Chaucer’s Criseyde: Woman in Society, Woman in Love

unambiguous vices and virtues propagated in the mass of contemporary homiletic work. This was inevitably disturbing to traditional and seemingly uncomplicated certainties as it works to subvert all absolutes and static finalities. Leszek Kolakowski’s essay on the antagonism between what he calls ‘the priest and the jester’ seems relevant:

The priest is the guardian of the absolute; he sustains the cult of the final and the obvious as acknowledged by and contained in tradition. The jester is he who moves in good society without belonging to it, and treats it with impertinence; he who doubts all that appears self-evident ... to unveil the nonobvious behind the obvious, the nonfinal behind the final.

Chaucer (unlike many of his exegetes) was, in the sense Kolakowski expounds, a jester rather than a priest or inquisitor. Nevertheless, as Kolakowski adds, ‘there are more priests than jesters at a king’s court, just as there are more police-men than artists in his realm,’ and the poet must have realized the unsettling implications of his own profoundly social psychology and imaginative ethical thought, the disturbing implications of being a jester in a culture where priests and intellectual policemen played a major role. But as for Criseyde, woman in society and woman in love, Chaucer was neither of her party without knowing it, nor one of the conventional moralists’ party against her. Instead this jester at a king’s court developed a complex, profoundly dialectical grasp of the interactions between individual and society which is subversive of all priestly absolutes, and which is as meaningful today as it was in his own culture.

CHAPTER 6

Chaucer: Love, Sex and Marriage

For no effect of tyranny can sit more heavy on the Commonwealth, then this household unhappiness on the family. ... Love in marriage cannot live nor subsist, unless it be mutual; and where love cannot be, there can be left of wedlock nothing, but the empty husk of an outside matrimony; as undelightfull and unpleasing to God, as any other kind of hypocrisie.

Milton, Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, 2nd, 1644

Among unequals what society
Can sort, what harmony or true delight?
Milton, Paradise Lost, VIII, 11. 383-4

In The Canterbury Tales Chaucer’s fascination with the interactions between individual being, predominant social practices and received ideas focussed on those living within the institution of marriage. Here I think we will respond to the poetry more fully if we recall some basic points about marriage in Chaucer’s period. Marriage was primarily a transaction organized by males to serve economic and political ends, with the woman treated as a useful, child-bearing appendage to the land or goods being exchanged. As Eileen Power wrote, ‘“Let me not to the marriage of true fief admit impediments” may be said to have been the dominating motive of the lord with son or daughter or ward to marry. Weddings were often arranged and sometimes solemnized when children were in their cradles. ... Grown women could also be summarily married off.’ Once married, the woman lost any economic rights and possessions she had before marriage, and while there may perhaps be some signs that peasant women could
have been in a slightly better position in relation to their own social groups than other women, the basic structure of the institution was the same throughout society. ¹

Conventional male attitudes to this institution, and the place of women in it, are well displayed in two works contemporary with Chaucer, the book translated by Eileen Power under the title The Goodman of Paris, and the Book of the Knight of the Tower. The former was written by a man of over sixty to his fifteen-year-old wife, and includes a host of exempla to show the woman her duties of unquestioning submission and minute attention to the husband’s every need, while insisting she should love him devotedly. The following is a representative illustration: ²

For to show what I have said, that you ought to be very privy and loving with your husband, I set here a rustic enexample. ... Of domestic animals you shall see how that a greyhound or mastiff or little dog, whether it be on the road, or at table, or in bed, ever keepeth him close to the person from whom he taketh his food and leaveth all the others and is distant and shy with them; and if the dog is afar off, he always has his heart and his eye upon his master; even if his master whip him and throw stones at him, the dog followeth, wagging his tail and lying down before his master to appease him, and through rivers, through woods, through thieves and through battles followeth him.

This sentiment is perfectly conventional and it is worth noting how it lacks any reflexivity, how closed it is against any critical voice. There could be no place here for suggestions that ‘love’ and ‘maistrie’ might actually be incompatible; no place for reflection on the implications of treating another human being as a dog (‘in bed’ too); no pause to wonder what kind of ‘love’ such a relationship could generate. Chaucer would subject this male voice of ‘reason’ to some profound poetic scrutiny, however complacently entrenched it was in his culture.

The Knight of the Tower demonstrates just how well entrenched it was, for he assumes that the best attitudes are utter subservience on the part of women and unquestioning domination on the part of men, supported by male aggression and physical violence towards women in a culture of discourse quite alien to self-criticism or reflexivity. One typical example of the work’s outlook is its account of a wife who answered her husband back: in response, he ‘smote her with his fyste to the erthe, and smote her with his foote on the vysage so that he brake her nose by which she was ever after al disfigured. And so by her ryotte and ennoye she gat her a croked nose, moche evyll.’¹ The celebration of male violence at the slightest challenge to the male ego permeates the work, as does a total lack of reflexivity. Here, for instance, he does not look at his own language and wonder whether riot is a proper description for a wife answering her husband, or whether it might not more appropriately apply to a man beating up a woman, or even to an author who lauds such an action; he never questions the morality of the husband nor does he recall texts like St Paul’s, ‘Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it’ (Eph. 5:25). All talk about ‘love’ in the Knight’s text actually turns out to be the male’s demand for a totally unquestioning obedience from the female he owns. In return, the man would abstain from violence towards the woman.

Mention of St Paul may encourage readers to wonder whether Christian teaching about marriage significantly altered this situation. The answer is that it offered no serious challenge to the situation outlined, and did much to sanctify these attitudes. Readers concerned to follow the theologians’ ideas about marriage, love and sex are fortunate in having the fine study by J. T. Noonan, Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists. What this demonstrates exhaustively is that orthodox Christian tradition consistently separated love both from sexuality and the primary purposes of marriage. Procreation and the avoidance of adultery were the primary purposes of marriage. Noonan observes the influence of the social structure, patriarchalism and dominant male attitudes in shaping theologians’ ideas, and concludes that, ‘The failure to incorporate love into the purpose of marital intercourse was largely a failure of theological analysis. The failure occurred in a society whose mating customs made procreation, not love, the most prominent value of marriage.’ H. A. Kelly, examining the purposes theologians and canonists attributed to Christian marriage concludes likewise that ‘mutual love between the spouses is notably absent from their lists’. In attempting to understand the depth of Chaucer’s exploration of love, sex and marriage we need to bear in mind the orthodox religious tradition as well as social realities he knew so well.
On top of the theological failure Noonan describes, we should also remember the very positive contribution orthodox Christian ideas made to the traditional downgrading and oppression of women celebrated by the Knight of the Tower or the Goodman of Paris. The Wife of Bath has an excellent knowledge of the anti-feminist tradition sponsored by the medieval church. St Thomas Aquinas was quite orthodox in following St Augustine’s assertion that the only point God could have had in making woman was as a procreating instrument, ‘since man can be more effectively helped by another man in other works’:

As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of a woman comes from defect in the active force or from some material indisposition, or even from some external influence; such as that of a south wind, which is moist . . . .

