sic:

wit-outin loue þou art lorn;  
wose hat nout loue, were bettre on-born.

4ta erat ista sic:

of al þi wele i bidde non oþer,  
bot loue me wel, as dot þi broþer.

vel sic:

of al þi richesse i bidde no more,  
bot loue me wel for euere more.

5ta erat ista.

Come nou, my swete chilt, wan þou come wilt,  
for redi is þin heritage, & forgouin is þi gilt (ll. 1-22).<sup>11</sup>

In this example, the proverbs and precepts are being communicated for the purpose of being committed to memory, although some of the verses are merely straightforward orders. However, in spite of the martial setting of the poem, the content of the precepts emphasises love of God and love within the family, and suggests a very warm and personal parent-child relationship. The fact that the parent is named as king shows that we are not altogether divorced from the wise man-son context.

That the wise man-son relationship was almost taken for granted in this kind of literature, regardless of the actual content of the advice, is shown in another brief lyric,



this one found only in Yale University Beinecke Library MS 163:

The wyse man his sone for bede  
 Masons crafte and all clymbynge,  
 And shipmans crafte for perell of dethe,  
 And nye in counsell com to no kynge.  
 For thi mys counsell þu maist hange,                    *mys: wrong*  
 Ther shepe shuld grasce vnder thi too;  
 Better þu were to kys the yatis,  
 And euer be warre or þu be woo (ll. 1-8).<sup>12</sup>

The advice proffered is non-moral, specific, and decidedly middle class: the son is told to avoid dangerous manual labour and equally dangerous intrigues at court. However, the author of these lines felt obligated to introduce his advice by using the old wise man-parent formula.

The most extensive of the Middle English parent-child advice poems is the fifteenth-century *Ratis Raving*, a work of 1814 lines in rhyming couplets.<sup>13</sup> However, although the actual content of the poem is quite extensive, the framing device is somewhat brief. The poem begins,

My dere sone, wnderstande this buk,  
 þow study, & reid It oft, and luk,  
 Her sal þow fynd this faþeris entent,  
 To the lefte in amendement.  
 Think þow art growin of hyme memor,                    *memor: mindful*  
 As he of his faþir before,  
 And thinke at thai are neuer dede,  
 Quhill gud memore Is in thare stede: (*Prologue*, ll. 1-8).

The poem continues some lines later,

Fore-thi, my gud sone, wnderstande,  
 And tak this tretys oft in hand,  
 And set weil thar-one thi entent,  
 Quhill þow art yhonged and Innocent:  
 For so lang art þow able alle  
 To grow as tre up gret & small (*Prologue*, ll. 15-20).

There are thus two main points made about the nature of the parent-child relationship, both of which involve the use of proverbial literature. First of all, these teachings are meant to be transmitted from generation to generation and to be committed to memory, thereby serving as a kind of "collective conscience." Thus, the analogies of this kind of literature with oral folklore are suggested. Secondly, the point is made that these teachings are also to be learned in youth, while the learner presumably is still trainable. In one matter, however, *Ratis Raving* must be regarded as atypical of the literature of parental instruction. In the first place, the image of the parent is apparently solely that of a father, with no attempt to present him as a wise man as well. In fact, the title itself seems to deprecate the speaker of the poem, thus showing an anxiety about the credibility of the wisdom that is being communicated. This kind of self-deprecation, which presumably does not result from intended irony, adds to the domesticity and the "folk" aspects of the poem, and may be one symptom of the changes in attitude to authority at work in the fifteenth century. Of course, authorial self-deprecation is not unknown in Middle English literature, but it is exceptional for this type of literature, which appears to rely to such a large extent on the wise or virtuous image of the teacher.

It may be significant that *Ratis Raving* is followed in the only manuscript copy (Cambridge University Library MS Kk.1.5, pt. 6) by two other examples of proverb and precept literature that do adhere to the more traditional image of the givers of wisdom: *The Foly of Fulys and the Thewis of Wysmen* and the *Consail and Teiching at the Vys Man Gaif his Sone*. The former, as we shall see, puts great emphasis on the figure of the "wise man." The latter again uses the wise man-child image, although the only reference to the dramatic situation is in fact outside the poem, in the introductory note or title, "And syne here efter folowis þe consail and teiching at the vyss man gaif his sone" (2. 479-80).<sup>14</sup>

There is another pair of poems making use of the parent-child situation that should be treated separately, as they purport to be advice given by mothers to daughters: *The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage* and *How þe Gode Wyfe Tauȝht hyr Douȝter*. As can be seen from the titles, which are actually direct quotations of lines at the beginning or early on in the text of the poems, the "wise man" of the other parent-child poems corresponds to the "gode wyfe" in these ones. In the first,<sup>15</sup> the situation is that the wife is about to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and wishes to give her daughter guidance for her behaviour during her absence:

The good wyf wold a pylgremage

vnto þe holly londe:  
 sche sayd, "my dere dougʒtur,  
 þou most vndor-stonde  
 For to gowerne well this hous,  
 and saue thy selfe frow schond" (ll. 1-6). *schond*: shame

Unlike in many of the other parent-child poems, the framing device returns at the end of the poem:

Far-well dougʒtur, far-well nowe!  
 I go vn-to my pylgremage;  
 kepe þe wel on my blessinge  
 tyl þou be more of age,  
 let no merth ner lollyte  
 þis lesson frowe þe swage (ll. 157-162). *swage*: assuage

The pilgrimage can be seen as a matter-of-fact reference to the fact that many Christians of the Middle Ages had to leave their secular domestic duties to attend to the important spiritual ones, which occasion is the opportunity for the mother to turn over many of the household duties to her daughter, and also to give some lessons on the subject of sexual modesty. Whether there are any further metaphorical implications to the framing device seems doubtful. Having the speaker about to go on a pilgrimage functions principally to increase the credibility of the mother as someone who is "good."

*How þe Goode Wyfe Taught hyr Dougʒter*<sup>16</sup> begins with a straightforward introduction in the third person:

Lyst and lythe A lytell space,  
 Y schall ȝou telle A praty cace,  
 How þe gode wyfe taught hyr dougʒter  
 To mend hyr lyfe, and make her better (ll. 1-4).

After these unrevealing and general lines, the wife launches straight into her specific advice. At the end of poem, the wife says,

Now I haue taught þee, my dere dougʒter,  
 The same techyng I hade of my modour:

Thinke þer-on both nyght and dey;  
 For-gette them not if þat þou may;  
 For A chyld vn-borne wer better  
 Than be vn-taught, þus seys þe letter (ll. 199-204).

