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# 'Which was the mooste fre': Chaucer's realistic humour and insight into human nature, as shown in *The Frankeleyns Tale*

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In Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* the concluding question 'which was the mooste fre' (1622) is not explicitly answered either by the Franklin or by any of the other pilgrims.[1] Yet it is not merely a rhetorical question added by Chaucer to drive the point of the story home. Recently Piero Boitani noticed that the *Tale* 'ends with this question, topical but not merely rhetorical' as an illustration of how 'the absolute paradigms of official secular culture are forced to a compromise, as in the *Knight's Tale*... or else they are forced to leave the question open, as in the *Franklin's Tale*,' where the question is one of reality being 'constantly broken up and recomposed in a continual dialectic of high and low, positive and negative, which through the irony of the author's treatment sometimes change places.'[2]

An attempt to answer the question is further justified by the fact that both in Chaucer's immediate source and in the best-known of the most ancient sources the question is an integral part of the narrative. The probable direct source for *The Franklin's Tale*, Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo*, has the story in an episode consisting of 'questioni d'amore', in which the question is a real one, discussed and decided on by the presiding day-queen. And the Sanskrit *Vetala*-stories, a collection of riddles set by a vampire to a king, puts the question like this:

> So tell me, King, which was the really generous man of those three ...? And if you know and do not tell, your head shall split into a hundred pieces.[3]

So again, a real enough question, which the king duly answers.

The possibility that the Lady Dorigen could even contend for the palm of generosity is ruled out by all versions. One version of the *Vetala*-stories states specifically why:

> It is a proper act to fulfil a promise; but to preserve chastity is, in every respect, one of the chief virtues for women: consequently, to be engaged in the violation of chastity from the fear of breaking a promise, must be called the act of an unchaste one. Hence her firmness in truth cannot be commendable.[4]

The discussion of the question in *Il Filocolo* also brushes aside Dorigen most inelegantly:

> Even if *he* possessed every other virtue, this vice (of having a wife lacking in chastity) seems to have the power to contaminate and ruin them all.
>
> Therefore the chastity which a good woman renders to her husband is a great honor, and should be cherished most dearly. He who is granted such a gift through grace may be called blessed, although we believe that there are few who may be envied for such a good.
>
> But to return to the subject of the enquiry ... [5]

For Chaucer's rendering of the story in *The Franklin's Tale* these accusations are obviously too severe. There is no trace of subdued promiscuity in Dorigen's character. Her 'rash promise' to love Aurelius on an impossible condition is, in fact, a polite refusal in the playful manner of Courtly Love. That is shown to be ill-considered, if not positively unwise, but not out of character for a chaste wife in polite society. Chaucer may be suggesting in his story how ill-advised that kind of polite manner is, but his character of Dorigen is, in the terms of the narrative, only held up for commiseration, not for either admiration or rejection. She is typically the inspirer of generosity. The audience is invited to view her with commiseration even before her 'rash promise,' as soon as her husband has left and all her friends join in an effort to cheer her up amid her sorrowing and her questioning of God's benevolence (814-924). Then, when things have come to a head, our pity is invoked by her long set speech of *exempla* of wives and maidens beset by cruel lovers (1355-1456). For the rest she is, structurally speaking, dismissed into the happy ending together with her husband, in the same close association that also marked the beginning.

So the choice is, as it always had been, between the husband, the lover, and the magician. The wise King of the *Vetala*-stories considered as the most generous a robber who is the equivalent of the magician in *The Franklin's Tale*. His generosity was not counterbalanced by love for the lady as the husband's and lover's were, nor by fear of being exposed. He freely gave up what he was to gain, inspired by the generosity of the husband and the lover towards the lady.

This, in itself perfectly valid and perfectly sensible, answer will not do for *The Franklin's Tale*. In a story that, in its opening, so clearly states its frame of reference as being concerned with Love and the effects of 'gentillesse' within a love-relationship (729-802), the magician can never be more than a subsidiary character. In the *sententia* 'Love is a thyng as any spirit free' (767), the idea of 'fredom' as the opposite of constraint and petty-mindedness is firmly linked to love. I accept John Stevens' description of this 'fredom' as 'an openheartedness, a total lack of self-seeking, a generosity of the spirit.'[6] Now the magician may, in the end, show all this to a remarkable degree, but he is not a lover, and therefore

he is peripheral in the story. His function can only be to show how ennobling and inspiring the 'gentillesse' of the others is.

