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Chaucer's Franklin and his Tale

by

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AMONG THE PORTRAITS in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* there are some whose significance is readily apparent today. The Parson, for example, is obviously compounded of a collection of ideal attributes, some of which comment rather bitterly on the character of many priests Chaucer and his contemporaries could see about them in London; and for those today familiar with the rich body of iconography generated by anti-fraternal propagandists from the days of William of St. Amour onward there is nothing very obscure about the picture of the Friar. At times we are assisted by deliberate contrasts like that between the Knight and the Squire, or that between the Parson and the Pardoner; and the more we learn about Chaucer's immediate background, both intellectual and social, the more vivid and often more humorous his little sketches become. We may well suspect that the Prologue as a whole was, at the time it was first read, a comic masterpiece, but that today it has lost a great deal of its humor along with its satiric sting. Among the more obscure portraits is that of the Franklin, who, we are told, rides along in company with the Sergeant of the Law.

As I have suggested elsewhere, it is probably helpful to regard the pilgrims not as "personalities" or "realistic portraits," or even as "types," if that word implies typical examples. They are better understood as collections of attributes exemplifying either the ideals or the weaknesses of the groups to which they belong. The Sergeant and the Franklin, as admin-

istrators of royal justice, have a great deal in common; moreover, actual Sergeants and men who held the various offices occupied by the Franklin frequently encountered one another in the conduct of their affairs. Royal justice was a profitable enterprise, both for the Crown and for its agents, but it is probable that Chaucer, many of whose friends exhibited a considerable interest in reform, regarded the abuse of office for personal profit on the part of those agents much in the same way that he regarded the abuse of office for personal profit on the part of friars and summoners. Greed and hypocrisy are not the special province of ecclesiastics. If the corruption of justice for gain among ecclesiastical dignitaries seemed reprehensible and thus subject to humorous attack, the corruption of justice for gain among administrative dignitaries must have seemed equally reprehensible, and equally comic when it rested on false pretenses.

That the Sergeant of the Law is an object of satire in the Prologue has long been clear, and efforts have been made to identify him with one of Chaucer's personal enemies, Thomas Pynchbek, although Chaucer's Sergeant is not described as having been chief baron of the Exchequer, as Pynchbek was in 1388. His relations with Pynchbek do indicate, however, that Chaucer knew something about sergeants. His own Sergeant, often seen drumming up trade at the Parvys, probably in the nave of St. Paul's, is a man of seeming wisdom, since "his wordes weren so wise." He often served "in assise," which means that he often travelled with one or two other justices to the counties to adjudicate disputes concerning the ownership of land, either by general commission to settle such cases, or by virtue of letters patent issued to specific plaintiffs. Justices in assise sometimes encroached on the powers of local justices of the peace in their sessions, and, as individuals, they were frequently named to sit with justices of the peace in their own sessions, especially when their legal knowledge was required to consider felonies. Our Sergeant has become enormously wealthy

in fees, robes, and land, not, we infer, in the interests of strict justice. He talks as though he knew all the cases and judgments since King William's time, not to mention all the statutes (both wildly impossible tasks), so that he could readily bear down opposition with fictitious technicalities. His activities at the king's bench, to which serious cases from the counties were often referred, and which exercised continuous control over the activities of the justices of the peace, would have brought him into frequent contact with men like the Franklin. We might add that Sergeants regularly attended Parliament where they carried on a great deal of business behind the scenes; there also they would of course meet knights of the shire on many occasions.

That the Franklin is the Sergeant's companion does not suggest that he is a very trustworthy character, although the association between the two figures simply reflects the fact that such men were in real life closely associated. Chaucer begins his description of the Franklin in general terms, to which we shall return, and reserves his account of his career for the last six lines. He was a justice of the peace, often a member of the Commons in Parliament, and he had been a sheriff and a "contour," presumably in reverse order. It was not uncommon for members of the country gentry to serve at one time or another as J. P., sheriff, and knight of the shire.¹ The word "contour" is now non-specific, but since it is coupled with "shirreve," we are perhaps safe in assuming that the Franklin began his career either as chief clerk or "receiver of moneys" in a sheriff's office, or as a sheriff's accountant. The "receiver" collected the ordinary farm of the county as well as summons, both for small debts and for the fines and amercements of the

1. E.g., see the list included for Nottinghamshire sessions of 1393-1396 in Bertha Haven Putnam, *Proceedings Before the Justices of the Peace in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (London, 1938), p. 149, or the description of M. P.'s in May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), pp. 188-189.

central courts and for the assizes. Again, the accounts of the bailiffs and those of the receiver were reviewed by an auditor before the sheriff made his presentation at the Exchequer. In any event, the Franklin's early activity seems to have been a profitable one, since it led to higher office.