The convention that these pieces of advice have been transmitted through generations is thus repeated in this poem, reinforcing the notion that these poems also have oral folk traditions in their origins. Of course, there is no evidence that these poems were actually written by women, as has been pointed out (Stiller 57-8).<sup>17</sup>

The framing devices of Middle English parental instruction literature thus vary from passing and incidental nouns of address, to full-fledged and continual reminders of the purpose of the teachings. What appear to be constants are the need to keep the poems from being mere domestic situations by frequent reminders of the credibility of the individual parent through the epithets of "wise" for the father and "good" for the mother. Against this "elitist" framework there are also frequent reminders that this sort of wisdom is of a type that is passed down from father to son, usually on the understanding that the offspring will teach the same things to his own children. Thus, homage is paid both to the learned and the folk traditions of wisdom.

The wisdom that is actually taught in these poems of parental advice is somewhat variable, however, and not always suited to the situation specified by the parent-child framing device. This fact may lead us to believe that the framing devices are actually literary pretexts that suggest little as far as the real applicability of the teachings offered is concerned. On the other hand, it may also reveal the extent to which the familial situation was the basis for a very wide range of the education of the children of the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the greatest variety of advice in these poems appears in *Ratis Ravingg*. The substance of this poem is in fact atypical of the Middle English parental instruction poems in that it has a very high religious content and indeed has more in common with works of religious instruction like Peter Idley's *Instructions to his Son*. It is moreover written in the enumerative style common in such works, presumably as an aid to memory. After imploring the son to procure grace, the poem discusses each of the five senses, in some cases using the sense organ as a pretext for a sermon on moral matters. For instance, the description of the sense of taste becomes a disquisition on the tongue and its abuse through hasty speech. There follows a description of the seven principal virtues, and five dangerous "motives" (joy, sorrow, doubt, ire, and youthful

ignorance), after which there is a passage of miscellaneous advice on more secular matters, such as the importance of self-knowledge, the choice of a wife, the conduct of trade business, the proper service of a lord, and behaviour in matters of love. Finally, there is a long treatise on the Seven Ages of Man, which includes moral observations on various subjects appropriate to one or more of the ages (such as reason, beauty, and envy). *Ratis Raving* is thus notable not only for the religious emphasis of its advice, but also for the degree to which its author pays attention to unified literary form and transition.

The disorganising effect of not using religious and ethical enumerations is seen in *Myne Awen Dere Sone*, which at 958 lines is about half the length of *Ratis Raving*, but which nevertheless covers a much wider range of material, and leans much more strongly to the secular side. It is also apparent that the range of advice makes it less likely that the poem is addressed to a specific situation, particularly because much of the advice is contingent in nature. The advice also tends to be very specific. For instance, the first bit of advice, far from being a general overview, is a legalistic exhortation to the effect that one should never put one's land into anyone else's hands while one is alive. This is followed by further legal advice not to let one's heir also be one's executor, or to purchase land illegally. The first two pieces of advice could be seen as initial attempts to put the son at a disadvantage by asserting a relationship of mistrust, but this sort of subtlety may be beyond this type of literature. Interestingly enough, the poem does continue on with the matter of relations between parents and children, but in the form of advice to the offspring on how to raise his own children, using the familiar tree image:

bou chasty thayme when thay er ȝyng.            *chasty*: chastise  
 Thorow chastisyng þou may thayme make  
 Bathe synne and foly for to forsake,  
 For als lange as a tre is ȝyng,  
 Men may make it even to spryng  
 þat walde hafe ben a croked tre  
 Hadde nocht men made it even to be (ll. 82-8).

There follow three stanzas on the rearing of daughters, one recommending a stern visage towards them, another advising one not to be too choosy in finding husbands for them, and the last advising against telling secrets to them. The poem then devotes several stanzas to the treatment of associates and friends. In general, the speaker recommends keeping one's counsel and not incurring moral debts. At this point, the

poem ceases to group advice according to subject, and jumps back and forth to various topics, including the treatment of servants, contentment with one's station and one's possessions, the characteristics of a good counsellor, the wise use of riches, and the acceptance of the vicissitudes of Fortune. Throughout, there is a noticeable avoidance of specifically religious subjects, and a notable lack of an organising principle. In terms of content, what is striking is a rather reserved, sometimes almost cynical, attitude to human relationships. We should also note that the advice is given in a rather straightforward way, and with considerable attention to detail and clarity. Traditional folk proverbs are used as well as straight explanation, but they tend to be used as part of a longer explanation, as a kind of clinching manner of expression. For instance, in a stanza preaching good behaviour and the cultivation of true relationships in times of good fortune, these lines are inserted:

And thus men says withowten ende,  
 "þat man is poer þat has no frende" (ll. 943-4).

Even more often, a more extended, usually non-proverbial statement of advice is preceded by a line similar to "The wise man in his booke says þis" (l. 179).

The Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61 version of the poem *How the Wyse man Tauȝht his Sone* is, at a hundred lines, considerably shorter than either *Ratis Raving* or *Myne Awen Dere Sone*, but covers a wider range of material than the latter, and has some discernible sense of form. After the introduction setting the situation, the son is advised of the importance of two basic religious practices: going to Mass daily, and saying prayers. The poem then advises on more practical matters, such as the need to hold one's tongue, and the importance of not verbally abusing one's wife. Then the poem ends with a few stanzas on the vanity of human life and the inevitability of death, for which reason we must turn to Jesus Christ. The poem avoids sticking to the monotonous format of one piece of advice per stanza, and gives a sense of organisation to the poem by framing practical advice within a religious framework. The version of the poem in Lambeth Palace MS 853 is longer (152 lines) and loses much of its sense of unity in the middle of the poem, where it seems to offer random pieces of advice without attention to order.

The *Consail and Teiching at the Vys Man Gaif his Sone* is a longer poem (456 lines) which has neither the one-step-at-a-time procedure of *Myne Awen Dere Sone*, nor the organisation of *How the Wyse Man Tauȝht his Sone*. At the same time, it is definitely a "bookish," explanatory sort of work, and not a series of proverbs listed together for

easy memorisation. It has no introduction, as we have seen, other than a manuscript rubric, but launches forthwith into specific advice, namely the importance of seeking good company. It may be relevant that the next lines deal with the subject of how one must speak well and avoid lying, but the following section deals with the unrelated subject of service to a master, and later with the choice of a wife. All along are interspersed other bits of advice on such subjects as honesty, helping the poor, and the giving of gifts. Only at the end of the poem do we have some sense of appropriate form, as the poem turns to more religious themes, such as the importance of reading the Scriptures, obeying the Ten Commandments, and accusing oneself as a defence against the devil. It is thus difficult to say what we have in this poem, which is too discursive and comprehensive to be a model for oral memorisation, yet has little sense of order or form, and has almost no framing device.