In *Il Filocolo* the palm of generosity goes to the husband. The day-queen of the Court of Love, Fiammmetta, ruled:

> ... truly each of them was very liberal; if we consider the cases – the first with respect to his honor, the second with respect to his lustful will, and the third with respect to the riches he had gained, was indeed courteous. And therefore, if we wish to understand which of them used the greatest liberality or courtesy, it is appropriate to decide which of these three things is the most valuable. When we have determined this, it is clear that we shall know who was the most liberal, for he who gives up the most is to be held the most liberal. And of these three things one is precious: that is, honor ... . The second is to be fled: that is, a lustful union ... . The third is not to be desired: that is, riches ... . And so, if only honor is to be cherished among these three things, and the others not, then he used the greatest liberality who gave away the lady, although he acted less than wisely in so doing. He was also the leader in this liberality, in that the others followed him. Therefore, according to our judgment, he who gave up the lady in whom resided his honor was more liberal than the others. (Miller, pp. 129-30)

And even though *The Franklin's Tale* is neither socially nor structurally an exact parallel to Boccaccio's story, it is true for Chaucer's husband Arveragus as well that his generosity results from an ideal of honour that deserves the highest esteem.

Fiammetta's point about his being the leader in liberality is true for Arveragus, too. But certainly also her *caveat* that he acted less than wisely will seem appropriate to most readers of *The Franklin's Tale*. The thought is even anticipated by the narrator:

> Paraventure an heep of yow, ywis,
> Wol holden hym a lewed man in this
> That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie.

But he continues blithely, and rather curiously:

> Herkneth the tale er ye upon hire crie.
> She may have bettre fortune than yow semeth;
> And whan that ye han herd the tale, demeth. (1493-98)

The narrator is brushing aside, very lightly, in no more than six lines, any objection that Arveragus' great act of generosity is only 'proved' by the narrative as being saved by the bell. He must be confident that this is not a serious objection. Dieter Mehl has recently argued the point thus:

> At first, this looks like an ironic excuse which only very simple readers will take seriously. Arveragus' actions are not made any more honourable by the reflection that some surprising turn of events, certainly not reckoned with by him, may suddenly resolve her dilemma

> and put her out of her misery. His act of selfless loyalty would be completely invalidated if he were not genuinely convinced that Dorigen would become Aurelius' mistress. Thus we may easily get the impression that, for all his apparent integrity, he violates the principle of conjugal faith by asking his wife to commit adultery. ...
>
> It is obvious, though, that the narrator wants to present Arveragus' decision as exemplary, and he is partly justified by the clearly unrealistic character of the story, which is in many ways more akin to a parable than to a psychologically consistent narrative. Its logic is rather like that of the Old Testament account of Abraham and Isaac: Abraham's unquestioning obedience is put to the test, proved and rewarded even though the strict observance of the divine command would have meant killing his own child. The happy outcome is by no means to be counted on from the beginning, but nevertheless justifies, in retrospect, the exemplary reaction of Abraham, who was seriously prepared to sacrifice his own son to the divine will. Similarly, Arveragus, according to the premisses of the story, acts quite correctly by choosing the more difficult path and by refusing to resolve the moral dilemma with a simple sophism.[7]

The parallel seems apt. However, it does leave open the question what kind of story it is that has such willing suspension of disbelief in common with the parable. *The Franklin's Tale* is clearly not a parable. A year before the English translation of Mehl's book came out, Derek Pearsall had argued:

> There are many things that a decent and sensible man in his situation could have done, and this is not one of them. An intolerable strain is placed on any straightforwardly naturalistic reading of the Tale by Arviragus's action, despite the resounding generalisation with which he concludes:
>
> 'Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe' (1479)
>
> We do not need to be told what St Augustine said about the sanctity of the marriage-vow or about the nullity of rash promises that involve sinful conduct ... , for we appreciate perfectly clearly that Arviragus's act is not that of a sensible man, not even a sensible pagan, and we understand that the world in which such acts are admired is not the world of ordinary reality.
>
> Yet we do understand that his act is to be admired, that it is the demonstration in action of some ideal code of behaviour. There appears to be, therefore, a conflict between the general 'feel' of the story and the creakiness of the hinge on which it turns. It is a not uncommon experience for the reader of Chaucer. What Chaucer often seems to be doing is to take a conventional form of story and to render it with an intense quality of imaginative engagement, so that the enigmatic nature of the story as a representation of the matter of experience and reality is brought into sharp focus, and the reader is stimulated to unexpected feats of perceptual tolerance.[8]

In short, while Chaucer's art transcends the narrative conventions of romance, the story is to be read and understood with the willing suspension of disbelief characteristic for romance and fairy-tale.