So spoke ‘auctoritee’. With statements like this, backed up as objective doctrine by the church, went a web of traditional and vulgar forms of male double-think and double standards, from which we are still far from free. The orthodox teaching on the sacrament of Christian marriage thus contributed to the disastrous separation of love from sex and marriage, the downgrading of women who did not choose the path of virginity, and the unreflexive male prejudices pervading the culture.

Before moving on to Chaucer’s work we should acknowledge the existence of important counter-tendencies to the dominant ideologies and practices we have sketched. Probably the most relevant of these were being developed in courtly literature of the high and later Middle Ages. Scholars such as J. Frappier and M. Lazar have shown how the oppositions between fin’amors and marriage in earlier troubadour poetry were gradually superseded in courtly literature of northern France in the later twelfth century, a process involving transformation of both fin’amors and images of marriage. The history is a complicated one, still being written, but it seems clear enough that Chretien de Troyes was the outstanding artist in this development. The incorporation of passionate, non-coercive mutual and sexually vital love into marriage was a vision which obviously contradicted the power relations of the period and the dominant attitudes to marriage and women propagated by laymen and ecclesiastics alike. What Chretien did was to give form and voice to new aspirations very much in conflict with established realities. In doing this he (with those who followed him) was putting art to one of the great roles it has continually played, giving expression to wishes, experiences and beliefs which go against the predominant values and sentiments of the established culture, creating visions of alternative forms of life and relationship. Such art may even lead people to see themselves, their relationships and their culture in new ways.

Unlike Criseyde, the Wife of Bath may seem to resist the prevailing order with abundant energy and dedication. Her project for survival is to make spaces in the culture for her own energies to find expression. She seems to rebel against conventional controls and the attitudes we have outlined, for which she has been severely chastized by sermonizing and would-be ‘historical’ critics. Yet while Chaucer presents her rebellion as real, he simultaneously discloses the complexities involved in opposing dominant social and ideological forms. He dramatizes the affirmation of the established culture in her negation of it, creating an aesthetic representation of the way subordinate groups or individuals may so internalize the assumptions and practices of their oppressors that not only their daily strategies of survival but their very acts of rebellion may perpetuate the outlook against which they rebel. Their penetration of dominant ideology and practice is distorted and displaced into a significant conformity with the established values which they are opposing. In grasping and embodying this dialectical process Chaucer was meditating on his own patriarchal culture, its values, its organization of love, sexuality and marriage.

Before the publication of Alfred David’s fine study of Chaucer, The Strumpet Muse, one would have had to argue this case about her rebellion and conformity at some length, but his chapter on the Wife makes this unnecessary. He shows how the Wife’s attitudes to marriage ‘are the sound economic ones of her time’, and that having penetrated the connection between male domination and economic power she sets about gaining control of property in approved male fashion. She states that in her culture ‘al is for to selle’ (l. 418) and so, in Alfred David’s words ‘regards “love” like any other commodity to be bought and sold in the world’s market place’. In
these terms she succeeds in the conventional ‘business of marriage’. The dialectic mentioned in my previous paragraph is very evident here as she succeeds by accepting the reduction of self and body to the status of a commodity to be bought by males, by accepting the reduction of female sexuality to an instrument of manipulation, control and punishment, powers partly retained even when she has been purchased. In her first four marriages she accepts that the institution cannot be the place for loving, affectionate relations. She does reject the traditional role of the passive and devotedly servile wife (her rebellion), but only to take on the traditional and culturally celebrated role of the domineering, egotistic husband (her affirmation of the culture) – ‘myself have been the whippe’ (I. 175). The Wife’s Prologue provides real insight to the pervasiveness and nature of the dominant culture and male ideology, something that has been overlooked by her moralistic antagonists.

The issue of procreation and marital sex is another area where the presence of rebellion and conformism is striking. The Wife’s text includes some memorable celebrations of her wish for sexual fulfilment and happiness, something always condemned by authoritative Christian tradition, as the Wife knows very well (II. 37-8, 614). She makes it clear that it is sexual pleasure she relishes as a good in itself. The delights she recounts from her fifth marriage, ‘in oure bed he was so fresh and gay’, have nothing to do with procreation of the official Christian duty of pleasurelessly ‘paying the debt’ of intercourse to deliver the incontinent spouse from adultery (II. 508-14; see also I. 35-46, 14650, 469-70, 617-18). Nevertheless, when she discusses God’s purposes in making sexual organs (II. 11-34) she begins by failing to distinguish the different potentials of sexual organs and labels them members ‘of generacion’ (II. 116). This classification undermines her case before her argument is even launched, revealing the power of ‘auctoritee’ in moulding her perceptions and reasoning about her ‘experience’, for there she has lived through very definite distinctions between dutiful wife copulation and the kind of joyful love-making she describes in her fifth marriage. She is quick to mock those who claim sexual organs ‘were maked for purгacioun’ or as markers of gender, appealing to the ‘experience’ of sex (II. 118-24). Yet Chaucer again shows received ‘auctoritee’ taking her over, and makes the very syntax enact the processes of consciousness involved:

So that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,
I say this, that they maked ben for bothe,
This is to seye, for office, and for ese
Of engendrure, ther we nat God displease.

(Wo B Pr., II. 125-8)

The first two lines take up her appeal to ‘experience’ against ‘the clerkes’ and promise to state her own meaning explicitly. The next line seems to fulfil this promise ‘they maked ben ... for ese’. Here, we feel, the rebellious Wife makes her stand. Despite the opening classification, she now places sheer ese as one of God’s aims in giving humans their sexuality. The ‘clerkes’ are put in their place. But not for long, since the next line forces us to re-interpret and qualify ‘ese’ in a strictly orthodox sense – ‘ese/Of engendrure’. The Wife’s ‘experience’ of sexual pleasure as an end in itself within her fifth marriage collapses into the traditional clerkly orthodoxo regarding sexual intercourse. After this it is no surprise to see her move on to the second orthodox purpose of marriage, according to what ‘men ... in hir bookes sette’: to make ‘paiement’ of the marital ‘dette’ (II. 129-32). Nor is it a surprise that she concludes with further confirmation of the ideological orthodoxies against which she is overtly in rebellion: ‘Thanne were they maad... To purge uryne, and eek for engendrure’ (II. 113-14). In fact, this passage witnesses to the difficulties of going beyond received paradigms and orthodoxies within received concepts and vocabulary. The result is again an affirmation of the traditional and orthodox failure to integrate love, sex and marriage.

Even her rebellious experiments with sexuality freed from the corrupting economic determinants of the medieval marital institution show the effects of orthodox ideology, for here too she perpetuates and mirrors central aspects of the tradition she opposes. As the latter separated love and sexuality, downgrading and dehumanizing sexual relations, just so the Wife presents her own sexuality in terms of an impersonal force and a sexual organ quite abstracted from the complete human being, body and soul:

Ye shul have queynte right ynogh at eve.
He is to greet a nygard that wolde werne
A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;
He shal have never the lasse light, pardee....
I koude noght withdrawe
My chambr of Venus from a good felawe.