The duties of the sheriff were complex, and it is difficult today to gain the kind of first-hand impression of his activities that Chaucer's audience must have had. He appointed bailiffs to act within his jurisdiction to assist him in making arrests and collecting revenues, and he presided over the county court and the hundred courts, where he could review petty offenses. He summoned jurors for the preliminary sessions of the justices of the peace. When accused persons pleaded not guilty, the sheriffs also summoned trial juries for the justices. "Thus," writes McKisack, "it was open to the sheriffs to empanel juries to suit one of the parties, to procure wrongful indictments, and to make false returns."² When the power of local magnates was great, sheriffs not unnaturally became their instruments. Temptation was also open to them in their capacity as jailors, especially since prisoners paid for their keep and were, at the same time, subject to pressures of one kind or another to testify in accordance with the sheriff's interests. The sheriff was also responsible for executing writs of various kinds, including those writs directing him to arrange the election of two knights from each shire, two burgesses from each borough, and two citizens from each city to serve in Parliament. These elections were not, of course, popular elections in the modern sense but were carried out in the county courts by the sheriff and other substantial county officials. Finally, the sheriff was, as we have seen, a financial officer responsible for collecting royal revenues, including the fines and amercements mentioned earlier. He had to make biennial accountings for these revenues to the

2. McKisack, p. 206.

Exchequer, which meant that he had to keep very careful accounts, since Exchequer officials, whose sessions were attended by sergeants of the law, always suspected sheriffs of withholding funds. In general, it is safe to say that sheriffs were very important men in their counties, but that they had no great reputation for integrity. As McKisack puts it, "The corruptibility of sheriffs was notorious."³

During the later fourteenth century, except for the year 1390, when they were selected in Parliament, justices of the peace were selected by the council, chiefly under the direction of the chancellor and the treasurer. Commissions of the peace were sent out to the "lord and sire" of the sessions, men like the Franklin, who would inform the members of the quorum, who were relatively few in number in comparison with the number of persons named, of their duty to attend. Those named in commissions included noblemen, lawyers, and members of the local gentry. Great noblemen, like John of Gaunt, who was often named, could not be expected to attend, but noblemen with strong local interests might wish to participate in sessions. Among the lawyers, whose presence was needed in cases of felony, men like Chaucer's Sergeant were frequently named. Efforts to keep sheriffs from being named were apparently not altogether successful, since the sheriff and the local J. P. often had many common interests, and sessions were often held in county courts. Apparently undersheriffs, bailiffs, and constables served, and knights of the shire sometimes appeared on commissions of the peace. In the course of Chaucer's lifetime the powers and duties of the justices of the peace varied. After the Peasant's Revolt, for example, they were replaced by special commissions. However, we can assume that they generally inquired into felonies, trespasses, and economic offenses, as well as into lesser offenses against the peace. In actual practice,

3. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

although the justices usually had power to determine cases of felony, felons were convicted with comparative rarity, their cases being referred to the king's bench where they fairly regularly obtained pardons. As Professor Putnam wrote, the justices of the peace "very largely failed in dealing with felonies."⁴ The profits available from pardons were too great to be ignored by medieval administrators. It should be added, perhaps, that justices of the peace were unpaid, and were expected in the ordinary course of things to obtain their rewards through their own activities.

The fact that the Franklin was "knight of the shire" does not mean that he was of noble birth, or that he was a belted knight; he might, indeed, be of very humble origin. Members of the Commons from the counties varied a great deal in background, and there is no reason why we should need to be more specific concerning a figure who is actually representative of a group. Where social rank was concerned, men in the counties were considered to be somewhat inferior to men of equivalent rank at court. However, the Franklin was a considerable figure in the shire. His services as sheriff and J. P. would have made him a likely candidate for the Commons. As we have seen, knights were elected in the county, and this means that local prestige, combined, perhaps, with the influence of local magnates, who were not above intervening forcibly in matters of deep concern to themselves, made election possible. As a member of the Commons, where Chaucer himself appeared in 1386,⁵ the Franklin was in a distinctly subservient position to the Peers, who in the fourteenth century were still using the

4. Putnam, p. cxxviii.

5. His experience there was unfortunate, and it is unlikely that he had much respect for members of the commons who readily submitted to great magnates like the Duke of Gloucester, who dominated the session. See John P. McCall and George Rudisill, Jr., "The Parliament of 1386 and Chaucer's Trojan Parliament," *JEGP*, LVIII (1959), 276-288.

Commons as instruments of their own interests. This fact, combined with the probability that this local career depended on the desires of local magnates, may well account for the preoccupation that the Franklin shows with "Gentilesse" in his Prologue and Tale. Chaucer ends his portrait by saying, "Was nowhere swich a worthy vavasour," where the word *vavasour*, originally a word for "sub-vassal," indicates that he was a large landholder, like his friend the Sergeant.

The above sketch of the career of the Franklin and the character of the Sergeant leaves many details and possibilities unmentioned, but it does show that the two are natural companions, and that they are closely related in a single administrative complex. Because of the Sergeant's character, the relationship between the two is suggestive of connivance, and this suggestion is reinforced by the fact of the Franklin's great wealth. But the facts of the Franklin's career are colored even more strongly in negative terms by the characterization with which they are introduced. The Franklin is described as an elderly man of sanguine complexion and highly developed Epicurean tastes:

Wel lovede he by the morwe a sop in wyn;
335 To lyven in delit was evere his wone,
For he was Epicurus owene sone,
That heeld opinioun that pleyn delit
Was verray felicitee parfit.