What code of behaviour is to be taken as ideal by the conventions of this form of story is apparent from the opening lines. After a prologue which itself begins by announcing that the following tale is a traditional Breton Lay, the story opens with:

In Armorik, that called is Britayne,
Ther was a knyght that loved and dide his payne
To serve a lady in his beste wise;
And many a labour, many a greet emprise
He for his lady wroghte, er she were wonne.
For she was oon the faireste under sonne,
And eek therto comen of so heigh kynrede
That wel unnethes dorste this knyght, for drede,
Telle hire his wo, his peyne, and his distresse.
But atte laste she, for his worthynesse,
And namely for his meke obeysaunce,
Hath swich a pitee caught of his penaunce
That pryvely she fil of his accord
To take hym for hir ... (729-42)

If the sentence had ended with 'lover,' this would have been a perfect and a perfectly traditional description of Courtly Love. It is true, of course, that the significance of this *Tale* lies in the fact that the line ends with 'hir housbonde and hir lord,' and so transplants the ideals of Courtly Love into the marital relationship, but the signal remains that the genre-expectations created by this opening are those of the courtly-love romance. And that genre-pattern determines the kind of the narrative. It sets the theme on which the variations are then played. And in spite of the variations, the functions – or in other words the 'logic' – of the characters and the other narrative elements remain those characteristic of the traditional romance.

This provides the context in which Arveragus is, indeed, an embodiment of an ideal honour, and as far as the conventions of this *Tale* go, without reservations. For the question whether or not the *Tale* is part of a marriage-debate, or whether Chaucer has anything profound to say about marriage, I tend to agree with John Stevens' view:

> Despite popular belief to the contrary, Chaucer was doing nothing new or unexpected in reconciling courtly love and marriage; it is the power of his idealization that attracts us, not its novelty. ...
>
> Whatever *The Franklin's Tale* is 'about', it is certainly not a paean in praise of 'romantic marriage'. It simply happens that a happy balanced and mutual relationship is the necessary starting-point for what Chaucer has to say. It is the premiss from which Chaucer begins, not the conclusion to which he moves. Marriage typifies such a relation, in its happy mutuality, but it is not the exclusive condition of it. The proper relationship of friends, spouses and lovers is the same: they must obey one another, they must not try to dominate ('constreyne by maistrye'), they must respect the desire for individual freedom.
>
> If Chaucer had simply wanted to praise marriage, would he, I wonder, have chosen a story in which the vows of marriage are overridden? (Stevens, pp. 62-63)

Dieter Mehl adds another consideration to this argument:

> ... it has rightly been questioned whether the elimination of 'maistrye' from the concept of marriage would really have been so easily compatible with medieval convictions about the relative positions of husband and wife, however convincing it may appear to the modern reader. But, even apart from this consideration, the somewhat theoretical and sophistic neatness of the definition is all too obvious, and its realization on this earth hardly seems a real possibility; this is why, like all pat solutions, it is not particularly helpful in practice. (Mehl, p. 167)

Taking all this into consideration, then, we may assume that the husband is the upholder of the ideal of honour in this *Tale*, but that does not necessarily condemn the young lover Aurelius as a simple marriage-breaker.

But the *Prologue* to the *Tale* holds another signal for us, too. Apart from the brief announcement of the genre as a Breton Lay, the rest of the *Prologue* consists of an elaborate excuse on the narrator's part for his lack of command of rhetoric. The at times highly rhetorical manner and construction of the *Tale* indicates that this excuse is to be taken ironically. It gives the Franklin as narrator an excuse for deviating occasionally from the strictest conventions of this kind of tale, and it may place him fairly outside the courtly tradition, thereby giving him greater liberty to manipulate the material. But, assuming with Dieter Mehl that 'it seems hardly practicable, or indeed profitable, to draw a clear line between Chaucer and his Franklin' (Mehl, p. 166), the ironic excuse can also be seen to contain in its texture some rather more subtle signals on the part of Chaucer the poet. It is, indeed, a claim that the story will be rendered with the intense quality of imaginative engagement that Derek Pearsall noted above. 'Thyng that I speke, it moot be bare and pleyn' (720) may suggest that Chaucer intends to get nearer to the experience of love than the genre traditionally allows, with less artifice. A similar signal may be read in 'Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede,/ But swiche colours as growen in the mede,/ Or elles swiche as men dye or peynte' (723-25), which in its texture seems to contain a rejection of rhetoric as a prop for mere conventionalism, and a distinction that he does appear to accept, between love in a 'natural' setting and love that is 'put on' in a merely conventional way, as an attempt to 'use' the convention. This distinction may very well hold the key to the primary difference between the husband Arveragus and the lover Aurelius later on in the story. All in all, the author seems to be announcing that the conventional material of the *Tale* will be treated in a critical way.

