

Critical Perspectives on the Merchant's and Franklin's Tales

- Robert R. Edwards, "Narration and Doctrine in the Merchant's Tale," *Speculum*, Vol. 66(1991): 342-367

In the marriage encomium, Justinus's speeches to January, and the episode of Pluto and Proserpine, the tale offers significant alternatives to the Merchant's presentation. Each is contested, for the Merchant seeks to discredit these views and manipulate their effect, but the sequence nonetheless achieves a cumulative effect. We can see at the end that the narrative offers dimensions of meaning that are not contained or determined by character. Chaucer's artistry opens what the Merchant tries to close and preserves the possibilities of meaning that he intends to reduce or eliminate. (351)

. . . The fundamental question is, how are we to interpret the disjunction between the narrator and his materials? The Merchant tries to erode the stature of the Clerk and the Wife, and gives us characters driven only by their appetites, but he fails to appropriate his subject matter completely. His narration, as virtuoso a performance as any in the *Canterbury Tales*, does not determine the meaning of his narrative. The discontinuity of character and narrative, narration and doctrine, is an essential quality of the tale. The question is not about aesthetic unity but hermeneutics.

I believe that Chaucer builds this conflict of ideologies into the text. The competing views of marriage represent and interrogate social reality. They are not an alternative to it, for the Merchant's Tale does not propose an aesthetic resolution for problems of human conduct. What the tale provides instead is a domain of moral speculation that preserves the complexity of issues, rejecting the reductions of misogyny and unexamined orthodoxy alike. The thematic richness of the tale develops between those two poles in a dialectical tension. And Chaucer does nothing to dissipate the tension. The action ends with January's seeming acceptance of May's devious explanation, but it is unclear whether he is merely a fool or a pathetic figure who has decided to countenance her betrayal (366-67).

- David Wallace, "'Whan She Translated Was': A Chaucerian Critique of the Petrarchan Academy," in Patterson, ed., *Literary Practice and Social Change*, 206-7.

It is the Merchant's Tale that performs the most comprehensive critique of the Clerk's Tale and hence of its Petrarchan origins. The Merchant's opening line makes it clear that we have not yet left Lombardy: we have, to be precise, moved just ninety miles east-north-east, from Saluzzo to Pavia. His Tale's opening sentence also informs us that we are to consider (once again) a man who "folwed ay his bodily delyt I On wommen." The narrative then plays out the familiar pattern: a tyrannical male sees a female body, commands it, takes possession of it. But here the determining act of vision, likened to a sighting in the mirror in a market place, is seen as one of blindness, not of insight: "For love is blynde alday, and may nat see" (1598). Here, as in the Clerk's Tale, such deliberative gazing at a female object is presented as the legitimate outcome of a consultative political process. But here that process, the consulting of Placebo and Justinus, is evidently a crude facade that covers a naked act of will. . . .

What I am proposing, then, is that Chaucer's two tales of Lombard tyranny be considered as the kind of narrative sequence formed by the Knight's Tale and the Miller's Tale: the second tale, through its judicious use of structural parallelism and grotesque realism, performs a humorous critique of the first.

- G.L. Kittredge, from "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *Modern Philology* 9 (1912)

Love and marriage, according to the courtly system, were held to be incompatible, since marriage involves mastery on the husband's part, and mastery drives out love. . . . This theory the Franklin utterly repudiates. In true marriage, he argues, there should be no assertion of sovereignty on either side. Love must be the controlling principle, perfect, gentle love, which brings forbearance with it. Such is his solution of the whole problem, and thus he concludes the long debate begun by that jovial heresiarch, the Wife of Bath. . . .

There is no mistaking Chaucer's purpose in this, the final scene of that act of the Canterbury Pilgrimage which deals with the problem of husband and wife. He does not allow the Franklin to tell a tale without a moral expressed and to leave the application to our powers of inference. On the contrary, the Franklin's discussion of the subject is both definite and compendious. It extends to nearly a hundred lines, without a particle of verbiage, and occupies a conspicuous position at the very beginning of the story, so that the tale is utilized to illustrate and enforce the principle. . . . It is clear, therefore, that Chaucer means us to regard the Franklin as "knitting up the matter," as summarizing the whole debate and bringing it to a definitive conclusion which we are to accept as a perfect rule of faith and practice.

· Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (1994), 63-65, 109-110

Rather than assessing blame for the parties' misconstruals, I would like to read the difference between Dorigen's desire to refuse Aurelius and his focus on the assigned task as an illustration of the difficulty of expressing resistance to courtship in romance.