In Chaucerian terms, as distinct from the literary historical fiction that asks us to associate the Franklin with men like Sir Roger de Coverly, these attributes should relate the Franklin in our minds with Januarie, who also indulges himself with morning winesops (*Merch. T. IV (E) 1843*) and agrees with those clerks who hold "that felicitee stant in delit" (2021-2022). The Franklin's appetites run more to food than to the female flesh relished by Januarie, but they are no more admirable. If we remember, moreover, that St. Julian gave up his wealth and social position to feed and shelter the poor, the statement that

the Franklin was "Seint Julian . . . in his contree" is not without a certain irony, which is hardly alleviated by the subsequent account of an abundance of fine wine, flesh, fowl, fish, and carefully prepared sharp sauces. There is no reason to suppose that these delicacies, resting on a "table dormant" in the Franklin's hall (an ostentatious luxury that few could afford), were provided for the poor of the county. Rather, we suspect that they were available to influential men like the Sergeant, the Franklin's friends among the gentry, the sheriff, the constable, and others who could further his material interests. In general, Chaucer's "ideal" portraits demonstrate interest in intangibles, so that the Knight, for example, loves chivalry, truth, honor, generosity, and courtesy; the Clerk is preoccupied with moral virtue; the Parson is concerned with "hooly thought and werk," maintaining a "sufficaunce" in little wealth, and avoiding the temptations of rigorous tithings and easy positions in London. If Chaucer had wished us to admire the Franklin, he would certainly have indicated some interest on his part in justice; instead he emphasizes a consuming desire for self-indulgence of a kind that only wealth can bring. With this fact in mind, as we see him riding along wearing a defiant dagger and a bag of silk suggestive of avarice hanging from his white girdle, any suspicions we may have about his exercise of his various offices are fully justified. And we may conclude without hesitation that, morally speaking, he was riding in appropriate company.

In most instances it is not difficult to show that the tale told by each of the "characters" in the General Prologue actually consists of an elaboration of the attribute there described. As we might expect, the Franklin is strongly impressed by the superficial and empty rhetorical extravagances of the Squire,⁶

6. Cf. Robert S. Haller, "Chaucer's Squire's Tale and the Uses of Rhetoric," *Modern Philology*, LXII (1965), 285-95; and John P. McCall, "The Squire in Wonderland," *Chaucer Review*, I (1966), 103-109.

which seem to him to demonstrate "gentilesse"; "thow hast thee wel yquit and gentilly," he says, going on to praise the young nobleman for speaking "feelingly" and with unsurpassed eloquence. A few lines later, however, we find him saying, with false modesty and obvious inconsistency, that he knows nothing of rhetoric, and, further,

726 "Colours of rethoryk been to me queynte;
My spirit feeleth noght of swich mateere."

It is clear that he admired the Squire not for any substance that may be found either in his person⁷ or in his narrative, but for the superficial and empty splendor of his "array," both literal and verbal. He explains that he himself has a son who lacks the Squire's discretion, exclaiming

686 "Fy on possessioun,
But if a man be vertuous withal!"

It is true as both Boethius and the Parson explain that true "gentilesse" is based on virtue, rather than on inherited status or wealth, but the special vice in his son that disturbs the Franklin is one that touches a very tender spot—he spends and loses all of his money. To be virtuous (and hence "gentil") from the Franklin's point of view is to keep and increase one's "possessioun." The laughable absurdity of these observations only irritates our Host, who is not generally very astute, so that he is emboldened to reprimand a man much above him in station, exclaiming, "Straw for youre gentilesse!"

But the Franklin is not to be put down, and he proceeds at once to tell a tale told by "olde gentil Britouns,"⁸ which will

7. On the character of the Squire, see Alan Gaylord, "Chaucer's Squire and the Glorious Campaign," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters*, XLV (1960), 341-361.

8. It has been suggested that since the Franklin's Tale is overtly a Breton lai, the pagan standards of the lai should be applied to it. See Kathryn Hume, "Why Chaucer Calls the *Franklin's Tale* a Breton Lai,"

demonstrate, we infer, his own "gentil" tastes and manners. His hero is a knight, not a knight of the shire, but a nobleman, who loves a lady among "the faireste under sonne," but because of her "heigh kynrede" (not, we notice, her virtue), he is afraid to make his feelings for her known. She, however, taking note of his "obeysaunce" and what the Franklin amusingly calls "penaunce," takes pity on him and agrees to take him for her husband and her lord "of swich lordshipe as men han over hir wyves." Evidently the Franklin feels that the Pauline hierarchy in marriage is not generally popular, especially among the noble. It certainly does not appeal to the Franklin's hero and heroine, for the former swears at once to disregard it, disavowing any "maistrie," and agreeing to obey his wife like a lover,

751 Save that the name of soveraynetee,
That wolde he have for shame of his degree.

We conclude that, even as a nobleman, the knight would have been an object of scorn if his subservient relationship had become known. It is probably true that whatever may have been said in modern discussions of "courtly love," men who subjected themselves to women except in formal feudal relationships were not highly regarded in the Middle Ages, and the

Philological Quarterly, LI (1972), 365-379. We know nothing of actual Breton *lais*, but they must have flourished at the court of Brittany during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. The Dukes of Brittany at the time, Hoel, Alain Fergent, and Conan III, were not by any stretch of the imagination men of "pagan" inclinations. The surviving *lais* in French and English are subject to a variety of interpretations. But the members of Chaucer's audience had no purely "literary" concerns and no inclination to take detached and objective views of the past. They undoubtedly judged Chaucer's tales by their own standards, regardless of the presumed dates of the events described. They did not have what Miss Hume describes as "bourgeois moral attitudes," but this does not mean that they did not have any moral attitudes at all. The Franklin, as a matter of fact, comes closer to having what might be called "bourgeois moral attitudes" than any other character in the Prologue.