The very lightness of these signals, wrapped up as they are in a conventional *captatio benevolentiae*, prevents us, however, from taking the announced critical treatment as the dominant mood. It only justifies an

expectation that there might be slight shifts and adjustments in the values of the otherwise conventional story. And in the conventional story the palm of generosity goes to the husband Arveragus, for very much the same reasons that Fiammetta gave for the tale in *Il Filocolo*. By the conventions of the story the knight has been duly 'civilized' by his love for his lady. Her love has inspired him to uphold the ideal of honour that he represents, and his generosity has been inspired directly by that ideal courtly love. In the terms of the story he secures the happy ending, by having the courage of his convictions. All the others only follow him, as Fiammetta pointed out, ennobled in their turn by the quality of the love that they witness between Arveragus and Dorigen. In the face of all dangers 'gentillesse' has proved invincible, and as the original bearer and inspirer of that virtue, Arveragus will be generally considered 'the mooste fre' by the Canterbury pilgrims, including the Franklin himself. The *sententiae* dispersed through the story by the narrator support that view.

The happy ending, in itself, suggests the same, were it not that the neat pattern is abruptly broken open again. Instead of a 'happily ever after,' we get 'Of thise two folk ye gete of me namoore' (1556), which suddenly reduces them to just two people among the others. After this the scene shifts to young Aurelius and the magician for another 64 lines, immediately followed by the question which concludes the story.

Again, as I argued above, a slight shift in the traditional presentation, but not quite a disruption of the pattern. It does, however, 'open up' the end. When the final question is put, we are left with the magician riding away and Aurelius left alone on the stage. So, perhaps, the case does not rest with the conventionally acceptable answer. In *The Complete Anglist*, Hans H. Meier warned against inferring from general, logical-systematic assumptions when dealing with medieval texts, and this may be a case in point:

> in historical explanation remember the lessons from living speech, in linguistic dissection be careful not to injure but – if necessary – to revive the literary organism, in literary interpretation keep in closest touch with the linguistic and social realities.[9]

And if I apply his prescription to *The Franklin's Tale*, a rather more complex but much more satisfactory answer seems to come forward.

Not only are we left in the end with Aurelius alone on the stage, but he has been presented to us throughout with more stylistic and dramatic vividness. Whereas the husband and wife are merely sketched as vehicles for the acting out of ideal love, and we do not get their names until the nature of their love has been fully described and commented on, Aurelius is pictured in lively and sympathetic detail at his first appearance:

Upon this daunce, amonges othere men,
Daunced a squier biforn Dorigen,
That fressher was and jolyer of array,
As to my doom, than is the month of May.
He syngeth, daunceth, passynge any man
That is, or was, sith that the world bigan.
Therwith he was, if men sholde hym discryve,
Oon of the beste farynge man on lyve;
Yong, strong, right vertuous, and riche, and wys,
And wel biloved, and holden in greet prys. (925-34)

And this goes on for another 30 lines describing his secret love for Dorigen in exemplary Courtly Love terms. He is the young, immature courtly lover, set by the side of the mature and considerate Arveragus. And handsome, virtuous and wise are hardly the kind of details selected to spell a villainous marriage-breaker.

And his grief at Dorigen's near-absolute refusal is also amply described in 80 lines, a passage whose length is surpassed only in the story by Dorigen's long monologue of despair when she must fulfil her promise. But again, Dorigen's speech consists mainly of *exempla*, whereas Aurelius' is entirely dramatic. Similarly Aurelius' outburst of grief after his act of generosity is much longer and more dramatic than Arveragus' after his generous decision. Arveragus bursts out in seven lines, imploring his wife to keep the affair secret (1480-86). That serves very well to show how much his generosity cost him emotionally. It functions as a contrast to enhance dramatically the courage of his honourable convictions. Aurelius' grief is portrayed in 50 lines of vivid drama (1557-1606). For a large part he may be concerned solely with the money he has lost, but that does, in its way, also dramatize how much his generosity has cost him. But it also contains his reasons for his act of 'gentillesse': if Arveragus' generosity sprang, ultimately, from true love and respect for his wife, Aurelius' appears to spring not only from Arveragus' inspiring example, but first and foremost from compassion and pity for her innocence. Aurelius has not merely followed a noble example, but has through that example come to true love and 'gentillesse,' so that he, too, can 'doon a gentil dede/ As wel as kan a knyght' (1543-44).