(Wof B Pr., ll. 332-5, 617-18)

This fragmentation and depersonalization of sex separates it from any constant and total human love, and is actually the very image of orthodox ecclesiastical tradition, again something the Wife’s modern antagonists have overlooked. It contrasts absolutely with the committedly personal love uniting all aspects of the individual which we saw in Troilus and Criseyde and which Chrétien located in marriage (Yvain), suggesting a real alternative to both dominant tradition and the Wife’s perpetuation of it in her libertarian rebellion.

Of course, the Wife also has a complex self-awareness (as in her moving meditation of her past and present, 11. 469-79), as well as the generosity and craving for love described by Alfred David. Before leaving her, we will look at the final recorded marriage in which she attempted to continue her rebellion in a manner which could unite what medieval Christianity and society sundered — love, sexual happiness and marriage (11. 508-14, 585-602). My fifth husband, she notes ‘I took for love and no riches’ (l. 526). Through her previous marriages and her successful ‘cloothemakyn’ she had accumulated enough money to exercise her free choice in a way the culture made impossible for younger women. This is a most promising though inevitably belated development.

But Chaucer’s imagination was so engaged with the realities of his own culture in relation to the Wife’s consciousness and actions that he did not allow the fifth marriage to achieve any straightforward transcendence of these realities. First, as Alfred David noticed, she continues to envisage it in terms of the market, human relations seen as the exchange of commodities (11. 515-24), however incompatible this is with the attempt to deliver herself and marriage from the market.’ 2 In this way she again perpetuates normal outlooks and practices. Second, Chaucer shows the powerful presence of the dominant culture she wishes to oppose in the way it has shaped the man’s expectations and values. These, the poet conveys, are not admirable. The Wife, now accepting standard practice, hands over ‘al the lond and fee’ (l. 630) to the young husband, although neither she nor the reader can avoid suspecting that his motives include the mercenary ones around which medieval marriage was constructed. 3

Furthermore, the male reacts to the Wife’s love and generosity as a conventional domineering husband, the sort admired by the Knight of the Tower (11.632-85). He tries to enforce his rejection of mutuality by repetitive and lengthy appeals to the anti-feminist tradition (11. 641-787), which Chaucer now satirizes and exposes as the superficial product of the unreflexive male ego. Even the form of speech embodies the tyrannical norms it assumes by precluding dialogue and any concern for anyone but the speaking self. Chaucer, a poet whose imagination was exceptionally reflexive and able to generate a multiplicity of perspectives, captures the one-dimensional folly of the highly respectable tradition Jankyn deploys. 4 The Wife now inevitably fights back using her experience to regain economic and psychological control over the man who would bully and subject her (11. 788-822). In her rebellion Chaucer has her once more perpetuate and illustrate the male-governed norms of the culture and their structuring of marriage. So total is the continuity with the dominant culture of discourse that she refers to her marital role in the traditional imagery which presented one partner as a human rider, the other (traditionally the woman, of course) as an animal to be ridden and controlled by the bridle. The Wife merely inverts the traditional positions within the structure of domination as she gains ‘bridel’, ‘governance of hous and lond’ and ‘al the soveraynetee’ (11. 811-18). 5 Too many scholars have attacked the woman here while ignoring how Chaucer has enacted a highly critical and dramatic reflection on orthodox marital ideologies and practices showing us how difficult it is to transcend them even when they are experienced as gravely inadequate.

Chaucer’s critical and reflexive meditations on medieval marriage also inform the Merchant’s Tale. Scholars have tended to treat its central relationship as a gross perversion of the admirable medieval sacrament and institution of Christian marriage, to see May and Januarie as extravagantly corrupt individuals who cast no light on the standard assumptions and practices of Chaucer’s world from which they are, allegedly, gross deviants. 6

But as Chaucer explored cultural norms through the Wife of
Bath’s Prologue so he did in the Merchant’s Tale, creating an imaginative vision which disclosed the structures and human consequences of the medieval institution of marriage and the ideologies which legitimated it, religious and profane.

The ‘worthy knight’ around whom the tale evolves is an elderly Christian gentleman whom we join as he is deciding to get married. At once Chaucer evokes the economic nexus which both moulded medieval marriage and was supported by it. The old man ‘lyved in greet prosperitee’ and determined to use his ‘tresor’ to get a young and fair wife ‘on’ whom he might enjoyably beget an heir, ensuring his property stayed in his own family (11. 1245-73, 1437-40). When Januarie proceeds to purchase himself a wife we must not assume he is being unusual or idiosyncratic. Chaucer images the medieval marriage market in action, displaying how old men like the Goodman of Paris could acquire brides. If readers take Januarie’s conduct here as a perverse aberration from a decent norm they not only manifest unnecessary ignorance about Chaucer’s society but misread the tale in a way which will consistently overlook the powerful critical dimensions of the poet’s imagination engaging with his own world. Even Justinus, who has received a good press from scholars, actually shares many commonplace assumptions with the old knight. The counsel he offers is obsessed with material possession and his whole approach to marriage is centred on his acceptance that it is another business transaction. He perceives individuals in terms of land, cattle and goods, viewing personal commitment purely as a transference of property rights (11. 1523-9). He wants a wife to be a good and safe investment for the man, telling Januarie to set up an inquiry into her wealth, attitude to property and temper. He has nothing to say about love, mutual responsibility or the self-sacrifice St Paul recommended to husbands (11. 1530-3). The ‘Justice’ Justinus counsels is no more than the pragmatic wisdom of the market-place allied to warnings about Januarie’s sexual decline which seem to echo his own experience (II. 1555-65).

Chaucer then represents the processes through which the knight decided who to bid for on the marriage market, a process of ‘Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse’:

Many fair shap and many a fair visage
Ther passeth thurgh his herte nyght by nyght,
one scholar recently accused May of ‘a willing prostitution’. Few statements about the text could be less justified, as I have noted, but it illustrates a common unwillingness to acknowledge that most (probably all) marriages in the middle and upper social groups were transactions in which human beings, their labour-power and their sexual-power were sold. In such a situation it would make more sense to call medieval parents, guardians and those holding rights over wards coercive but respectable pimps than to call May, and the women she represents ‘willing’ prostitutes.