It is important to turn to the two poems specifically written for mothers and daughters to see whether there is a substantial difference in the type of teachings offered. We have to consider the fact that the poems were likely not written by women, and such a difference in content probably indicates significant facts about men's attitudes towards women in the Middle Ages. Although there is considerable overlap with the content of those poems written for sons, there are also significant differences in emphasis in the mother-daughter poems. In general, the mother-daughter works are much less philosophical, a fact which probably reflects the lower opinion of the female intellect which was not unusual in medieval writings. Moreover, the poems emphasise practical, household matters, as well as the importance of feminine reputation and chastity. And while humility is advised for the male offspring as well, there is much more unqualified stress on this virtue in the mother-daughter poems.

*The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage* from the third line summarises this restricted range of teaching:

. sche sayd, "my dere doçttur,  
     þou most vndor-stonde  
 For to gowerne well this hous,  
     and saue thys selfe frow schond" (ll. 3-6). *schond*: shame

The daughter's range of activity is thus limited to domestic duties and sexual reputation. The next seven stanzas are devoted to how to avoid attracting attention from men:

And rene þou not fro hous to house  
 lyke a nantyny gryce; *nantyny gryce: 'Anthony pig'*  
 For þe yonge men cheres the,  
 they wyll sey þou art nyce,  
 And euery boy wyll wex bold  
 to stere þe to lovd wysse (ll. 15-20).

The daughter is likewise advised not to show herself "to proude," not to hang her girdle too low or to show her hose, not to laugh too lightly, and not to sit with men alone or tell lies to them. The lines that follow are not so specifically addressed to women alone, advising against frequent changing of friends, swearing, flattery, slander, and too much drinking. There is, however, another warning against activity that exposes a woman to the gaze of men:

Ren not a-bout in eueri pley,  
 nor to tawern in toвне (ll. 135-6).

This almost wholly negative advice is set within a stanza form which ends a tale-rhyme "Witt a O & I," followed by another variable line, plus a final rhyming couplet embodying a proverbial saying. For instance, the stanza warning against lying ends, "A follis bolt ys son I-schot, / and dothe but lyttyll gode" (ll. 95-6). The effect of this type of stanzaic form is to give the poem a more song-like and less literary quality, and to place it more strongly in the oral tradition. Whether or not this quality results from a patronising sense that women need more assistance to retain teachings is open to debate.

*How þe Gode Wyfe Taught hyr Douȝter* is less formally appealing, and has no consistent stanzaic form, but it too puts great emphasis on "feminine" virtues. After reference to basic religious devotions, the poem goes on to exhort the daughter to be meek in her relations with her husband:

What man þat þee doth wedde with ryng,  
 loke þou hym loue A-bouen Alle thinge;  
 Yf þat it forteyne þus with the  
 That he be wroth, and angry be,  
 loke þou mekly ansuere hym,  
 And meue hym noþer lyth ne lymme; *lyth: limb*  
 And þat schall sclake hym of hys mode;



Than sschall þou by hys derlynge gode (ll. 33-40).

Moreover, the daughter is told, "Byde þou at home, my douȝter dere," and not to go to market, taverns, or cock-fights. There is the familiar concern over a woman's reputation in the advice not to make friends with all men or to take gifts from them. There is also considerable stress on practical domestic advice:

Be þou, douȝter, A hous-wyfe gode,  
 And euer-more of mylde mode.  
 Wysely loke thi hous And men-ege; *men-ege: household*  
 The beter to do þei schall be (ll. 123-6).

The poem even encourages the presumably middle-class listener to pitch in with the chores under certain circumstances:

And if þat thy nede be grete,  
 And in þe country courne be stryte, *stryte: scarce*  
 Make An hous-wyfe on thy-selue,  
 Thy bred þou bake for hous-wyfys helthe.  
 Amonge þi seruantes if þou stondyne,  
 Thy werke it schall be soner done;  
 To helpe them sone þou sterte,  
 For many handes make lyght werke (ll. 147-54).

It seems, however, that there is specific advice directed to women in these poems, most of which concentrates on the need for them to be obedient, as well as chaste and sexually faithful.

What then are we to make of the literature of parental instruction? To some extent this material overlaps very much with that of medieval courtesy books, especially when the advice strays far from the moral and becomes very specific and practical. However, the principal content of these poems is moral guidance. And unlike that of the courtesy books, the audience of these poems is not necessarily as specific as the framing devices seem to imply, for the content could just as easily be addressed to a much older audience, and not necessarily by a parent. What may be happening here is that the framing devices are simply a throw-back to the traditional proverb situation of oral tradition, that of a parent addressing a child. By the time these poems were written, the proverb had definitely strayed into many other discourse contexts. Thus the

framing devices may only have been token and not reflective of the real purposes of the poems, that of preserving precepts in long, memorisable lists. This possibility is less likely, however, in the case of the mother/daughter poems, in which the advice is much more specifically addressed to young women. But it is clear from these works that proverbial advice was seen as something passed down from a position of dominance and authority, in this case, domestic.

### *Proverbial Works Attributed to an Historical Authority*

We have seen that, even in a domestic context, the source of moral and practical advice had to be a credible one, either a "wise" man or a "good" woman. We see the importance of credibility even more graphically in the case of works where the advice is attributed to one or more figures of history. The importance of the credibility of the source of moral advice is shown in the concluding portion of the series of moral poems in Cambridge University Library MS Kk 1.5, part 6, after *The Thewis of Gud Women*, where the author (not specified as a woman) sums up perhaps the whole manuscript:

Now have I tald ȝow mine awyssh  
 How ȝe suld know men that are wyssh,  
 And also ful men in sum party,  
 Be sindry poyntis generaly;  
 And also of sindry documentis  
 To scharp ȝong men in thar ententis;      *scharp*: keen  
 Of wysmen that before has ben,  
 And mekil honor knowin & sen,  
 Quhilk thai drew out throw thare gret wyt,  
 And efter maid seir bukis of It:  
 Quhar It lay, as in myne the gold.  
 Quhat thank serf I bocht It gud bee?      *serf*: deserve  
 Sen gudnes cummys nocht of me,  
 Bot of thir worthi mennis sawis,  
 That fyrst maid profecy & lawis (ll. 295-310).<sup>18</sup>

This passage is, of course, a conventional authorial apology for inadequacies, but it also emphasises that the wisdom contained therein comes from men that were wise and worthy (not from parents), whose teachings are time-honoured and written down in books. The moral authority of philosophers and scholars is thus emphasised.