learned might have recognized in the knight's position a kind of foolishness once renounced by the poet Ovid.⁹ No one sought to excuse the subservience of King Edward III to Alice Perrers on the ground that he was simply a "courtly lover" of another man's wife. It is not irrelevant to observe also that our knight deliberately disavows the sacrament that made marriage a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

As a result of the knight's self-denial, the lady, exulting in "so large a reyne," a figure, incidentally, that recalls the rider and horse relationship used conventionally to suggest the hierarchies of spirit and flesh or husband and wife,¹⁰ agrees to be a true wife, although this promise, in view of her husband's obedience, implies little more than an "appearance," like his "soveraynetee." But the Franklin hastens to defend the relationship thus established. His words have won him the reputation of being a great authority on marriage; in fact, he is often credited with solving the problem of the "marriage group" in *The Canterbury Tales*. According to the usual theory, the Wife of Bath advocates the sovereignty of the wife, the Clerk advocates the absolute sovereignty of the husband, and the Franklin solves the problem by making the two equal, thus allowing Chaucer to anticipate the present happy state of affairs, transcending his own time and outdistancing Shakespeare and Milton. This achievement seems highly unlikely, but it is even more unlikely when we consider the orthodoxy of King Richard's court generally and the character of Chaucer's friends. But there are more detailed objections. The Clerk says specifically that he

9. See Richard L. Hoffman, *Ovid and the Canterbury Tales* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1966), pp. 165-168.

10. See the present author's *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 253-254, and fig. 6. Horses were much more familiar in Chaucer's time than they are now, and the folly of giving them too much freedom to exercise their own inclinations was more apparent.

does not mean that wives should behave toward their husbands as Griselda did (IV (E) 1142-1144); his story, he explains, concerns patience and obedience in the face of Providential adversity. If he is answering the Wife of Bath, as he obviously is, he is answering implications of her Prologue and Tale that concern literal marriage only incidentally. It may be argued, moreover, that the theme of marriage is introduced in the Knight's Tale, and that it is by no means neglected in the tales of the Miller, the Reeve, and the Man of Law. We should expect of the Franklin a literalistic attitude and an attempt at an Epicurean marital arrangement.

The Franklin does not disappoint this expectation, pointing out first that friends must obey each other if their friendship is to be maintained. He does not say, as others had said before him, that friendship should be based on mutual desires, or, to quote Cicero, that it is *nihil aliud nisi omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio*, but that friends must obey each other. A little reflection will show that this is a ridiculous proposition in terms of actual practice. If Friend A desires one thing, but realizes that Friend B desires the other, what are friendly A and B to do? What if A accedes to B, and B, in friendly fashion, accedes to A at the same time? Or if A commands B to do one thing in his company and B commands A to do something else? It would be best, perhaps not to define friendship in terms of obedience, but the Franklin, in this matter as in others, shows little penetration. He goes on to say, in a very famous echo of the words of that worldly wise and cynical character Amis in the *Roman de la rose* of Jean de Meun,¹¹ that love and "maistrie" are incompatible, a principle that if applied rigorous-

11. Jean amusingly misapplied some lines from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2. 846-847. The most thorough and illuminating discussion of this passage available is that in Hoffman, pp. 63-67, and the accompanying notes.

ly, would have undermined the entire structure of Chaucer's society, not to mention the Christian religion as it was then understood. However, the Franklin means love in a limited sense:

765 Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon
Beteth his wynges, and farwel, he is gon!
Love is a thyng as any spirit free.
Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreyned as a thral;
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal.

If "the God of Love" is the same god that appears in the *Roman* (Cupid, or sexual desire), and there is no reason to assume that he is not, these lines express some commonplace themes of Christian morality, although these themes are not exactly favorable to the Franklin's general argument. That is, marriage is a sacrament, the first, in fact, to be established by Christ. Its function is to direct and control concupiscence, or the operations of the God of Love. Thus the Parson, a "lerner man" to whom Chaucerians might well pay more attention, adduces chastity (faithfulness) in marriage, which "maketh the hertes al oon of hem that ben ywedded, as wel as bodies" the first remedy against the vice of lechery, or in other terms the free activity of Cupid.¹² The levity, indiscretion, and fickleness of Cupid are proverbial.

It is true also that women "of kynde" desire liberty, a principle explained fully by the Old Woman in the *Roman de la rose*, who says, in Dahlberg's translation,

"Moreover, women are born free. The law, which takes away the freedom in which nature placed them, has put them under conditions. . . . Thus, when they are engaged, captured by law, and married in order to prevent quarreling, contention, and murder and

12. Cf. the discussion in Lombard, *Sententiae* 4.26.2.

to help in the rearing of children, who are their joint responsibility, they still exert themselves in every way, these ladies and girls, ugly or beautiful, to return to their freedom."¹³

And it is quite obvious that men who place their own pleasure above responsibility desire the same freedom. But the "kynde" or nature involved here is the nature St. Paul speaks of when he says (Eph. 2.3) that "we were by nature children of wrath." That is, the fallen nature of man and woman does not readily acquiesce to the restraints of hierarchical marriage.¹⁴ These implications of the Franklin's words would have been clear at once to most persons in Chaucer's audience. They do not bode very well for the mutually obedient relationship the Franklin has proposed, nor do they contribute to any impression that the Franklin himself is very astute.