As if to ensure we do not miss the normality and culturally sanctioned nature of Januarie’s conduct Chaucer moves us straight from the market to the church, from the social realities of marriage to the mediator of grace, doctrine and the saving sacraments, one of which is marriage:

But finally **ycomen** is the day  
That to the chirche bothe be they went  
For to receyve the hooly sacrament.  
Forth **comth** the preest, with stole aboute his nekke,  
And bad hire be lyk Sarra and Rebekke  
In wysdom and in **trouthe** of mariage;  
And seyde his orisons, as is usage,  
And croucheth hem, and bad God sholde hem blesse,  
And made al siker ynogh with hoolynesse.  
(Merchant, 11.1700-8)

This transition is most significant for it embodies the absorption of the church in the economic fabric and prevailing social practicesoftheworld, evenwhere these wereplainconflict withelements of its public doctrine. My impression is that the major implications of Chaucer’s decision to emphasize the church giving its unqualified blessing to this marriage, ‘as is usage’, have been missed. The poet examines the church’s use of its spiritual and material influence over individual Christians. In his text the church is clearly decisive in turning the exploitative and loveless purchase of a young person into a more than respectable union, a sacramental one. Chaucer completes this picture by telling us that when the appalled bride is brought to bed ‘as stille as stoon’ (again stressing the situation is imposed on her), it is the priest who blesses the bed in which this marital union, this sacramental mystery of Christ, and his church, is to be consummated (11. 1818-19). In the context, the assertion that the priest ‘made al siker ynoth with hoolynesse’ (11. 1708) works in two directions. As most commentators state, it ironically exposes Januarié’s delusions, his misunderstanding of the Christian dogma that enjoyment of marital sex is sinful, either venial or mortal, thus connecting it with his bizarre claim that a man cannot hurt himself with his own knife (an image discussed towards the end of chapter 4). But the second direction is at least as important, and it works against the priest and the church he represents. Piers Plowman and the Pardoner’s Prologue showed sacraments becoming part of a chronically simoniac set of practices in which they were exchanged for money or land, their effects purchased in a market exchange. In this situation people could very easily be led to believe that the sacramental ritual did indeed make ‘al siker ynoth with hoolynesse’, thus having some of their most vicious propensities legitimated and encouraged by the church. We note the priest offers no challenge to Januarié whatsoever, and makes no effort to ascertain whether May, ‘as stille as stoon’, genuinely had the inward consent theoretically necessary for a valid sacramental marriage. In this silence Chaucer mirrors the prevailing relationships between leading secular groups and the orthodox church, as well as the latter’s inability to transform practices and attitudes in which it was fully immersed. Thinking about the church’s role here, we may also see how it recalls what Noonan and Kelly described as its ‘failure to incorporate love into the purpose of marital intercourse’, the absence of ‘mutual love between the spouses’ in theologians’ and canonists’ lists of the chief ends of marital union. The fragmentation of love, marriage and sexuality in dominant and traditional ideology had its counterpart in the relationships experienced by individuals, as Chaucer’s poetry continues to reveal.

For Januarié, the wife he has acquired only exists to serve his ego, a totally obedient servant, housekeeper and nurse with the added ability to provide sexual gratification and heirs. His outlook is an ordinary male one, but Chaucer now looks closely at some of the forms of relationship which emerge from it and the institution of marriage, using his art to make us engage with the human consequences of the established realities. Januarié approaches sexual intercourse as a vehicle in which the male ego can confirm its own power in a self-gratifying consumption of the ‘yong flessh’, ‘the tendre veel’ recently acquired. Like the orthodox Parson,
Januarie perceives male sexuality as a ‘knyf’, an area of being quite separate from love and affection. The poetry which makes Januarie physically present is justly famous and has often been discussed (11. 1821-50). Kisses, which should be expressions of love and friendship become acts of male violence over the subordinate female and we are made to envisage the specific effects of his ‘thikke brustles ... Lyke to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as breere’ on her ‘tendre face’. By choosing the verb ‘rubbeth’ to depict Januarie’s kissings Chaucer suggests a deliberate intention to hurt May with this painful sandpapering, an impression which links his action both to his feelings at the feast, when ‘he gan hire to manace’ (1. 1752), and to the ensuing intercourse which he sees in terms of self-gratification which she must experience as an assault, an offence (11. 1828-30, 1840). The last thing that Januarie considers, any more than the Knight of the Tower, is the woman’s separate existence as a human being with her own wishes and thoughts. Such was the sacramental union imposed on May, a woman deprived of any possibilities of self-determination before marriage in a culture where there were few forces to encourage male self-criticism and affectionate awareness of the woman’s feelings. Chaucer’s art was actually one of the forces that did so, and he draws attention to this aspect in passing:

But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
Whan she hym saugh up sittyng in his sherte,
In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene.
(Merchant, 11. 185 l-4)

As readers have often observed, the horror of the performance to which May is subjected is conveyed through the poet’s particularization of the knight’s physical age as he croaks out his aubade, the slack skin shaking about his lean neck. But as important is the utterly complacent and unself-conscious attitude of the old knight, a complacency that is dependent on the support received from the major cultural institutions which licensed and blessed this union. Chaucer (for it is he, not the egotistic, self-deceiving and thoroughly foolish merchant ‘narrator’ (11. 1213–39)), breaks off the description of the male to remind his readers of the feminine consciousness so habitually excluded from attention in the dominant traditions controlled, as the Wife of Bath objected, by men. What the woman ‘thoughte in hir herte’ was hardly a habitual male concern. Having made this consideration prominent, he acknowledges the inevitable limitations of the comic modes in which he was working — ‘God woot’ what May thought, and the reader has been invited to empathize, but Chaucer himself passes on. He is not writing in a form which allows the detailed psychological exploration we followed in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and his interest in May is, of course, quite unlike his interest in Criseyde. Nevertheless, he leaves readers with no cause to make easy moralistic judgments about May which abstract her from the system which directly engenders the situation she must suffer. Chaucer, we have seen, stresses that the husband’s power of command over his wife’s body is culturally approved, like her initial response — ‘she obeyeth, be hire lief or looth’ (11. 1957-64; also 11. 1920–8, 2008).

When May seeks to alleviate her unhappy existence it is in an alternative relationship which will not overtly challenge the accepted power relations between husband and wife. The affair between her and Damyan can only be reasonably discussed when it is taken where Chaucer placed it, within the context of the marriage and the treatment May has received. The relationship is a product of the legitimate marriage. We may laugh at May’s ‘pitee’ for the randy squire (11. 1986–2000), but we read poorly if we stop at mockery and moralism. For however perverted by the culture in which she has been sold to Januarie, her aspirations include an aspect whose significance should not be ignored. It is made clear that she aspires to a relationship with a man of her own choice, one which transcends the economic and religious nexus in which she has been sold and violated:

whom that this thyng displese,
I rekke noght, for heere I hym assure
To love hym best of any creature,
Though he namoore hadde than his sherte.
(Merchant, 11. 1983-5)

Of course, Chaucer shows us that May’s partial resistance to her culture’s values is deeply compromised by the situation in which she has learnt to exist. So her version of ‘love’, while it transcends the market, not surprisingly lacks any very articulate demand for close mutual affection and commitment. As for Damyan’s
outlook, we have no reason to believe it is any different to that of his old master, who had ‘folwed ay his bodily delyt/On wommen, ther as was his appetyte’ (11. 1249-50). That May seeks for a day and place where ‘she myghte unto his lust suffise’ (1. 1999, my italics) suggests how the structures of domination and exploitation will be perpetuated in the society’s extra-marital relationships. May accommodating to ‘his lust’ just as she has had to do to her husband’s. She is still very closely guarded by her legal owner, hardly propitious circumstances for developing a personal and loving relationship even if the mutual wishes were there. May is compelled to read and dispose of Damyan’s letter ‘in the pryvee’ (11. 1946-54) and the utterly joyless affair, lacking in any sensual fulfilment whatsoever, has to be hurriedly consummated in a tree guarded by her husband embracing its trunk in a grotesquely apt masturbatory gesture (11. 2330-53). That the alternative relationship is thus consummated within the husband’s arms is a beautifully chosen symbol of both its generation and gross limitation by the official marriage and its contexts.