Beginning with works in which the advice is attributed to a single historical figure, we must first distinguish between those works whose attribution is due to translation from a source in another language (such as the *Distichs of Cato*), and those whose attribution is clearly a rhetorical strategy, designed to lead the reader to believe that the teachings originate with an individual renowned for wisdom. The best known of these so-called proverb collections is the twelfth-century *Proverbs of Alfred*.<sup>19</sup> The text as we have it in its most complete form appears to be a combination of one poem consisting of the wisdom of a wise king, and another consisting of parental instruction. The first part, which makes up thirty of the thirty-four verse paragraphs of the poem, is assigned a solemn political setting, like that of the Anglo-Saxon *witenagemot*:

At siforde  
 setin kinhis monie.  
 fele biscopis.  
 7 fele booc-lerede.  
 herles prude  
 7 cnites egleche (ll. 1-6). *egleche*: bold

We thus see that the audience itself, far from being children, is established as one consisting of wise and learned nobility, and the setting is one of dignity and importance, far from the simple domestic settings of parental instruction. The credentials of the giver of wisdom are even more significant to the poem and are spelled out fully as well. Although it is now generally accepted that the connection of the poem with the historical King Alfred is tenuous, the fact that the author chose this figure as his speaker is an important part of the rhetorical strategy of the poem. In fact, Alfred's reputation as a giver of proverbs is attested to in the writings of Ailred of Rievaulx (Arngart, *Proverbs of Alfred* 4). The rest of the first verse paragraph of the poem is devoted to characterising Alfred by a series of epithets:

þer was erl alfred  
 of þe lawe suiþe wis. *suiþe*: very  
 7 heke alfred  
 englene herde.  
 Englene derling:  
 In enkelonde he was king.  
 Hem he gon lerin:  
 so ȝe muȝen i-herin.  
 whu ȝe ȝure lif

lede sulin.

Alfred he was in enkelonde a king:

wel *suiþe* strong 7 lufsum þing. *suiþe*: very

He was king 7 cleric:

ful wel he louede godis werc.

He was wis on his word:

7 war on his werke.

He was þe wisiste mon:

þad was in engelonde on (ll. 7-24).

This passage, of course, addresses the reader with regard to the situation: we are to witness what happened on this solemn occasion and hear for our purposes "whu ge ȝure lif / lede sulin." The reader is thus asked to take a humble tertiary role and to benefit as best he can, although he is presumably inferior to both the speaker and the primary audience. However, the major interest in this passage is the manner in which the image of Alfred is built up and given credibility. In this one stanza, the word "wis" or "wisiste" is used three times, and he is twice described as the king of England, the emphasis thus falling on the connection between his authority and his ability to teach wisdom. The mention of Alfred as one versed in the law also lends a kind of law-giving air to the proceedings, and tends to blur the distinction between the king's legal pronouncements and his moral teachings. As well, the words "derling" and "lufsum" are thrown in, balancing the austere image of the wise teacher and king with one of endearment. We thus see an image similar to that in the instructional situation of the parent and child, but with a different emphasis. Finally, the piety of Alfred is also mentioned as part of his qualifications. Once the series of precepts has begun, the original situation is not recalled except in the reiterative formula at the beginning of each stanza, which is always "þus quad alfred," with variations only in spelling. The repetition of this formula also increases the authority of the sayings and gives them a sense of being inviolable words which must be obeyed. Moreover, within the actual advice there are references to the position of the king and the authority that he wields, particularly in stanza three:

May no riche king

ben onder crist selue.

bote ȝif he be booc-lerid.

7 hi[s] writes well kenne.

7 bote he cunnie letteris

*kenne*: knows how

*cunnie*: knows

lokin him-seluen:  
 wu he sule his lond  
 laweliche holden (ll. 63-70).

The point here made once again, this time within the actual text of the advice, is that the principal quality of the king is his wisdom. Implied here also is the importance of the church, which controlled literacy at the time. This attempt to support the credibility of the putative author of the poem is all the more interesting because it is quite fraudulent. Arngart has shown that the real source of most of the poem is the *Disticha Catonis* (Arngart, *Distichs of Cato*). Thus, whoever composed the *Proverbs of Alfred* (likely a cleric) was falsely attributing the text to an historical personage in order to give it plausibility and credibility.

The actual advice that is given, at least in the early part of the poem, is of a different order than that proffered in the works of parental instruction, because of the difference in situation. After the preliminary religious exhortation to love Christ, which as we have seen often forms an envelope for the less religious material contained in the middle of the text, there is a discussion of the duties of the various parts of society, albeit only those represented at the assembly. The earls and the athelings are told "þe lond to leden / mid lauleiche dedin," while the clerks and the knights must "demen euenliche rict." Even the churls are addressed indirectly, when it is said that the knights must also keep peace and security so that the churl can sow his seeds, mow his meeds, and drive his ploughs. This preliminary statement of duties, of course, is designed to reaffirm the traditional structure of society. However, the instruction that follows is less bound to the situation, and is of a more personal nature. Indeed, much of it after the formal opening is not much different from that given by parents to children in other works. It can be seen that the advice in the *Proverbs of Alfred*, in fact, becomes less formal and more personal as the poem goes on. This structural feature, however, is likely to be less a result of deliberate artistic design than of the fact that the poem as it comes down to us is probably the result of successive additions being made to an original work. Significantly, though, much of the advice still centres on wisdom, as we see in stanza six:

þus quad helfred.  
 Wid-utin wisdo[m]  
 is wele ful vnwrd (ll. 95-7). *vnwrd*: worthless

The rest of the stanza in fact plays off the value of wisdom against that of gold. The

poem thus seeks to validate itself through repetition. We also see in stanza twelve the growing personal tone of the poem, and another attempt to exalt wisdom:

þus quad alfred.	
lustlike lust me	<i>lustlike lust</i> : eagerly listen to
lef dere.	
7 ich her ȝu wille leren	
leue mine.	
wit 7 wisdom.	
þe alle welþe oure-god.	<i>oure-god</i> : surpass
siker he may [sitten].	
7 hwo hem mide senden	<i>senden</i> : are
for þoch his weleþe him at-go:	
is wid ne wen[t] him newere fro.	
Ne may he newir for-farin:	<i>for-farin</i> : suffer
hwo him to fere haueþ	<i>fere</i> : companion
hwilis þat is lif	
lesten may (ll. 187-201).	

