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ENDING NORMAL word-order in order to fit his metrical pattern, and gets little help from inflections.) Grammatical gender was early lost in the medieval period for the same reason, and to our great benefit. Verb forms developed a very flexible and rich system through the use of many auxiliaries.

Middle English had become a more flexible, varied, looser language than Old English. At first it was deprived of social status but in the end though scars, such as a somewhat irregular spelling system, remained it had become an instrument of immense potentiality. The use that Chaucer, the Gawain-poet and Langland, to mention only the three great fourteenth-century poets, could make of it, varying from plain, even coarse colloquialism to the richest descriptions and the heights of exalted feeling, show how that potentiality could be realized.

NOTE

The story of William and Brihtric may be found in Wulfstan of Wulfstan by John, Abbot of Ford, ed. Dom Maurice Bell, Somerset Record Society, XLVII (1933), privately printed. The story of Hugh de Morevile's wife is referred to by G. E. Woodbine, 'The language of English Law', Speculum, XVIII (1943), 305-436, and is to be found in Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Rolls Series, I, 128. The Peterborough Chronicle 1070-1154 is edited by Cecily Clark (Oxford, 1970, 2nd edn). Amongst several valuable histories of English may be noted A. C. Baugh, A History of the English Language (London, 1939), and Barbara Strang, A History of English (London, 1970).

CHAUCERIAN THEMES AND STYLE IN THE FRANKLIN'S TALE

JILL MANN

The Franklin's Tale is not only one of the most popular of Chaucer's tales, it is also one whose emotional and moral concerns lie at the centre of Chaucer's thinking and imaginative activity. It is usually thought of as a tale about 'trouthe' — or perhaps about 'gentillesse' — but it is equally concerned with the ideal of patience and the problems of time and change, which are subjects of fundamental importance not in this tale alone but in the Canterbury Tales as a whole. What follows is intended to be not only a close discussion of the Franklin's Tale, but also an attempt to indicate how a proper reading of it can help with a proper reading of the rest of the Tales — and indeed, of Chaucer's work in general.

The Franklin's Tale begins by introducing a knight who has, in best storybook fashion, proved his excellence through 'many a labour, many a greet emprise' and thus finally won his lady who, likewise in best storybook fashion, is 'oon the faireste under sonne'. 'And they lived happily ever after' is what we might expect to follow. And so far from trying to dispel the reader's sense of the familiar in this situation, Chaucer takes pains to increase it. He refers to the actors only in general terms ('a knyght', 'a lady'), and attributes to them the qualities and experiences normally associated with tales of romantic courtship (beauty, noble family, 'worthynesse', 'his wo, his peyne and his distresse'). Only after eighty lines are the knight and the lady given the names of Arveragus and Dorigen. This generality cannot be accidental, for Chaucer's apparently casual comments are designed precisely to emphasize that this individual situation takes its place in a plural context:

But atte laste she, for his worthynesse,
And namely for his make obeisance,

a exploit.
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Hath such a pitee caught of his penance4
That prively she fil of his acord
To take him for his husband and hir lorde,
Of swich lordship as men han over hir wives.

(738-43, my italics)

What is more, they stress this plural context even in describing the feature of the situation which seems to make it an unusual one: the knight's promise to his lady that he

Ne sholde upon him take no maistrye4
Again hir wil, ne kithe hire jalousyr,
But hire obeye, and folwe hir will in al,
As any loverethis lady shal.

(747-p; my italics)

And after the lady's delighted promise of her own faithfulness and humility, we have a warm outburst of praise which again consistently sets this mutual understanding in the context of a whole multiplicity of such relationships,

For o thing, sires, saufly dar I seye,
That freendes everichother moost obeye,
If they wol longeholden compaignye.

Love wol nat been constreined by maistrye4.
When maistrye comth, the God of Love anon Beteth his wings, and farewell he is gon!
Love is a thing as any spirit free.
Wommen, of kinde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreined as a thral.
And so doon mm, if I sooth seyen shal.

(764-70)

'Love, maistrye freendes wommen... men' — the terms are abstract, plural, general. They relate general human experience to this situation, and this situation to general human experience, with no sense of conflict or discontinuity between the two.

I stress the importance of the general here for two reasons. The first is that this interest in the common features of human experience is characteristic of Chaucer. The parenthetical comments which transform the singular of the story into the plural of everyday experience are not confined to this passage or this tale alone; on the contrary, they are so ubiquitous in Chaucer that we may take them for granted and fail to question their significance. The second reason is that the unusualness of the relationship between Arveragus and Dorigen has often been taken as a sign that it is aberrant — that it represents an attempt to break away from the normal pattern of marital relationships which inevitably invites problems to follow. Against this view we should note that however unusual the degree of generosity and humility in this relationship, Chaucer very firmly roots it in the normal desires and instincts of men and women.