I will conclude this discussion of the Merchant’s Tale by looking at Januarie’s use of the Canticle, or Song of Songs, before he enters his own enclosed garden.

‘Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
The turtles voys is herd, my dowve sweete;
The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete.  
Corn forth now, with thyn eyen columbyn!
How fairer been thy brestes than is wyn!
The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;
Corn forth, my white spouse! out of doute
Thou hast me wounded in myn herte, 0 wyf!
No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf.
Corn forth, and lat us taken oure disport;
I chees thee for my wyf and my confort.’
Swiche olde lewed wordes used he.  
(Merchant, 11.2138-49)

The contemptuous dismissal of Januarie’s poem to ‘my love, my lady free’ as ‘olde lewed wordes’ is fully justified, for the same words in different contexts can take on very different meanings. Here the words of the Canticle do become ‘lewed’, as their appropriation by Januarie for his own marriage enacts a destruction of a poetry which could possibly be made a fitting celebration of love. The erotic Old Testament text had, of course, been subjected to one of the classic works of sublimating allegory in the tradition of Christian exegesis — for instance, when the text reads, ‘my beloved put his hand through my opening [misit manum suam per foramen] and my bowels were moved at his touch’, exegetes claimed that it expressed, allegorically, how the mystical bride (church, Virgin Mary, soul) opened the door of the heart (not what the Wife of Bath celebrated as her bele chose) to Christ or divine illumination (not to the sexual touches of the male). It is hardly surprising that the erotic power of the text survived its allegorization, simultaneously enjoyed and dissolved. Indeed, Augustine himself talks about his puzzlement at finding Christian doctrine ‘sweeter’ when he hears what he assumes to be ‘the same thought expressed in plain words’ without the richly erotic similes of the Old Testament work. It is this combination which makes the text especially significant here.

For the unashamed and overtly carnal love was juxtaposed with a description of the union between Christ and the church (or Virgin Mary, or soul), while in Christian marriage the carnal union was said to involve a mysterious sacrament representing the union of Christ and his church (Eph. 5:23). The Old Testament text was thus potentially one which might possibly be used to bring together a language of carnal love and the religious dimensions attributed to Christian marital union, potentially able to overcome what Noonan documented so clearly as ‘the failure to incorporate love into the purposes of marital intercourse’. In doing so it could possibly meet aspirations, evident in the later medieval world, to unite a love which involves the complete, incarnate human being with the institution of marriage.

But these aspirations, still utopian in Chaucer’s society, are disastrously negated by being used in the contexts of the Christian marriage around which the present tale develops. Here we should again be careful not to let our disgust at the old knight blind us to the representative aspects of what has happened. It is the current institution of marriage, blessed by the church, which has turned the woman from a ‘lady free’ into an object for egotistic male use, excluded the expression of love and mutual happiness from sexual union, downgraded sexual intercourse from being an act of love to something obscene and dirty, something only tolerable as a
The Franklin both gives voice at various points to marriage, and although the practices and ideologies to penetrate their contradictions and make women. In my own view, these explorations would not have been disastrous fragmentation of love, sexuality and marriage, joined the utopian vision in his dimension of human love, these are appropriated and negated by marriage as a union which could fuse the erotic with the spiritual could never have attained sufficient detachment from dominant possible without the utopian aspirations around marriage mentioned on more than one occasion in this chapter. In the Merchant’s Tale the utopian images of marriage as a paradise, marriage as a union which could fuse the erotic with the spiritual dimension of human love, these are appropriated and negated by Januarie. Such, Chaucer had to acknowledge, was the likely fate of the utopian vision in his world. But without the vision Chaucer could never have attained sufficient detachment from dominant practices and ideologies to penetrate their contradictions and make them highly problematic topics in a thoroughly critical and creative poetic exploration.

In the Franklin’s Tale Chaucer continued these explorations and now concentrated on the utopian perspective so essential to his own art. There has been much lively commentary on the tale, but most of it may be placed into two basic groups. One, stimulated by G. L. Kittredge’s influential article on ‘Chaucer’s discussion of marriage’ sees the Franklin joining mutual love and marriage in an unorthodox view which Chaucer unequivocally approved: ‘the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen was a brilliant success. Thus the whole [marriage] debate has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion.’ The second, represented by D. W. Robertson, sees the poem as an elegant but conventional homiletic text defending the traditional ‘hierarchy of marriage’ (the one illustrated by the Knight of the Tower and the Goodman of Paris), satirizing the wish ‘to maintain the delights of the God of Love in marriage’, satirizing Arveragus, Dorigen, Aurelius, the magician and the Franklin who admires all these foolish and sinful characters. The reading of the poem I wish to propose draws on both these conflicting schools.

I think Chaucer puts forward certain of his own aspirations for a marital institution in which the couple engage in non-coercive personal relations founded in a mutual love incorporating sexuality. In his historical context this comprises a utopian transcendence of conventional relationships based on an economic exchange and rampant male egotism sanctioned by secular and religious traditions. This is the aspect of the tale the scholars I have grouped with Kittredge have responded to with enthusiasm, and good reason. But their response has been distorted by a failure to recognize the utopian nature of these aspirations in that culture, and a failure to register Chaucer’s extraordinarily reflexive mediation on major problems of such utopianism. Many manifestations of such problems in the tale have been noticed by those I group with Robertson, only they have been forced into a conventional homiletic framework which is not Chaucer’s. The poet’s own procedure was far from simple. His work included both cherished utopian aspirations, which constituted a fundamental perspective from which to develop a critique of the present, impoverished reality, and his imaginative scrutiny of such aspirations as they might fare in the present. The interaction between utopian perspective and the present was thus central to the poem’s meaning. It is in this process that we should see the teller of the tale. He does not express Chaucer’s ‘final’ views nor is he merely exposed by Parson-Chaucer to a damning orthodox and satiric homily. The Franklin both gives voice at various points to important hopes the poet shares, and yet also serves as another means for the poet to examine significant problems in their present articulation.