Other things that are warned against include the pursuit of wealth or long life, and over-indulgence in sorrow or drink. We have the familiar advice on child-rearing as well, including especially the relevant instruction to train the child while it is young:

þe wile þat hit is litil:	
þu lere him monnis þewis.	<i>þewis</i> : manners
þanne hit is woxin.	<i>woxin.</i> : grown up
he sal wende þer-to.	
þanne sal þe child	
þas þe bet wurþen.	<i>wurþen</i> : become
ac ȝif þu les him welden	<i>welden</i> : possess
al his owene wille:	
þanne he comit to helde:	<i>helde</i> : old age
sore it sal him rewen.	
7 he sal banne þat widt:	<i>banne þat widt</i> : curse that person
þat him first tagte (ll. 227-39).	

As we have seen, this common piece of advice is often a self-justifying part of this type of literature. There is also the familiar antifeminism, although it appears in a more

specific form in this poem. Men are advised not to seek a wife on the basis of physical beauty or wealth, or to disclose too many secrets to their wives. Moreover, idle young women are seen as the source of much trouble, and all women are depicted as dishonest in their words. Friendship is treated in some detail here as well, and in a familiarly cautious manner. The audience is told to avoid telling too many secrets to friends who may later become enemies, and not to assume that any friendship will last forever.

The first part of the poem is brought to a close with some appropriate stanzas on the inevitability of old age and death. Finally, the poem returns to the subject of Christ, which thus serves as an envelope pattern, and, through Christ, the theme of wisdom and learning:

Ne mist þu þi lif	
lengen non wile.	<i>lengen</i> : lengthen
bote al þu it salt leten:	
one lutele stunde	<i>stunde</i> : hour
7 al þi blisse:	
to bale sal i-wurþen.	<i>bale</i> : evil; <i>i-wurþen</i> : become
bote gif þu wurche:	
wille to criste	
for biþeng we	<i>biþeng</i> : bethink
þenne us selwen	
to leden ure lif:	
so god us ginnid leren.	
þenne muþe we wenen:	<i>wenen</i> : expect
þad he us wile wurþen.	<i>wurþen</i> : happen
for swo saide salomon	
þe wise Salomon.	
wis is þad wel dop (ll. 517-34).	

It would be tempting to say that stanzas thirty to thirty-four of the poem continue the personalising pattern. However, these stanzas have the air of being tacked on or added from another poem, not least because they are clearly addressed by a father (still Alfred nonetheless) to a son. Stanza 30 begins, "þus quad alured / sone min swo leue" (ll. 537-8), and stanzas 31-34 have similar formulas. Stanza 30, in fact, establishes a new situation, that of a dying old man addressing his son:

site me nu bisiden

7 hich þe wile sigen  
 soþe (c)weþes. (c)weþes: sayings  
 Sone min ich fele  
 þad min her falewid  
 7 min wlite is wan. wlite: face  
 7 min herte woc woc: weak  
 mine daȝis arren nei done.  
 7 we sulen unc to-delen. unc to-delen: us two separate  
 wenden ich me sal  
 to þis opir werlde  
 7 þu salt bileuen bileuen: remain  
 in alle mine welþe. (ll. 539-51)

However, whether this final part of the poem is an addition or not, we can see that structurally it has a certain appropriateness to the poem. The previous part of the poem ended with the themes of old age and death, and the need for an attitude of humility to confront this part of life. The switch to the domestic setting effects a calmer, less public, atmosphere than was the case at the beginning of the poem, and the passing on of the worldly goods to the son parallels the passing of the wisdom of the king to the next ruler. In this context, the shift in scene from the king at the height of his power to that of the king about to die is no more abrupt a shift in structure than that of *Beowulf*. The actual advice Alfred gives to his son suitably begins with precepts on how to treat his subjects in a merciful way, but then shifts to more personal teachings on how to choose friends and advisers. Somewhat enigmatically, it ends with a stanza (not included in the Cambridge Trinity College text, but in the Oxford Jesus College one) to avoid short, tall, and red men. In any case, this abrupt shift to parental advice seems to indicate that there was not too fine a distinction between parental advice and proverbial advice that is more generally directed.

The teachings given in this poem are presented in a very direct and straightforward manner. Very seldom is the advice cryptic or even proverbial in the traditional sense of the word. When a short proverb is used, its language tends to be unambiguously related to the literal teaching. For example, the stanza which preaches severe disciplining of children ends with the couplet, "for betere is child vnborn / þenne vnborn" (ll. 243-4). The little imagery that appears in the text is quite clearly related to the matter at hand, as, for instance, in these lines preaching moderation in striving:

[S]orge it his to rowen



aȝen þe se-flod:  
 [s]o it his to swinkin  
 again honiselþe (ll. 123-6). *honiselþe*: oneself

This literalness might be surprising in view of the fact that the poem is called the "Proverbs" of Alfred, but we must remember that the title is a modern one. In two of the manuscripts, the poem is called *Dicta Aluredi*,<sup>20</sup> but the Latin word has a broader meaning than that of the English one, and can refer to anything that was originally spoken.

The other famous Middle English "proverb" poem of indigenous origin which seems to be attributed to a credible figure of moral authority is the thirteenth-century *Proverbs of Hendyng*.<sup>21</sup> This poem lacks the formal and well-delineated setting of the *Proverbs of Alfred*, and instead has the teacher address the reader directly:

Mon that wol of wysdam heren,  
 At wyse Hendyng he may lernen,  
 That wes Marcolves sone;  
     Gode thonkes ant monie thewes    *thonkes*: thoughts; thewes: qualities  
     For te teche fele shrewes,       *shrewes*: rascals  
 For that wes ever is wone (ll. 1-6).    *wone*: intention

The speaker is given some historical credibility by being associated with Marcolphus,<sup>22</sup> of course, though it is not clear from other sources exactly who "Hendyng" is, if he is not merely a lexical creation from the Middle English word "hende." The name is another way of validating the speaker as a wise man. In any case, the point is still made within the text that he was a "wise" man, and, although there is nothing more made of the teacher, each stanza has the reiterated "Quoth Hendyng" at the end. Unlike the discursive style of the *Proverbs of Alfred*, however, the *Proverbs of Hendyng* are presented in a clearly delineated form which is almost rigidly adhered to. With a few exceptions, each of the thirty-eight stanzas consists of six lines rhyming aabaab, plus a proverb summing up the sentiment expressed, followed by the "Quoth Hendyng" refrain. The poem also frames its teachings with prayers to Christ, in the first stanza to help us to be "wys," and in the last stanza to save us and bring us to heaven.