Nor is there any reason given for supposing that these desires and instincts are merely human weaknesses. Chaucer's own comments, some of which have been quoted, constitute an unhesitating endorsement of the wisdom of this situation and of the participants in it. The relationship between the knight and his lady is called 'an humble wys accord', and the knight himself 'this wise, worthy knight'. It would not affect this point were anyone to argue that the comments are the Franklin's, not Chaucer's. For in either case any reader who wishes to dissociate him- or herself from the warm approval in these lines will face the same difficulty — and that is the difficulty of finding a location in the tale for true wisdom and worthiness, if both characters and narrator offer only false images of these qualities. The only way out of this difficulty would be to claim that the reader already knows what true wisdom and worthiness are, and brings this knowledge to bear on the tale, in criticism of its values. But this idea assumes that it is possible for his or her knowledge to remain detached from the tale in a way that the passage we are considering simply refuses to allow. For if the reader is a woman, to refuse to acknowledge the truth of what is said about her sex is, ipso facto, to accept the legitimacy of her own 'thraldom':

Wommen, of kinde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreined as a thral.

If, on the other hand, the reader is a man, and feels inclined to respond to these lines with a knowing smile at the ungovernable nature of women, then the following line —

And so doon mm, if I sooth seyen shal
immediately challenges him in turn to measure the reasonableness of the female desire for liberty by matching it against his own. The result is that both men and women readers are made aware of the need for the liberty of the opposite sex through the recognition that it is a need of their own. The use of the plural, the appeal to the general, is indeed an invitation to readers to bring their own experience and feelings to bear, but it invites them to an identification with the narrative, not to a critical dissociation from it.

Chaucer’s use of the plural is thus intimately connected with his use of the second person, an equally pervasive and significant feature of his style. His appeals to the reader as judge have often been discussed — ‘Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamon?’ (Knight’s Tale); ‘Which was the moost fre, as thinketh yow?’ (Franklin’s Tale). But to emphasize these formal appeals alone is to imply, again, that the reader, in the role of judge, remains detached from and superior to the narrative. If, on the other hand, we look at the whole series of addresses to the audience in Chaucer, we shall see that the situation is more complicated. Certainly it is true that the narrative is subordinate to the reader, in the sense that it acknowledges that it relies on a particular experience of the reader for its life and depth; the appeal for judgement on the situations of Arcite and Palamon, for example, is specifically addressed to ‘Yow loveres’. The opening of Troilus and Criseyde similarly invites ‘ye loveres’ to read the narrative in the light of their own experience. This call for ‘supplementation’ of the narrative from one’s own experience is often implicitly, as well as explicitly, made. Such an appeal can, for example, be felt in the rhetorical question that concludes the praise of the marriage in the Franklin’s Tale:

Who koude tell ye, but he had wedded be,
The joye, the esc, and the prosperitee
That is betwixe an housbonde and his wif.?  
(803–5)

The rhetorical question here makes a space for the reader’s own experience to give full meaning to the description, just as it makes space for a very different kind of experience to give a very different kind of meaning to the apparently similar question in the Merchant’s Tale:  

Lemeth to suffre, or elles,  
‘So moot I goon,  
Ye sult lerne, wherso ye wele or noon;  
For in this world, certein, ther no wight is  
That he ne dooth or seith somtime amis.  
(771–80)

The command ‘Lemeth to suffre’ does not stand alone; if we disobey it, we face a threat, an ‘or elles’. If we search for the authority on which we can be thus threatened, we find it, I think, in the appeal to common human experience that I have been describing, in the generalizations from which the imperative issues and into which it returns. And because the experience is common, the speaker himself is not exempt from it; it is perhaps possible to detect in the parenthetical ‘so moot I goon’ a rueful admission that he has learned the truth of his statement the hard way. At any rate, the phrase stands a since, as he pleases, b as I live, c whether.
as an indication that the speaker offers his own individual experience as a guarantee of the truth of the generalizations.