So the young squire appears to receive preferential treatment if not thematically, then structurally and dramatically, at the hands of the narrator. This impression is corroborated by the fact that Chaucer has prepared the reader for a prejudice on the Franklin's part in favour of young squires. The Franklin first appears as interrupting his fellow-pilgrim the Squire in the telling of his tale. And in 'the wordes of the Frankeleyn to the Squier, and the wordes of the Hoost to the Frankeleyn' immediately preceding *The Franklin's Tale*, it becomes apparent that his comment 'Thus

kan a squier doon a gentil dede/ *As wel* as kan a knyght, withouten drede' towards the end of this tale has a deeper significance than that of a mere *sententia* confirming the ennobling influence of the Knight. The Franklin is presented as being genuinely impressed in particular by a young man who 'myghte lerne gentillesse aright' (694), and for the purpose he is given a son who will not. We are, almost melodramatically, given to understand that our narrator-to-be feels strongly about this, as the Host also notices. But the point is made that the narrator is aware, from the experiences with his own son, that young men do not necessarily follow noble examples.

On the critical issue whether this makes the Franklin a vehicle for a critical portraiture of the social climber (or a sentimental dotard) I tend to agree with Derek Pearsall where he comments:

> There is little historical support for the view of the Franklin as a member of a class of bourgeois *parvenus* ...

and further on:

> it may be stressed again that the weakness of the systematic ironisation is that it simplifies the text in an intolerably reductive manner, and substitutes meanings that derive from the critic's own specialised views for the free and complex play of the author's mind. (Pearsall, p. 148)

The narrator's motives are not further made explicit in the text, and I do not find any evidence that social envy is distorting the picture any further. What we have is a narrator whose shown interest in young men learning 'gentillesse aright' may also be supposed to be present in the *Tale*. His great respect (for whatever reasons he may have that) for the chivalric honour of the husband is, of course, undiminished, because 'gentillesse' itself is the object of his admiration. But finding the same quality in a young man must please the Franklin to such an extent that, in his heart, he may have given the prize to Aurelius.

If *The Canterbury Tales* are to be read as a dramatic whole, it seems to me relevant to notice that Chaucer's portrait of the Squire in the *General Prologue* shows the same ambiguities that are also at work in the characterization of Aurelius. The young men are promisingly following in the footsteps of the older (ideal) knights, but showing at the same time the formative adolescent steps in that career, with all the gay splendour, and the imbalance and the risks of that quest.

With Aurelius so successful in the attainment of 'gentillesse' and so vividly put before us, the answer to the question 'which was the mooste fre' appears to be a double one, though I would call it complex rather than ambiguous. There is an official answer: the husband; and one 'from the heart': the young lover. And that is an effect not untypical of Chaucer's

'realistic humour and insight into human nature,' which Hans H. Meier found so characteristic of *The Canterbury Tales*.[10]

NOTES

1. Quotations from the *Franklin's Tale* are from F.N. Robinson ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: OUP, [2]1957): 135-44.
2. Piero Boitani, *English Medieval Narrative in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, trans. Joan Krakover Hall (Cambridge: CUP, 1986): 247-48.
3. N.M. Penzer ed., *The Ocean of Story: Being C.H. Tawney's Translation of Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagara* (London: privately printed Chas. J. Sawyer, 1927), VII, 5-9.
4. *The Betal Punchabinsati*, trans. Adalut Khan (Calcutta, 1864), Story IX, 75-79.
5. As quoted in Robert P. Miller ed., *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (New York: OUP, 1977): 133.
6. John Stevens, *Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches* (London: Hutchinson, 1973): 64.
7. Dieter Mehl, *Geoffrey Chaucer: An Introduction to his Narrative Poetry* (1973; Cambridge: CUP, 1986): 168-69.
8. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985): 152.
9. H.H. Meier, *The Complete Anglist* (Groningen: Wolters, 1967): 27-29.
10. *Winkler Prins Encyclopedie* ([7]1968), s.v. Chaucer.