The teachings themselves are quite similar to those of many other works of the genre. The ones that concern us include statements that reflect upon the teaching

process itself. Significantly, after the references to Christ that begin many of these works, the substantive teaching begins with a reflection on the value of wisdom itself:

Wyt ant wysdom lurneth <i>gerne</i> ,	<i>gerne</i> : eagerly
Ant loke that none other werne	<i>werne</i> : refuse
To be wys ant hende;	<i>hende</i> : gentle
For betere were to bue wis,	
Then for te where feh ant grys,	<i>feh ant grys</i> : fear & terror
Wher so mon shal ende	
"Wyt ant wysdom is god warysoun."	<i>warysoun</i> : cure
Quoth Hendyng (ll. 15-21).	

Also familiar is the theme which is taken up shortly after, the need to train and educate people when they are young:

Such lores ase thou lernest,  
 After that thou sist ant herest,  
     Mon, in thyne *gouthe*,  
 Shule the on elde folewe,  
 Bothe an eve ant a-morewe,  
     Ant bue the fol *couthe*. *couthe*: known  
 "Whose *gong* lerneth, olt ne leseth;"  
     Quoth Hendyng (ll. 39-46).

After this point, the advice takes a more or less disorganised course through teachings that are largely personal in nature. There are the familiar injunctions to be cautious in speech and content with one's lot in life, as well as advice on the rational choice of a wife. This poem places more emphasis on the avoidance of sin than most, but its overt religiosity is still restricted to the references to Christ at the beginning and end.

Much less is made of the qualities of the speaker in other proverb poems, particularly those which consist of lists of undeveloped proverbs and precepts. The reason may be that in some of these, the historical figure alluded to is a famous non-native figure from the very remote past. For instance, there are several copies of an English "ABC of Aristotle,"<sup>23</sup> of which only some contain a prologue which specifically mentions Aristotle. Even in the prologue, however, there is no attempt to build up the credibility of the philosopher, and he is only mentioned in naming the verses. On the other hand, the prologue does give some support to the importance of learning

the verses:

Who-so wilneþ to be wijs, & worschip desiriþ,  
 Lerne he oo lettir, & looke on anothir  
 Of þe .a. b. c. of aristotil: argue not aȝen þat:  
 It is counsel for riȝt manye clerkis & knyȝtis a þousand,  
 And eek it myȝte ameende a man ful ofte  
 For to learne lore of oo lettir, & his lijf saue;  
 For to myche of ony þing was neuere holsum.  
 Reede ofte on þis rolle, & rewle þou þer aftir;  
 Who-so be greued in his goost, gouerne him bettir;  
 Blame he not þe barn þat þis .a. b. c. made,  
 But wite he his wickid will & his werk aftir; *wite: blame*  
 It schal neuere greue a good man þouȝ þe gilti be meendid.  
 Now herkenep & heerip how y bigynne (ll. 1-13).<sup>24</sup>

These introductory lines seem to indicate that the author himself was aware that the connection with Aristotle was merely a formal one. It is strange, however, that on the one hand the poem is said to have been made by a "barn," while it is also said to be counsel for "riȝt manye clerkis & knyȝtis." It may be that the "making" of the ABC consisted merely of copying it or putting the general concept of the poem into effect, while the main idea behind the text is based on Aristotle's Golden Mean. It is also possible that the word "barn" is not meant to refer specifically to a child, but rather is a generic word for a man, inserted mainly for purposes of the alliteration. Still, the text, consisting as it does of a series of adjectives, three beginning with each letter of the alphabet, has the air of a child's exercise, and the reference to its use by knights and clerks may only be a wishful thought:

A to amerose, to aunterose, ne argue not to myche.  
 B to bolde, ne to bisi, ne boorde to large. *boorde: joke*  
 C to curteis, to cruel, ne care not to sore.  
 D to dul, ne to dreedful, ne drinke not to ofte (ll. 14-17).

Clearly, in any case, the work is so constructed for memorisation.

There are other lines in Middle English which are more in the nature of poetry, but which are attributed to Solomon with similarly perfunctory attention to the character of the giver of wisdom. A poem of thirty-five lines in stanzas rhyming aaaabb

begins thus:

1. Salamon sat & sayde. many soth sawys  
 wordis þat walkys wyde. by wyndowes & by wawys *wawys: waves*  
 he ys pouyr & penyles. þat na gode hawys  
 & litil ys set by. be þis landes lawys  
 with an O & J. qwyllys a man haues owth  
 Cumpany wil with him go. til he be broght to noght (ll. 1-6).<sup>25</sup>

The only further mention of Solomon in the poem comes in a passing reference to him as the supreme example of a "wytty" man; the poem continues with a pattern of four lines of doggerel, followed by a couplet embodying the refrain and a summarising moral. However, although the poem does not exploit the framing device of its speaker, it does have a thematic unity in the actual thoughts expressed, which consist mainly of cynical, and very similar, observations on the nature of material wealth and the effect it has on relations with others. Another poem, known as "Proverbs in Rimed Couplets" (Trinity College O.9.38, f. 70r), consists of thirty lines in rhymed couplets,<sup>26</sup> and begins with the line, "Salamon seyth ther is non accorde / Ther euery man wuld be a lord." However, there is no attempt to make use of Solomon's image to increase the credibility of the poem.

There are other examples of Middle English proverbial verse attributed to an historical personage by virtue of the fact that they are translations from another language, and they have come into English complete with an author named in the source. Notable among these is a verse translation of a twelfth-century Latin letter said to have been written by Bernard of Clairvaux, and called the *Bernardus de cura rei famularis*.<sup>27</sup> For our purposes, the important part of the text is the opening lines, the only original part of the verse paraphrase:

Awtenyk bukys and storis alde and new  
 Be wyss poetys ar tretit, þe quhilk trew,  
 Sum maide for law of god in document,  
 And opir sum for varldly regiment,  
 Expervence throw þam þat men may haffe  
 Off sapience, and sa, amange þe laiffe,  
 A lytil epistile I fande for to comende, *fande: try*  
 Be þe doctor bernarde, and sende  
 To raymwnde knyght of chewalry þe ross:

be forme as he his howsalde sulde contene,  
 And his famele miserabilly sustene,  
 Wyt mony opir virtueus eligant,  
 Rycht necessar to vaike and ignorant (ll. 1-13). *vaike: weak*

This passage places the work squarely in the literary tradition, in spite of the fact that it is also said that the content of the poem applies to domestic affairs. The validity of the work is said to lie in its origins in "Awtenyk Bukys and storis," not in oral tradition, and its goal is "sapience" or wisdom in the reader. However, as in some of the works of parental instruction, the wisdom is not transmitted directly to the reader, but by way of a witnessed dialogue. We can see that in spite of this emphasis on the importance of textual sources for wisdom, not much is made of Bernard himself. The same may be said of the fifteenth-century *Moral Proverbs of Christine de Pisan*.<sup>28</sup> This work is really a list of proverbs, one per couplet, translated from the French by Richard Wydville, first Earl of Rivers. Nothing is made of the authorship of Christine, and the only introductory comment is one couplet:

The grete vertus of our elders notable  
 Ofte to remembre is thing profitable (ll. 1-2).