The poem opens with a courtship which displays some striking features. There is absolutely no mention of land and money transactions so basic to medieval marriage, and although the woman has kindred who are socially much superior to the man, a fact which exerts some psychological pressure on him, she herself is apparently not subjected to normal controls imposed by male guardians concerned with land, money and family alliances. Nor is there any sign that the knight has a thought for such normal concerns (I. 729-42). In elaborating an image of a freely-chosen marriage between people rather than between fiefs, or between purchaser and commodity, the poet has bracketed the socioeconomic nexus whose crucial effect on marriage he had examined. He also bracketed the institutionalized Christianity of his culture, the most authoritative sanctification of traditional male egotism in the domination of women, a most influential ideological force in downgrading sexuality and in resisting any incorporation of mutual
love and its sexual expression into the prime purposes of marriage. Bracketing specifically economic, patriarchal and Christian determinations over the institution of marriage made it possible to elaborate aspirations to mutual, non-coercive and loving relations while focussing on the difficulties concerning power, mutuality and an appropriate language of love which could persist even if the most obvious adversaries of the utopian imagination had been removed.

The husband expresses the aspiration to supersede the coercive and domineering norms sanctioned by the religious and profane circumstances Chaucer had already presented. He voluntarily renounces the traditional powers of coercion and bullying, believing that this act will lead to ‘moore blisse’ in their lives (11. 744-9). The narrator’s enthusiasm is unqualified as he offers his own thoughts on this marriage (11. 761-98). Appropriately, he draws heavily on explicitly utopian passages in the Romance of the Rose. There the Friend describes the Golden Age when there was no domination and private ownership of property and all ‘know well the saying, neither lying nor foolish, that love and lordship never kept each other company’. Contrasting present marital relations he finds that now a husband habitually assumes a violent ‘control over the body and possessions of his wife’, treating her ‘just as if she were his slave’. He comments: ‘love must die when lovers want lordship. Love cannot endure or live if it is not free and active in the heart.’ Chaucer’s narrator, rightly impressed by the lucid comments on ‘love’ and ‘maistrie’ in this section of the Romance of the Rose now wants the attitudes of the Golden Age to transform the present, inviting males to overcome the customary double-standards in their relations with women and to see that if someone is ‘constreyned as a thral’ the inevitable destruction of even the possibility of love is a loss for both the female-slave and the male-master (11. 761-70). The passage is the result of Chaucer’s own analysis of contemporary marriage and an expression, as Kittredge and others have maintained, of his own desires for higher forms of married relationships than those currently available. But, as Jean de Meun’s poem observed, these are utopian desires. And here the poet begins to examine the problematic nature of such aspirations.

The narrator’s language itself shows the depth of the difficulties faced as his statement unfolds:

It seems the poet is revealing the absence of a common language for reciprocal and free relations. The idea of obedience, in the first line quoted, entails disparities of power in which one party has the position of giving commands, the other of obeying, something quite incompatible with the mutuality which the narrator is striving to define. Utopia has to be expressed in current language and concepts and these, we see, inevitably carry many elements of the conventional practice and assumptions the utopia must negate. In the remaining lines quoted, the narrator tries to graft the language of courtly male service of women on to the conventional language of male domination in marriage. Trying to do so, he falsifies Arveragus’ promise since this was to renounce ‘maistrie’ and the reality of lordship in marriage (11. 745-52). He had not demanded to keep ‘lordshipe’, resting content with the mere ‘name of soveraynetee’ in deference to a non-utopian public’s expectations. The narrator’s language creates real confusion. The juxtaposition of ‘servant’ and ‘lord’, of ‘love’ and ‘mariage’ in these lines actually maintains the conventional splits so trenchantly criticized in the Romance of the Rose and the narrator’s own use of that work (11. 761-70). He seems to sense that his lines are becoming incoherent, for having asserted that the knight’s status was both lordship and servitude, he corrects himself most revealingly: ‘Servage? nay, but in lordshipe above.’ But what ‘lordshipe’ is above remains obscure. Above ‘servage’? Would this mean the male is more like a lord than a servant, more a traditional husband than Troilus? Or, and this reading seems to me definitely one of those required by the text, simply ‘above’ the woman? The narrator thus emerges with conventional norms against which Arveragus pledged himself, to the speaker’s delight. On top of this, the lines collapse into a totally male-oriented utterance (he ... his ... his ... His ... his), while
the last line displays a marked confusion. For which ‘lawe of love’ he now refers to, and which part of his statement he is now crediting, cannot be determined.

The narrator then moves into his story, leaving the difficulties to the readers. We should not miss their relevance to the poem and their significance in Chaucer’s own continuous meditations on love, marriage and sexuality. The very confusions of the narrator exhibit fundamental problems in utopian thought in these areas, and are a dramatic product of Chaucer’s reflexive attention to these aspects of his own imagination. The confusions stem from the narrator’s perpetuation of received categories and the attitudes they bear while wishing to transcend them. But there may be no alternatives; utopian and critical thought may just have to accept the inevitability of some confusions and work through them as reflexively as possible. This is what the poet was doing in the Franklin’s Tale.

In pursuing these difficulties he decided to focus on the consciousness of the couple trying to initiate this new, utopian marital union. Just as Criseyde internalized norms created by males and serving peculiarly male interests, so we find Dorigen explicitly offering to accept Arveragus as a traditionally dominant husband, even though in her case the coercive external forces have been expelled in the writer’s utopian experiment (11. 742-3). She then replies to the knight’s alternative proposals in a similarly revealing way:

Sire, sith of youre gentillesse
Ye profre me to have so large a reyne, ...
Sire, I wol be youre humble trewe wyf;

(Franklin, 11. 754-5, 758)

She uses the very image we found at the conclusion of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, when the Wife reported how she took ‘al the bridel in myn hond’, inverting traditional roles of husband and wife and keeping the structure of domination the traditional image mirrors so well.

Dorigen has the chance of a marriage in which both members regard each other as full human beings, yet she accepts it in an image which declares the thorough internalization of traditional marital outlooks and ideology. Her reply shows how females’ self-images, their perception of their own identity, are profoundly determined by male ideas and myths concerning women. She sees herself as the animal, Arveragus as the human controller, albeit an unusually generous one. This traditional outlook emerges in her utterly dependent behaviour in the crisis she faces towards the end of the poem (11. 1339–465), and it offers a fine insight into dangerous distortions of the utopian imagination which tends to underestimate the power of traditional ideologies and practices over human consciousness. The power persists even in changed circumstances when received patterns are neither imposed by an irresistible superior force nor in the interests of the group or individual in question. Chaucer built his awareness of this into his own poetic expression of utopian ideas he valued.

Chaucer’s treatment of Arveragus manifests similar preoccupations, as we can see from his response when his weeping wife tells him her tale (11. 1459-92). These responses have sharply divided scholars, those in the line of Kittredge offering fulsome praise: ‘an extraordinarily wise and idealistic man’ who shows his ‘respect for his wife as an independent human being’, one who is ‘“trouthe” incarnate’. Those who have opposed this reading, by no means only followers of Robertson, have assessed the knight’s action in very different terms: ‘Arveragus has no right to put Dorigen’s “word” to Aurelius above their mutual love’, while he is ‘only enough of a husband to threaten his lady to be quiet about what she does “up peyne of deeth” ’. On this scene, A. T. Gaylord pointed out that Arveragus fails to utter a word about his wife’s woe and that threatening someone ‘up peyne of deeth’ (1. 1481) is hardly surrendering lordship. When we look closely at what Arveragus actually says I think we must agree that the criticisms of the knight are well-founded in Chaucer’s text, although there is a need to offer a rather different explanation of the husband’s behaviour:

Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!
For God so wisly have mercy upon me,
I hadde wellever ystikd 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’ –
But with that word he brast anon to wepe,
And sayde, ‘I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,
That never, whil thee lastesth lyf ne breeth,
To no wight telle thou of this aventure,
As I may best, I wol my wo endure
Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse.'