He goes on to explain, however, that his lovers will have to be patient, and that they must learn to suffer a great deal. Since the argument still follows that of Amis in a general way, it will repay us to look very briefly at that worthy's exposition in the *Roman*. Having just recommended flattery and false courtesy to the lover, Amis turns to the subject of wealth and large gifts, concluding, with reference to the beloved, that "if she saw a great heavy purse all stuffed with bezants rise up all at once, she would run after it with open arms; women are not so maddened that they would run after anything except purses. Although formerly they had other customs, now everything is going into decline."¹⁵ This consideration leads to a discussion

13. *The Romance of the Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 238.

14. On the distinction between two kinds of "nature" where human beings are concerned, see John V. Fleming, *The Roman de la Rose: A Study in Allegory and Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 194-195, and on "natural love," see p. 131.

15. Dahlberg's translation, p. 154. The idea is a reflection of the ironic statement in Ovid, *Ars amatoria* 2. 161-162: "Non ego divitibus venio praeceptor amandi: / Nil opus est illi, qui dabit, arte mea."

of the Golden Age, which in the view of Amis was a time of free Epicurean delights when the "simple secure people led their carols, their games, and their idle, pleasant activities, free of cares except to lead a life of gaiety in lawful companionship. . . . All were accustomed to being equal, and no one wanted any possessions of his own. They knew well the saying, neither lying nor foolish, that love or lordship never kept each other company nor dwelt together. The one that dominates separates them."¹⁶ Amis finds that "it is the same in marriages," and proceeds at once with the Jealous Husband's famous attack on marriage. When this attack has been completed, Amis adds, "Yes indeed, without fail, whatever she says, he will not be loved by his wife if he wants to be called 'lord' for love must die when lovers want lordship."¹⁷ Thus a woman who has been loved by a man *par amour* and who subsequently marries him is usually disappointed, for, since the man who once jumped at her every wish now wishes to command, she is unhappy. Because the Golden Age has given way to an hierarchical society through greed, lovers should not be jealous. If a man finds his lady unfaithful, he should not criticize her but "pretend to be blind, or more stupid than a buffalo"; he should allow her to come and go as she pleases, never believe any evil of her, and never reproach her for her vices. Moreover, even if he is "beaten or reviled, even if she should pull out his nails alive, he must not take revenge but rather thank her." He should deny any unfaithfulness on his part, or if necessary claim to have been forced into it; and if she is sick, he should flatter and console her with false tenderness. But in spite of all this, Amis concludes, no woman is to be trusted and no woman is so loyal "that one could ever be certain of holding her, any more than if one held an eel by the tail in the Seine." This is not true of

16. *The Romance of the Rose*, pp. 155-156.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170.

"good women," but, Amis says, "I never yet found any." He once more recommends flattery, for a woman, "however foolish she is, knows by her natural judgment that, whatever excesses she commits, good or bad, wrong or right, or whatever you wish, she does nothing that she should not, and she hates whoever corrects her."¹⁸

The Franklin's knight, who believes that he who is most patient in love has the greatest advantage, thus lays himself open to some rather disconcerting possibilities. Those mentioned by the Franklin are sufficiently pregnant with potential adversity—wrath, illness, astrological influences, the effects of wine, sorrow, or alteration in complexion. If the husband is to have only the name of sovereignty and continue the "obeisaunces" and "penaunces" of his courtship, he will probably suffer a great deal. Under the circumstances, the lady can hardly be blamed for swearing that "nevere sholde ther be defaute in here," since her husband would never have anything about which to complain. In the event that both parties take the Franklin's little scheme seriously, always obeying each other, the potentiality for two very literal patient Griseldas is obvious. When the Franklin seeks to rationalize the position of his wedded pair, the result is mere absurdity:

Heere may men seen an humble, wys accord;

Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord,—

Servant in love, and lord in marriage.

Thanne was he bothe in lordshipe and servage.

795 Servage? nay, but in lordshipe above,

Sith he hath both his lady and his love;

His lady, certes, and his wyf also

The which that lawe of love acordeth to.

In the context of a society in which hierarchical social relationships were considered to be natural this passage simply makes

18. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

no sense at all except as an amusingly verbose flurry of illogicality. How can a man be a lord and a servant at the same time? When is he "in lordshipe" and when is he "in servage"? Far from solving the problems of an imaginary "marriage group," the Franklin has succeeded only in making himself ridiculous and in exhibiting the kind of greed that prompted old Januarie to try to make of marriage a haven for the pleasant exercise of concupiscence. The hierarchy of marriage was an integral part of the society of Chaucer's time, firmly established in theology, canon law, criminal law, and the prevailing political theory.¹⁹ The idea that Chaucer (as distinct from his Franklin) would have seriously attacked it is absurd. The Franklin, whose eye is firmly fixed on externals, is just the kind of man to be satisfied with an "appearance" if it seems to imply pleasure for himself.