The poem thus seems to be placed in the literary tradition, but it also appears to call on the reader to commit the advice to memory, a suggestion which is supported by the proverbial/couplet form of the verse.

We have, of course, now entered the realm of actual rather than fictitious authorship, not that the distinction would have been an effective one in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, a different attitude prevails with regard to the most translated of the moral literature of the Middle Ages, the *Distichs of Cato*, of which five Middle English translations were made. It appears that during the Middle Ages "Dionysus" Cato was thought to have been the real author of the *Distichs*, although even that name is probably an echo of the name of Cato the Censor, who, significantly, wrote a series of instructions to his son (Duff and Duff 2.585-6). In any case, the medieval attitude to this work has been the subject of much discussion. The *Distichs* largely received their popularity in the Middle Ages from their wide use in the schools, of course. However, there was also a problem, albeit seldom acknowledged, with the pagan origins of these verses giving moral guidance. We see this concern expressed in the versions based on Everard's Anglo-Norman translation. One of them, in Bodleian Library, Fairfax MS 14, for example, has:

Catoun was a paynym,  
 and na þing knew him  
 in þe cristin fay.  
 in his worde ne writte  
 fande we him neuer ȝitte  
 againis our lay.

*lay*: law

In alle he accordis,  
 and na þing discordis,  
 tille goddis hali writte;  
 after goddis awen rede  
 he mai his life lede  
 þat wille folowe hit.

þe hali gaste be resoun  
 semid in catoun,  
 queþer sa he was;  
 for na goode kunning  
 is in man coming,  
 wiþ-out goddis grace.

gode grante vs grace  
 to folow catouns trace  
 in his teychinge  
 in gode maneris,  
 to be his feris  
 In his wonyng. Amen.<sup>29</sup>

*feris*: companions  
*wonyng*: dwelling

We thus see not an attempt to support the credibility of the supposed author, but rather a token acknowledgment of his pagan background, together with an assertion that there is no contradiction between his morals and those of Christians. It appears that the credibility of Cato as a moralist needed no further support than this. We see some evidence here of the non-Christian basis of much of the specific morality of the Middle Ages. In fact, as we saw while considering the *Proverbs of Alfred*, in some ways the contribution of the *Disticha Catonis* to the proverbial literature of Middle English was more in the way of content rather than authority.

## *Proverbial Works Attributed to Several Authorities*

There are, in addition to these collections of sayings attributed to one historical figure, several large Middle English collections of assorted sayings by various authors. These include Ashby's *Dicta et opiniones diversorum philosophorum*, the four Middle English prose versions of the *Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*, the stanzaic *Proverbs of Diverse Prophets and of Poets and of Other Saints*, and the *Summum sapientiae*. In these works, which in fact have a long medieval tradition in the form of *florilegia* (Deskis 145-9), typically a sage is named and a saying or a number of sayings of the sage are quoted. Of course, at least theoretically these sayings are the words of past authorities. As is well known, the Middle Ages in general respected ancient authorities as the source of knowledge in general, whether moral or otherwise, and in many cases these sayings are genuine nuggets of wisdom from the intellectual tradition of the Western World.<sup>30</sup> However, the attributions to authority in proverbial sayings are very casual, and one is led to suspect that intellectual or religious authority in general is being invoked to bolster the credibility of the sayings—historical accuracy seems not to have been a major concern.

The *Proverbs of Diverse Prophets and of Poets and of Other Saints* also have an interesting prologue:

Cher amys, receuez de moy  
 Vn ben present ke vous envoy,  
 Nunpas de or ne de Argent,  
 Mes de bon enseignement;  
 Ki en escripture ai troue  
 E de latin translate  
 En commun langage pur amis  
 Ke de clergie ne ount a-pris.  
 Trestut est sen e verite  
 Ke issi trouereꝯ en Romaunce.  
 Ki ben len entent e souent list,  
 Prou en auera e delist;  
 Dount cely seit de dieu benet  
 Ki sa entente bien i mest (ll. 1-14).<sup>31</sup>

[Dear friends, receive from me a good present which I send to you, not of gold or silver, but of good teaching; which I found in writing and have

translated from Latin into common language for friends, and which they have not learned from clerks. Very much is the sense and truth which is found here in French, from the which, if one well hears and often reads, one will have much profit and joy. By this may you be blessed by God, whose understanding is good and greatest.]

This introduction has an atypical tone in that it is friendly and egalitarian rather than patronising, and the writer at least in this case seems to treat his readers as equals. Almost all of the 104 stanzas of the *Proverbs of Diverse Prophets and of Poets and of Other Saints* are headed with the name of a prophet, poet, or sage, followed by a Latin proverb, which is then translated into a French and an English quatrain rhyming aabb (with some variation):

Salomon

Melius est vicinus iuxta quam f[r]ater procul.

De vostre veisyn pres de vous

Seveḡ tendre e gelous;

Kar meuḡ vaut bon veisyn

Ke ne fet frere loynḡ tayn.

Of þi neigebor þat neig is to þe

Be þou tendre and haue him in cherte;

ffor bettre is a neigebore neigē

þen a broþur fer fro þin eige (ll. 80-84).

As can be seen, the translations keep the sense of the Latin, but are somewhat more elaborated upon, perhaps primarily because of the demands of the rhyme-scheme. The named sages include the classical (Seneca, Hippocrates), the biblical (Job, Solomon, Jesus), and the Christian (Augustine, Gregory). An analogue of this poem in form is the *Summum sapientiae*, which is however based on the French *Les proverbes de bon enseignement* by Nicole Bozon (Napierkowski 39).