(Franklin, 11. 1474-86)

What starts out most sharply from our present perspective is the emergence of a familiar male egotism and violence sanctified by traditional attitudes. Now it is exalted under the name of the 'verray love' supposedly fostered by the admirable utopian proposals Arveragus made to Dorigen, and allied to a thoroughly confused version of truth, but it is recognizable enough. The husband claims to be so full of love that he is capable of absolute self-sacrifice for her, and this would certainly be a utopian transformation of the attitudes of men in marriage. But the claim is rather hollow, for Arveragus is not even able to bear the thought that his public reputation as a husband might be tarnished by gossip. He finds this affront to his ego (and in the fear of being known as a cuckold, to his virility) so unbearable that he warns Dorigen he will kill her if she ever breathes a word to anyone about the event he is organizing. This is marital language in accord with that relished by the Knight of the Tower, but hardly an example of the devoted self-sacrifice he announces or of the promised renunciation of coercion. Given his earlier aspirations, his speech is astonishingly lacking in affection and care for her misery, as A. T. Gaylord observed. When the knight bursts into tears it is out of self-pity and his language to her is self-righteous and utterly self-centred—'As Z may best, Z wol my wo endure.'

One would hardly gather that it is not he who is unwillingly being sent off to be screwed by someone for whom he has no affection whatsoever, a male May. Chaucer's dramatization of the knight's admirable utopian aspirations thus culminates in a strange but most coherent manner. The husband who has attempted to initiate mutual and non-coercive love, orders his obedient but unwilling wife to subject herself to another male while he himself displays the unreflexive masculine egotism habitual in the traditional culture.

Here Chaucer's poetry does not stop at the individual's errors, as critics of Arveragus have done. Instead it shows us that the generous 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.

In the poem's conclusion the narrator proves most unwilling to accept the dialectical movement we have just followed. As Dorigen leaves her husband he tries to avoid all ambivalence in his ending and intervenes directly to assure the audience that the tale may now give Dorigen 'bettre fortune' than the situation seems to allow (11. 1496-8). The narrator draws back from the problems the poem has raised and tries to terminate its delicate movements of thought in a cosy but alien ending.

Suddenly the squire abandons his lust and becomes full of 'greet compassionoun...franchis...gentillesse', admiration for the husband, we have been scrutinizing and respect for Dorigen's married love. It is true that his performance in the courtly garden, and when he made his later outrageous demands on the woman, had been in terms of his-devoted 'servyce' to her. But as in Troilus and Criseyde Chaucer had made plain the realities underlying the courtly forms of male worship and service of the female, so here he had provided excellent evidence for J. Huizinga's contention that in the Middle Ages 'all the conventions of love are the work of men: even when it dons an idealistic guise, erotic culture is altogether saturated by male egotism'. Aurelius renounces his fraudulent claim to the wife, and the narrator applauds the timely conversion so implausibly effected, and praises both squire and husband for 'a gentil dede' (11. 1514-44, 1593-7). No criticism of
either male is offered by the Franklin, emphasizing his distortions of the poetry to fit the comforting ending he wishes to impose. He concludes with a question which fits the imposed ending but remains a bizarre and superficial evasion of the poem's preoccupation and significance: 'Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?' (1. 1622). After the behaviour of Arveragus in the crisis, the paralysed dependence of Dorigen, the dramatization of problems intrinsic to utopian thought (itself an integral element in Chaucer's critical imagination), including the exhibition of difficulties in finding an appropriate language, the Franklin's final question is a misleading and comic trivialization which abandons the poem. It is this cozy and evasive imposition which justifies the criticism of the narrator, perhaps most cogently made by Alfred David.

Yet handing the poem's conclusion to the Franklin was more than a clever way for the poet to avoid tragedy while keeping his own thumb out of the balance and his aesthetic conscience clear. It is an integral part of the poem's movement sketched at the opening of my own analysis. Chaucer has used this pilgrim, with his blend of insight, enthusiasm, confusion and superficiality, to suggest the temptation of the utopian imagination to substitute what Alfred David calls 'wish fulfilment' for the creative encounter of utopia and established reality. His own profoundly reflexive art thus characteristically builds into its organization a perspective from which certain of its own basic tendencies can be viewed with a critical detachment which does not entail their rejection. We come to see that the narrator's error is not his enthusiasm for the utopian perspective on marriage, nor his generous faith that people may experience conversions which break the bonds of selfishness, allowing them to perceive and appreciate other people in their own being. Rather his mistake is in his refusal to concentrate on the power of dominant tradition and attitudes to resist and pervert utopian alternatives, his refusal to accept the poem's disclosure of this power and its human consequences. In a way, the failure involves a lack of faith; faith pays scrupulous attention to the present, the weight of the past on the minds of the living who wish to change it, and yet can construct a vision on glimpses and presences of a more fulfilling human future which is perceived as latent but emerging as possibility. The utopian perspective and the role of fantasy and dream is an essential component of much great art for it allows the writer to posit and explore alternative values to those prescribed in the dominant codes. It allows him to generate images for aspirations he knows are part of his world, but as yet lack material realization or ideological elaboration. The poet can free these aspirations, repressed in conventional and orthodox discourse, to challenge the established realities, to question and criticize dominant values and prevalent relationships. It is this interaction between the present and utopian perspective that the poem embodies and if, as Donald Howard claims, the Franklin's Tale 'is not the final word on marriage', this is ultimately because the form of poetry Chaucer created here is dialectical and open, responding to a historical movement in which more and more people would come to share the 'utopian perspective' described, until it ceased to be a 'utopian' project.

I shall complete this chapter with some comments on the Clerk's Tale. A great many scholars read it as a poem in which Chaucer teaches what they assume to be unquestioned medieval doctrine about the individual’s duty to absolute and unquestioning obedience to superiors, whatever they command or do; they seem to view the poet as an authoritarian writer propagating the absolutism allegedly conventional in his day, another Knight of the Tower. On both scores I believe such scholars are mistaken, and there has certainly been dissent from their approach. The line of dissent I wish to single out as most in accord with my own understanding of the Clerk's Tale is lucidly expressed by Donald Reiman. He focuses on the way Chaucer’s text carefully brings out Walter’s ‘recalcitrant self-will’ and its ‘unambiguous censure’ of his decision to afflict Griselda. In the light of this he argues that Griselda’s patience becomes ‘as much a source of evil as was Walter’s arbitrary wilfulness’, for her decision to be ‘an accomplice to the murder of her own children without so much as a frown of protest’ shows a disastrous failure to distinguish between her husband, explicitly presented as a selfishly cruel, mortal man, and God, the sovereign to whom both she and Walter owe allegiance and whom they both ignore.