The literature of courtship does not suggest that a plain "no" would have persuaded Aurelius to stop importuning Dorigen; indeed, as Kaske recognizes, refusal is itself scripted into courtship as a first stage of feminine responsiveness. . . . Later romances, particularly under the influence of the *Romance of the Rose*, develop a strongly narrative impulse within courtship by relocating the difficulties that divide the knight and his beloved from external circumstances to the lady's own resistance. With this development, refusal becomes an integral part of courtship, an expected first response that the lover's efforts can overcome.

Dorigen's words to Aurelius comment on the constrained situation of women in the literature of courtship. First, that Dorigen finds herself ventriloquizing encouragement as she attempts resistance reveals that there is no vocabulary of refusal in this generic context. Both the lady's resistance to a first declaration of love and her extravagant demands might well be signs of acquiescence. Even Dorigen's references to her husband...are consonant with Aurelius's version of his courtship as a competitive confrontation with Arveragus, a relation between men. The only way for Dorigen to communicate refusal to Aurelius would be to relocate herself altogether outside of sexual circulation, and the many stories she later recalls can only imagine that outside as death.

. . . Chaucer's particular version of the rash promise suggests that Dorigen is neither rash nor flirtatious but rather that her desire to refuse is at odds with courtly discourses that do not admit a language of refusal. Located in and constrained by the literary conventions of courtship, Dorigen's reply illustrates the wider situation of gender construction.

My point is not simply that Dorigen's role is constrained by her femininity, but that the plot contradicts the Franklin's assertion that he can represent a courtly relation in which men and women enjoy the same "libertee." It is as if the Franklin begins with a desire to reinterpret or alter romance, yet soon submits to the passive role designated for him in the genre. Similarly, Dorigen's words "in pley" (V.988) attempt to parody the role of the haughty lady with Aurelius, revealing that role to be no more than a sham construction from which she herself is alienated. Dorigen chooses to distance herself from convention, but Aurelius reads her mimicry unreflectively, as the kind of "emprise" by which Arveragus won her, reconstructing her words according to his own desires. Dorigen cannot determine how she is perceived, nor can the Franklin revise her role. Both vavasour and lady can inhabit romance but do not control its paradigms and plots.

· Linda Charnes, "'This Werk Unreasonable': Narrative Frustration and Generic Redistribution in Chaucer's Franklin's Tale," *Chaucer Review* 23 (1989): 300-15.

The rules of this world depend upon the unquestioning acceptance of the knight's absence-the volitional quality of Arveragus's decision to leave his wife is never overtly challenged. In fact, the Franklin (along with many critics) regards the knightly quest almost as a "natural" phenomenon, a biological imperative whose pleasures excel even those of love

<http://www.umsl.edu/~gradyf/chaucer/franklincrit.htm>

and sex ("for al his lust he sette in swich labour"). In an absurd reversal of experience, literary convention becomes natural principle; and authentic emotional response (a wife's grief and desperation in her husband's absence) becomes self-indulgent, inappropriate, and "unnatural."

Dorigen's obsessive concern with the rocks can be regarded as a metamorphosis of her desire to strike back, an hysterical wish to make Arveragus suffer in kind. But because it is sublimated, she experiences it as a fear, a terror for his safety...

Not only does the narrative dilation of [Aurelius's] love suit to Dorigen "fill in" for the dalliance of courtship narratively foreshortened into marriage in the tale's opening lines; it also places Dorigen in relation to another figure who experiences emotions in time, ameliorating the isolated nature of her narrative experience. After all, neither her friends nor the Franklin can understand her; and it is no wonder, for they are at once contained and constituted by the system of values responsible for Dorigen's suffering. While the Franklin attempts to ridicule (however lightly) Dorigen's feelings by locating them within a conventional system that renders them indecorous, Chaucer legitimates them by giving the tale another character who feels; and even more importantly, who feels, like Dorigen, across an expanse of narrative time.

The Franklin may be putting "gentillesse" to work in a literally mechanical fashion; but Chaucer is doing something far more sophisticated. If, in the denouement, "gentillesse" functions for the Franklin as a merely expedient courtesy code, Chaucer makes of it a kind of ad hoc genre-one in which each character understands exactly what the situation requires of him and acts accordingly. It may seem a bit radical to talk about a category of "courtesye" as a genre; but this is exactly how Chaucer is using it at the tale's end....By moving out of the divisive generic systems that have obtained (or failed to obtain, depending upon how one regards it) so far in the tale, and by becoming members of a homogeneous generic community, the Franklin's characters find that the conflicting generic values which divided them earlier actually enable the achievement of their common quest. For the goal of this quest is precisely to overcome generic difference.