In the subsequent tale, the effects of the marital arrangement just described are far from happy. Arveragus, the husband, after "a yeer and moore" of bliss decides to go to England for two years to exercise his chivalry. Dorigen, his wife, does not exercise much patience, but begins to weep and sigh, according to the Franklin "as doon thise noble wyves whan hem liketh," reassuring his audience of his expertise in noble manners. She secludes herself and refuses all diversion until her friends succeed in consoling her a little and Averagus sends her letters

19. Cf. *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 374-375. For further elaboration, see Henricus de Segusio, *Summa* (Lyon, 1537), fol. 41, which contains a full-page diagram, and a discussion, fols. 41 verso-43. With reference to the present tale it may be of some interest to notice that under canon law a man who consents to the adultery of his wife is to be denied Holy Communion perpetually. See *Thomae de Chobham Summa Confessorum*, ed. Rev. F. Broomfield (Louvain, 1968), pp. 339-340. The analogy between marriage and the relationship between a prince and his dominions was still being used by Bacon. See "The Wisdom of the Ancients," in *Works*, ed. Montagu, III, 4. In fourteenth-century criminal law a wife who murdered her husband was said to be guilty of "petty treason," but no treason was involved if a husband murdered his wife.

announcing his hasty return. On the seacoast she indulges herself with a long complaint against the Providence of God, who has heedlessly and unnecessarily placed rocks on the Breton coast that might endanger any ship bearing Averagus on his return (865-893). Complaints against Providence, are, as both Boethius and the Parson explain, foolish and reprehensible, although the Franklin seems unaware of this; and the special complaint about rocks in the sea has its own iconographic overtones. For the pilgrimage of life is often a voyage on the sea of the world, and the rocks are the temptations, either of prosperity, when they form a resting-place for Sirens or Mermaids, or of adversity.²⁰ When these figurative rocks are covered up by sophisticated arguments or by the seductive voices of the mermaids, they do not become less dangerous but more threatening. The efforts of the Franklin just described to make marriage a refuge for the God of Love affords a good example. If the Boethian philosophy underlying it is taken seriously, Dorigen's complaint becomes humorous, and there seems little doubt that Chaucer, who took the trouble to translate *The Consolation of Philosophy*, intended it to be so.

Among the diversions provided by Dorigen's friends is a garden, so curiously bedecked by May "with his softe shoures" and "by craft of mannes hand" that it seemed to be "the verray paradys." There everyone joins in song and dance except Dorigen, who is too sorrowful to participate in the festivities.

20. See *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 144, 305-306, 400-401. The theme has most recently been discussed with reference to Chaucer by Dinshaw M. Burjorjee, "The Pilgrimage of Troilus's Sailing Heart," *Annuaire Mediaevale*, XIII (1972), 14-31. For the Franklin's Tale, cf. R. P. Miller, "Allegory in The Canterbury Tales," in Beryl Rowland, *Companion to Chaucer Studies* (Toronto, New York, London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 285, who remarks justly concerning the rocks that "the desire to remove them, as well as their 'magical' disappearance, are both emblematic of the Epicurean imagination."

The scene is familiar. Troilus prays to Cupid in such a garden (*TC* II, 505-539), Emelye roams about there singing in the Knight's Tale (I (A) 1033-1055), and old Januarie constructs it with great diligence (IV (E) 2021-2056). It is, that is, another version of the garden described by Guillaume de Lorris, whose delights are closed to Dorigen just as they are to "Sorowe" herself (*Romaunt*, 301-348). This locale, like most other "scenes" in Chaucer's work, is not actually a location in space and time. It is an appropriate place for the machinations of the God of Love, who in this instance inspires a young Squire, Aurelius, who closely resembles the Squire in the General Prologue. His vanity is displayed in his costume, for he is "jolyer of array . . . than is the month of May" and in his skill at song and dance. He is also young, strong, wealthy, and in the Franklin's estimation wise, not to mention being "servant to Venus" or like the Franklin himself a man bent on pleasure. After the usual preliminary hesitation, Aurelius makes his approach to Dorigen, concluding, "Have mercy, sweete, or ye wol do me deye!" This plea, like that of Nicholas in the Miller's Tale—"Lemman, love me al atones or I wol dyen"—is neither very noble nor very manful,²¹ and of course Aurelius does not die upon the lady's refusal, which he receives immediately:

"By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf,
Ne shal I nevere been untrewed wyf
985 In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;
I wol been his to whom that I am knyght.
Taak this for fynal answer as of me."

She adds "in pley" a promise that if Aurelius will "remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon," from the Breton coast so that they do not hinder shipping, she will love him "best of any man." But this promise in so far as "entente" is concerned is merely a repetition of the first vow to be true to her husband, since it

21. Cf. *A Preface to Chaucer*, pp. 46-47.

demands an impossible task. This fact is emphasized in Dorigen's reply to her suitor's request for "oother grace," a reply, incidentally, that exhibits a profound ignorance on her part of modern ideas of "courtly love":

1000 "No, by that Lord," quod she, "that maked me!
For wel I woot that it shal never bityde.
Lat swiche folies out of youre herte slyde.
What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf
For to go love another mannes wyf,
That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh?"