The *Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*<sup>32</sup> is a much more extensive collection, in which attention is focused on the personality of the sage as well as on his sayings, so that instruction is by both example and precept. Each section begins with the name of the sage, followed by biographical information based on traditional medieval legend, and a number of sayings. For example, the section on Plato begins by saying that he was of a good family, who first learned the science of poetry and dwelled with Socrates for five years. Plato set up two schools in Athens and refused the governance



of the city. There follow almost fifteen folios of sayings supposedly by Plato, along with more biographical details. This prose work exists in four versions (including one by Scrope and another by Anthony Wydeville, Earl Rivers) all based on a French translation (*Dits moraux*) by Guillaume de Tignonville, which in turn comes from an Arabic text via Spanish and Latin. Another (incomplete) Middle English version is a verse translation from the Latin by George Ashby entitled *Dicta et opiniones diversorum philosophorum*.<sup>33</sup> Ashby, however, omits most of the biographical information.

What is striking about these collections of sayings by various sages, as in the works attributed to one teacher or philosopher, is the casual way in which attribution is assigned to historical figures. For instance, the names in the *Proverbs of Diverse Prophets and of Poets and of Other Saints* seem to be completely arbitrary, for most of the material in fact comes from the Book of Ecclesiasticus. The *Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*, which devotes more attention to the personalities of the sages, likewise is suspect in accuracy, as, for example, Hermes Trismegistus is thought to be the source of the Golden Rule. Even Ashby's *Dicta et opiniones diversorum philosophorum* does not accurately reflect the attributions of its own source (Bühler, "Liber de dictis" 282-9). Clearly, the authors and translators of these pieces regarded it as important that they attribute their sayings to wise personages of history, but without excluding pagans and without feeling it necessary to be truthful to history or even to their own sources. These attributions, then, appear to be a rhetorical device to validate the truth of the words recorded.

Our focus here has been the use of authority as a rhetorical device for teaching moral instruction and advice, as well as the relationship between the use of that device and content. We have not considered in detail the manuscript contexts of these works, and the ways in which that context relates to their audience and social context.<sup>34</sup> A very useful start in this direction has been taken by Felicity Riddy in her article on *How þe Gode Wyfe Tauȝt hyr Douȝter*, in which she argues that the poem was written to enforce the interests of the clergy and the bourgeoisie, and its intended audience may not in fact have been the daughters of the household, but the servants. This argument, while in some respects quite speculative, is an intriguing one, for it demonstrates even more strongly the importance of parental authority in these works—even if the device was only a rhetorical trick which did not represent the real situation for which the poems were written.

Thus we can see that in this literature, morality and ideology are taught within a political framework of being uttered by a personality in a dominant position, whether

as a parent, teacher, ruler, or historically sanctioned sage. In the case of historical figures and possibly even of parental narrators, this attribution was more of a rhetorical device than an accurate documenting of sources. If in fact many of these works were composed under the auspices of the church, we can see a kind of implied support being drawn from these figures for the work of the priesthood, although—interestingly enough—priests are not depicted as the sources of proverbial wisdom. Many of the works of moral instruction, although they are in content little more than lists of precepts (sometimes versified), demonstrate a need to provide a context within which the advice is given, in order to validate the truth of the words. But, as we have noted, the traditional proverb does not need this kind of context: normally, a proverb is not introduced into a conversation with a note as to who first said it. Rather, it is a recognisable utterance with a tradition behind it, and thus comes with its own validation. The Middle English works we have considered seem to require a substitute validation in the form of either the situation in which the proverb is spoken, or at least an attribution to a recognisable and respected source.<sup>35</sup>

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### **Endnotes**

1 The example from medieval France of the clergy collecting such material for the use of the upper echelons of society is described by Davis 230-3.

2 See also Mustanoja, *Good Wife* 29-74.

3 Brown and Robbins (hereafter *IMEV*) no. 430; edited by Padelford and Benham 322-5.

4 Robbins and Cutler (hereafter *SIMEV*) no. 312.5; edited by Milne and Sweeting 243-5.

5 *IMEV* 432; edited by Furnivall, *Queene Elizabethes Achademy* 68-70.

6 *SIMEV* 3784.6; edited by Brotanek 48-9.

7 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 1877, 1891, and 1985; several editions.

8 As printed by Furnivall, *Queene Elizabethes Achademy* 52-55.

9 As in Lambeth Palace MS 853, pp. 186-93; printed by Furnivall, *Babees Book* 48-52.

10 *IMEV* 2186; edited by Mustanoja, "Myne Awen Dere Sone" 145-93.

11 *IMEV* 3106; edited by Furnivall, *Political, Religious, and Love Poems* 264.

12 Not listed in *IMEV* or *SIMEV*; edited by Lass 172-5.

13 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 2235; edited by Lumby, *Ratis Raving* 26-76.

14 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 4100; edited by Lumby, *Ratis Raving* 90-103.

15 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 3363; edited by Furnivall, *Queene Elizabethes Achademy* 39-43.

16 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 1882; edited by Mustanoja, *Good Wife* 216-21.

17 However, Bornstein (64) believes that the style of the piece is that of a woman or of a man effectively imitating the style of a lower middle-class woman.

18 As quoted by Lumby, *Ratis Raving* 111-12.

19 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 433 and *IMEV* 2093; quoted here from Arngart, *Proverbs of Alfred*, from the text of Cambridge, Trinity College MS B.14.39.

20 The exception is the text in Maidstone Museum MS A.13. See Arngart, *Proverbs of Alfred* 27.

21 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 1427, 1429, 1669, 2078, and 2817; quoted here from Wright and Halliwell 1.109-16.

22 On Marcolphus as a proverbial figure, see Utley 3:737-8.

23 *IMEV* 471 and *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 3793 and 4155.

24 As edited from Lambeth Palace MS 853 by Furnivall, *Babees Book* 11.

25 *IMEV* 3069; edited by Brunner 288-91.

26 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 3170 and *SIMEV* 3068.5; edited by Person 52.

27 *IMEV* 450; edited by Lumby, *Bernardus*.

28 *SIMEV* 3372.1; edited by Blades; see also *STC* no. 7273.

29 From *IMEV* 169; these verses edited by Furnivall, "How Cato Was a Paynym." See also Goldberg 167, concerning *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 247 and 820, and Hazelton.

30 On the medieval notion of authority, see Bland *passim*, Miller 9-20, and Min-

nis 10-12.

31 *IMEV* and *SIMEV* 3501; edited by Furnivall, *Minor Poems* 522.

32 Edited by Bühler, *Dicts and Sayings*.

33 *IMEV* 738; edited by Bateson 42-100.

34 On these issues see my article in *Mediaeval Studies*, forthcoming.

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