The Clerk's Tale, as Reiman’s study suggests, exhibits the kind of critical thought and reflexivity about authority which I have traced in this and the preceding two chapters. It involves an exploration of irresponsible absolutism which brings together...
domestic, psychological and political dimensions. In the *domestic* sphere Walter’s marriage is founded on a determination to ensure that whatever he claimed about the loss of liberty in marriage (11. 143-71) he should be able to continue a life in which ‘on his lust present was all his thought’ (1. 80). With this end, he tells the young peasant girl, ‘be ye redy with good herte/To al my lust’ (see 11. 351-3). He assumes the woman only has identity as an instrument for his ‘lust’, an assumption he shares with men like the Knight of the Tower and Chaucer’s own Januarie. Chaucer reminds us of Walter’s representative nature by stating that although his tyranny over his wife is evil there are undoubtedly men who will admire it (11. 455-62, 622-3) – such men, it should be clear by now, are far removed from the poem’s maker.

Griselda assents, like her father, ‘quakyng for drede’ (11. 358, 317) and this scene sums up the marital union well. On the man’s part, a capricious imperialism, on the woman’s part, such an obedience that she surrenders her moral and religious responsibility and assents to the murder of her children by a man whose arbitrary ‘lust’, ‘cruel purpos’ and ‘wicked usage’ is recurrent and explicitly presented as such. 43

It is in Walter’s ‘lust’ that a most important psychological dimension of the text resides, for the poet continually presents him as a man who is overwhelmed by a desire he cannot control. He so longs to afflict his wife in his exercise of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty, 44 that he myghte out of his herte throwe

That he myghte out of his herte throwe
This mervelleous desir his wyf t’assaye;
Nedeless, God woot, he thoughte hire for t’affraye.
He hadde assayed hire ynogh bifore,
And foond hire evere good; what neded it
Hire for to tempete, and alwey moore and moore

(*Clerk*, 11.453-8)

He seems to feel guilty enough to make some attempt at checking his ‘merveillous desir’, but fails and renounces any effort at resistance. To emphasize this the poet adds an image to his sources, likening Walter to people who become fixated on one course of action, ‘right as they were bounden to a stake’ (11. 701-7). The all-powerful husband and ruler whose free will is unchecked is thus perceived as a powerless prisoner. Chaucer presents him as an authoritarian personality who *fulfils* his egotistic lust for dominion under the tyranny of his own sick will. Interestingly this combination was analysed by St Augustine himself with considerable acumen. With the reflexivity so abundant in the *Confessions*, he writes of himself: ‘From a perverted act of will, desire had grown, and when desire is given satisfaction, habit is formed; and when habit passes unresisted, a compulsive urge sets in: by these knit links I was held.’ 46 One of the most prevalent and vicious imprisonments the will suffered, in his opinion, was the ‘lust of rule’, in which the ruler was ‘ruled by the love of ruling’, a lust which ‘lays waste men’s hearts with the most ruthless dominion’. 46 These are appropriate psychological and moral concepts for discussing the condition of Walter as Chaucer creates it, and they lead us to the tale’s *political* dimensions.

The way Chaucer illustrates the mentality which absolute rule thrives on and produces can be exemplified by his treatment of the sergeant. The poet stresses that this man’s unquestioned obedience, his ‘feithful’ service to his ruler makes him peculiarly prone to do evil ‘thynges badde’. Chaucer changes and considerably expands his sources to bring this out in his description of the obnoxious nature of the loyal and obedient man, and he has the sergeant himself remind Griselda that ‘men moote nede until hire [lordes] lust obeye’ (Il. 519-32). 47 The poet’s critique of ‘swich folk’ as the sergeant implies a far more individualistic ethical outlook than any attributed to him by scholars who try to assimilate his art to some untroubled medieval totalitarianism in which hierarchy, authority and social obligation were fixed, unproblematic and never subject for critical reflection. The individual, we are shown, needs to assess the moral and religious grounds of the superior’s commands for himself rather than just obeying because the command comes from someone of higher position in the social and political hierarchy. The consequences of this view are subversive of any hierarchy where social place and inherited allegiance, rather than articulate moral reasons and the assent of independent individual conscience, are the justification and explanation of authority and obedience. 48

The political dimensions of the *Clerk’s Tale* are lost on those who assume late medieval political thought provided a carte *blanche* for absolutism and therefore assume that Chaucer’s text must simply fit this universal situation in his day. Such assumptions are mistaken and recent work on fourteenth-century political
theory, and practice, makes this very plain. For an intellectual writing in the reign of Richard II the distinction between legitimate rule and arbitrary absolutism was very much a live issue, of especial interest to a poet who attended as a member of parliament when the magnates threatened to depose the King, and who later accepted Henry IV, a magnate who overthrew a ruler judged to be tyrannous and wilful.

And in this connection it is worth recalling that in his own work, as Margaret Schlauch documented many years ago, Chaucer constantly depicted tyranny as arbitrary acts of will. She also noted that accusations of arbitrary will were a major theme in the 1399 Articles of Deposition, while the new king, whom Chaucer addressed in his ‘Complaint of Chaucer to his purse’, pledged himself to pursue the ‘commune profyt’ and to preserve the laws above his self-will. In this, significantly enough, he was promising to rule as Griselda did in Walter’s absence, not like Walter.

I believe that major historical studies of recent years have reconstructed the political and intellectual contexts in which we can situate Chaucer’s own critical examination of Walter’s arbitrary will and absolutism, for they document the emergence of fully articulate theories of limited monarchy in the later Middle Ages in which the ruler was viewed as the servant of a community where individuals rather than corporate wholes were to be the prime beneficiaries of government. They trace the desacralization of secular power together with the supersession of the hierocratic thesis of sovereignty in which all secular authority, law and government derived its legitimation from God through the ruler rather than through the community. Here it may not be far-fetched to wonder whether the long-lived metaphor in which the marriage of man and woman is used to examine political questions concerning sovereignty and responsibility could have been an element in Chaucer’s treatment of the ruler and his wife in the Clerk’s Tale. It is particularly interesting that according to M. Wilks’s investigations this metaphor had acquired an anti-absolutist meaning by Chaucer’s day in which the marriage of man and woman is used to examine political questions concerning sovereignty and responsibility could have been an element in Chaucer’s treatment of the ruler and his wife in the Clerk’s Tale. It is in these ways that the metaphor may have contributed to the resonance of Chaucer’s treatment of Walter and Griselda. It may have been a minor, but significant element in the poem’s fusion of the domestic, psychological and political spheres I have outlined, pointing towards the intellectual and political contexts which would have encouraged Chaucer’s own critical imagination in its magnificent explorations of love, sex and marriage.