But neither the refusal nor the advice makes much impression on Aurelius, who takes the remarks about the rocks with legalistic literalism, exclaiming that their removal would be impossible, and concluding with solemn absurdity, "Thanne moot I dye of sodeyn deth horrible." He proceeds at once to meditate on rock removal, but does not, of course, die.

This literal-minded reaction to the words rather than to the clear "entente" of Dorigen's playful remarks places Aurelius in company with other literal-minded figures in the preceding tales. The summoner in the Friar's Tale, for example, exhibits a literal-minded preoccupation with the "shap" and "bodies" of fiends, paying no attention at all to their powers and functions as instruments of God, so that he steadfastly refuses to repent, with devastating but just results. He takes the carter's curse literally, without any heed to his "entente," which even the fiend can understand (II (D) 1543-1558). The friar in the Summoner's Tale is so hopelessly literal-minded that he becomes preoccupied with the problem of how to divide a fart into twelve equal parts, and the Wife of Bath herself shows a complete disregard for the "entente" of the Scriptural passages she quotes. The Franklin, preoccupied with satisfying externals, cannot be expected to do much better, and his characters, in this respect, turn out to be no better than he is. Aurelius hopes fervently for a very high "spryng flood," which might, indeed, cover up the rocks but would hardly make them less dangerous

as hindrances to shipping, although Dorigen demanded that they be removed so that "they ne lette ship ne boot to goon."

Arveragus returns safely, and Aurelius instead of suffering death simply lies in bed for over two years unable to put his foot down because of his truly remarkable physical discomfort. His lamentable situation offers a further example of the Franklin's inadvertently humorous exaggeration. But Aurelius is aroused by his brother, who thinks that it might be possible to find a clerk in Orleans who could with "an apparence" make the rocks seem to disappear, using operations concerning the mansions of the moon. The Franklin here interrupts to display his own skepticism for, as he says,

1133 hooly chirches feith in oure bileve
Ne suffreth noon illusioun us to greve.

It is true that the mansions of the moon have nothing to do with the illusion that follows;²² nevertheless, the Franklin's notion that Holy Church, whose teachings he has been blithely disregarding, protects him from illusion is laughable. If it were true, there would be no sinners in the Church, and no Epicureans among nominal believers to be misled by externals. The Franklin's Christianity is not very profound.

Aurelius and his brother do indeed find a clerk who entertains them with illusions involving hunting, jousting, and dancing before he enters a contract to "remoeven alle the rokkes of Bretayne" (1221) for a thousand pounds. The fact that the delightful and noble pastimes presented by the clerk are illusory should have served, perhaps, as a warning, but Aurelius persists, although he does not, as it turns out, have a thousand pounds. But he promises to deliver this enormous sum for the privilege of alleviating his physical distress on the person

22. See the very careful and detailed discussion by Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 266-267.

of Dorigen, and this in spite of the fact, as he well knows, that she is no longer interested in the rocks because Arveragus has returned. Needless to say, he is neither being very "gentil" nor even moderately considerate. He is, in fact, being very stupid. In the fourteenth century, not to mention Breton antiquity, if anyone thinks that to be relevant, a thousand pounds would have been sufficient to purchase the Venereal services of a variety of amiable and capable wenches for a number of years. It is true that the purchase of such services is not very noble, but, after all, that is exactly what Aurelius is seeking to do. His concentration on Dorigen, the wife of a knight reputed to be "of chivalrie the flour" can be attributed only to vanity. The magician sets about some sham calculations just before the high tide after the winter solstice,²³ so that through what the Franklin thinks of as "his magik" it "semed that alle the rokkes were awaye" (1296). We should notice that the clerk did not, as he promised, remove the rocks, and that, in so far as Aurelius is concerned, they were not removed stone by stone as Dorigen demanded. The fact that the tide is said to have lasted for a week or two in the Franklin's account should probably be attributed, as Professor Wood suggests, to the Franklin's usual weakness for exaggeration.

After falling at the feet of his master, the clerk, to thank him and his lady, Venus, Aurelius proceeds at once to inform Dorigen of her predicament. His approach is full of pious hypocrisy, since his prayer to Venus has made his real aims very clear, and, at the same time, he knows very well that Dorigen does not wish to be unfaithful to her husband. Addressing her as his "righte lady," whom he loves best "and lothest were of all this world displese," he asserts again that he is about to die, reminds her of her promise, adding, before announcing the disappearance of the rocks,

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 245-249.

1331 "Madame, I speke it for the honour of yow
Moore than to save myn hertes lyf right now."

The bold statement that his interest lies in Dorigen's honor when he wants nothing but to dishonor her is not only ridiculous but laughable, not to mention being ignoble by any standards except those of the Franklin, who places pleasure before everything else.

Dorigen is naturally most displeased. Remarking that the removal of the rocks is "agayns the proces of nature," she begins to weep, wail, and swoon. She complains bitterly, and foolishly, against Fortune, and meditates at great length on a long series of exempla, some of them ridiculous, involving maids and wives who have suffered death rather than dishonor or led chaste lives in the face of tribulations. She determines finally, after a day or two of such unpleasant speculation, that she must die. If Aurelius was foolish to take the words or the "appearance" of Dorigen's second oath seriously rather than its "entente," Dorigen is downright silly to do so.²⁴ But the Franklin's characters are, in a sense, all little images of himself. Thus when Dorigen informs her husband of her plight, he too is deceived by an appearance and launches into a pious diatribe on "truth," which has won for him, rather oddly, a reputation among critics as an exemplar of true chivalry:

"Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!
1475 For God so wisly have mercy upon me,
I hadde wel lever ystiked for to be
For verray love which that I to yow have,
But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save.
Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe."