· Emma Lipton, "Beyond Kittredge: Teaching Marriage in The Canterbury Tales"

I invite students to consider how the Franklin's Tale's depiction of marriage reworks the paradigms and genres of earlier tales, using marriage to construct an ideology that suits the Franklin's social class. I ask students to compare the opening five lines to the Knight's Tale so that they recognize it as a highly condensed form of a conventional romance plot After this initial passage, the tale deviates from the conventions of romance (and from the depiction of vows in the Clerk's Tale) by granting Dorigen the choice offered by marriage law without mentioning the role of family, property or money in her decision. . . . By emphasizing the exchange of vows, the tale draws on the sacramental model that represents mutual love as the basis of marriage. Immediately after discussing the exchange of vows, we move to an analysis of the "sermon on marriage" in which the Franklin expounds: "...[Freendes] everych oother moot obeye, / If they wol longe holden compaignye. / . . . Love is a thyng as any spirit free" (V, 762-63, 767). Here the Franklin echoes the diction of contemporary marriage sermons, which often used a classical vocabulary of friendship, describing spouses as equals and partners, to comment on mutuality in marriage. . . . Later, we note that the vocabulary of friendship used to describe Dorigen and Arveragus's marriage is applied in the end of the tale to the relationship between the Clerk, Squire and the Knight, suggesting that marriage has become a model for social relations. . . . Kittredge's notion that the tale provides a model for marital mutuality that resolves the "problem" of marriage posed by the Wife's and Clerk's tales can be difficult to sustain with students who question Dorigen's absence at the end of the tale and want to explain Arveragus's death threat against his wife. Indeed, the focus on male bonding in the tale and the failure to address Arveragus's violent threat suggest that the tale may be more invested in using marriage to articulate a horizontal ideology of social equality than in constructing truly egalitarian gender relations. The tale can be seen not so much as Chaucer's ideal of marriage or as an answer to the problem of marriage in the tales, as Kittredge argues, but as the Franklin's own use of marriage to reflect and formulate his emergent social values.

- Davis Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the creative imagination* (1980), 166-67

Here Chaucer's poetry does not stop at the individual's errors, as critics of Arveragus have done. Instead it shows us that the attempt to create a higher form of marital union has collapsed under pressures from without which revealed how the individuals concerned had internalized traditional assumptions more deeply than they, or the Franklin, had acknowledged. Furthermore, the collapse is not just a decisive negation of the utopian aspirations. In fact, it comprises a subtle affirmation of them, for it is in the light of utopian perspectives evoked by Arveragus and the narrator that we see the knight's behaviour at the end as an unacceptable egotism and the wife's unquestioning obedience of her husband's command (based on a complete failure to distinguish levels of obligation) as a wretched collapse. This encourages us to take such behaviour as a distortion of love and marriage rather than accept it as a 'natural' reassertion of the male domination and self-centredness of the kind celebrated by the Knight of the Tower, and to continue meditating on the difficulties presented to any attempt at critical transcendence of the present reality, stimulated by the utopian imagination.

- Robert J. Meyer-Lee, "Fragments IV and V of the Canterbury Tales Do Not Exist," *Chaucer Review* 45 (2010): 27-28.

Misled by this fragment break, what have critics been missing? Although this is not the place for an exploration of the various interpretive scenarios made possible by the suturing of the wound Furnivall inflicted upon MerSQL, I offer by way of conclusion one suggestion. With MerSQL restored, what emerges is a continuous, tightly integrated dramatic sequence of four tales for which the occupation of each of the four tellers has some close biographical relation to Chaucer—for Chaucer was a squire, his father was a merchant, he resembled the Franklin at the time he was writing the Tales, and, though not technically a clerk, he held clerkly jobs and represented himself, in such efforts as the House of Fame, as clerk-like. This sequence, I believe, thereby represents a dynamic and conflicted conversation among Chaucer's and his father's masculine occupations, past and present (or, more specifically, among what Elizabeth Fowler has termed the "social persons" corresponding to these occupations), a conversation that is at the same time (and necessarily) a searching examination of the place of fiction in human life. The key ratios in the sequence are, on the one hand, that between adolescence (Clerk and Squire) and maturity (Merchant and Franklin) and, on the other hand, that between demystification and belief (whether naive or willed). As tellers, the sequence has two competing father-figures and two dependents, and, in the dynamics among these, the central Merchant-Squire transition—precisely that which the MerSQL division obscures—is pivotal, representing a thematically overdetermined juxtaposition of Chaucer's mercantile paternal heritage and his quasi-aristocratic youth.