24. Alan Gaylord demonstrated fully in "The Promises in *The Franklin's Tale*," *ELH*, XXXI (1964), pp. 352-357, the prevalence of a commonplace ethical principle that rash promises leading to wrongful action are not to be kept. Dorigen should not have been inclined to keep her promise about the rocks even if that promise had been serious. Since it was made "in pley" she has no obligation whatsoever to abide by it.

The "truth" is that Dorigen's second promise was a denial; nevertheless, our noble knight, breaking into tears,²⁵ adds at once,

"I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,
That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,
To no wight telle thou of this aventure—
As I may best, I wol my wo endure—
1485 Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse."

Our hero will thus be satisfied with an appearance of honor or "truth" in his marriage, just as he was satisfied with an appearance of husbandly status in the first place. He is, in effect, very adept at covering up rocks. Meanwhile, the threat to kill his wife if she does not commit adultery and keep quiet about it in the name of "truth" is hardly a manifestation of "gentillesse." The usual interpretations of this tale deprive it of its humor as well as of its basically serious "entente." It is true that Dorigen does not live up to the cynical expectations of Amis in the *Roman de la rose*. But the wedded pair, having followed the recommendations of Amis concerning marriage, are both made to suffer what in Jean de Meun were the trials of the husband only. Arveragus tearfully demands the unfaithfulness of his wife, and she, who has just contemplated suicide to avoid breaking the "truth" of her marriage, is now threatened with death if she does not do so cheerfully. Chaucer has thus gone a step beyond Jean de Meun, showing that even when women are virtuously inclined, they cannot keep faith if their husbands are sufficiently stupid, and that this is true especially when "mutual forbearance" has been substituted for the usual Pauline relationship. In defense of Jean de Meun, however, it might be added that his Jealous Husband was, after all, a sufficient manifesta-

25. The allegation, sometimes made, that Arveragus knows in advance that his wife will be released is hardly supported by this outburst of weeping.

tion of husbandly stupidity. Like the Franklin, he sought to make marriage a vehicle for pleasure.

Dorigen proceeds secretly to meet her lover in an appropriate garden, but when Aurelius learns of what the worthy knight has done, he decides to set aside his pleasure rather than perform a churlish act "agayns franchise and alle gentillesse." Actually, his vanity triumphs once more, so that, seeking to outdo the great virtue of Arveragus, he releases Dorigen from her promise, at the same time calling her "the treweste and beste wyf" he has ever known, in spite of the fact that she has just come to receive him as her lover. Impressed by this renunciation of that surpassing good, pleasure, the Franklin observes,

Thus kan a squier don a gentil dede,
1544 As well as kan a knyght, withouten drede.

Aurelius proceeds to the clerk, disturbed because he does not have the necessary thousand pounds and requesting the privilege of making payments in installments. At first, the learned gentleman is taken aback, inquiring whether or not he has fulfilled his side of the bargain. He has not actually done so, although Aurelius thinks that he has by magic caused the rocks to disappear. When the clerk learns that Arveragus out of "gentillesse" has made Dorigen keep the letter of her promise, and that Aurelius has taken pity on her and released her out of "gentillesse," he, being a proud man, decides that he is "gentil" also and releases the Squire. A basic attribute of "gentillesse" is generosity, so that the Franklin, at the close of his tale, inquires, "Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" Chaucer must have awaited with some amusement the reactions of his audience.

Generosity is a great virtue, but it is impossible to be generous with something to which one has no right. In the tale, Aurelius has no justification for taking Dorigen's second promise literally, and he does not, as he realizes, remove the rocks stone by stone from the coast, so that he has no claim on

Dorigen's person at all and hence nothing to give up. Dorigen promised emphatically to be faithful to her husband, so that she has no right to give up her physical favors to Aurelius. The clerk does not "remove" the rocks as he promised to do. And Arveragus, having renounced all sovereignty over his wife, has no right to demand that she submit to Aurelius. If he gives up anything, as the source of this tale suggests,²⁶ it is his honor or "truth" in marriage, but this, after all, was a mere appearance. The Franklin's conception of "gentilesse" is consistent with his admiration for the Squire's rhetoric, with his Epicurean concern for externals, and with the kind of attitude we might expect on the basis of his career. Chaucer's interest was not, however, in the Franklin as a person. As we see him riding along with the wealthy and venal Sergeant, we are led to wonder about the state of royal justice in England if it rests in the hands of men whose weaknesses are exemplified by these self-deluded and pompous figures who cannot see beneath appearances either in the world itself or in words. Both, in fact, are skilled at using words to hide the truth.²⁷

26. See Miller, p. 284.

27. On the shallowness of the Sergeant as he appears in his tale, see the brilliant essay by Wood, "Astrology in the Man of Law's Tale," *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars*, pp. 192-244.