It is because Chaucer wishes to appeal to the general that he so often uses proverbs as the **crystallizations** of episodes or whole narratives. The proverb which underlies the description of the marriage in the *Franklin’s Tale* is perhaps the most important one of all to him; the attempt to understand the paradoxical truth ‘Patience conquers’ is at the heart of the *Canterbury Tales* and much of Chaucer’s other work besides. It animates the stories of *Constance* and Griselda; it is celebrated in Chaucer’s own tale of Melibee. It undergoes, as we shall see, a comic-realistic metamorphosis in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, and it also stimulates Chaucer’s exploration of the qualities that represent a rejection of patience—‘ire’, ‘grucking’, ‘wilfulness’. It is tinged with a melancholy irony in *Troilus* and *Criseyde*, where Criseyde quotes another version of the proverb—‘the sufferant overcometh’—in the course of persuading Troilus of the wisdom of letting her go to the Greeks. This latter instance shows us that an understanding of the truth to be found in such proverbs does not give us clues to the instrumental manipulation of life—quite the reverse, in fact. The parallel truism that Criseyde also quotes—‘Whoso wol han lif, he lief moet lete’—does not become the less true because in this case Troilus fails to keep possession of his happiness even though he follows her advice. It is precisely the knowledge that proverbs carry with them the memory of human miseries as well as human triumphs and joys that gives depth and emotional power to the apparently worn phrases.

But of course it is also the story, the new setting which will give fresh meaning, that gives new depth and emotional power to the old words, and we should therefore look to the rest of the *Franklin’s Tale* to see how much it can help us to understand the nature of patience and ‘suffrance’. The first thing that the story shows us is the link between patience and change. In the first place, it is because human beings are inevitably and constantly subject to change, not just from day to day but from moment to moment, that the quality of patience is needed. In his list of the influences that disturb human stability, Chaucer makes clear that they come both from within and from without the person.

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**CHAUCERIAN THEMES AND STYLE: FRANKLIN’S TALE**

Ire, siknesse, or constellacioun.
Win, wo, or chaunginge of complexioun.
Causeth ful oft to doonamis or spiken.
On every wrong a man may nat bewrecken.
After the tumeoste be temperança.
To every wight that I kan on governaunce.

All these things disturb the stability of a relationship by altering the mood or feelings or behaviour of an individual. Thus, the only way that the stability and harmony of a relationship can be preserved is through constant adaptation, a responsiveness by one partner to changes in the other. The natural consequence of this is that patience is not merely a response to change; it embodies change in itself. And this is at first rather surprising to us, since we tend to think of patience as an essentially static quality, a matter of gritting one’s teeth and holding on, a matter of eliminating responses rather than cultivating them. But it is the responsive changeability of patience which is emphasized in Chaucer’s final lines of praise for the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen.

Heere may men seen a humble, wys accord:
Thus hath she take hire servant and hir lord—
Servant in love, and lord in marriage.
Thanne was he bothe in lordship and sewage.
Sewage? nay, but in lordship above,
Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love;
His lady, certes, and his wif also.
The which that lowe of love acordeth to.

It is often said that this passage illustrates Chaucer’s belief in an ideal of equality in marriage. But the patterning of the language does not give us a picture of equality; it gives us a picture of alternation. The constant shifts in the vocabulary suggest constant shifts in the role played by each partner: ‘servant, lord, servant, lord’—lordship, servage, servage lordship, lady, love, lady, wif. The marriage is not founded on equality, but on alternation in the exercise of power and the surrender of power. The image it suggests is not that of a couple standing immutably on the same level...
and side-by-side, or marching in step, but rather of something like the man and woman in a weather-house, one going in as the other comes out. Except of course that this image gives a falsely mechanical idea of what is, as Chaucer describes it, a matter of a living organic responsiveness, and that it is also incapable of expressing an important aspect of the relationship — that the ceaseless workings of change lead to an unchanging harmony, and to the creation of a larger situation in which each partner simultaneously enjoys 'lordship' and 'servage', as the passage itself stresses. The result of these constant shifts could be called equality (though I should prefer to call it harmony), but the term equality is too suggestive of stasis to be an accurate description of the workings of the ideal involved here. The ideal of patience better befits the way human beings are, because the simplest and most fundamental truth about people, for Chaucer, is that they change. 'Ncwefangclnesse', the love of novelty, is part of their very nature ('propre kinde'; Squire's Tale).

Human being are not only subject to change in themselves; they also live in a changing world. The opening of the Franklin's Tale might seem at first to belie this, since it reads more like an ending than a beginning, so that the story seems, with the long pause for the eulogy of the marriage, to have reached a full stop before it has begun. What prevents a sense of total stagnation is that the unusualness of the situation — of Arveragus' surrender of absolute control — creates a powerful expectation that something is going to happen. This is not just a stratagem for holding our interest; on the contrary, Chaucer uses narrative expectation as a way of indicating the persistence of change even when events have apparently reached a standstill, of making us feel the potentiality for change within the most apparently calm and closed of situations. Thus, as Chaucer allows himself his leisurely commentary on the 'humble, wys accord', we find ourselves asking not 'Is this a good thing?', but 'How will this turn out?' We await the completion which the development of events will bring to our understanding and evaluation, and we are thus taught to expect development, the breaking of stasis, as natural.

The stasis is first broken in a very simple way: Arveragus departs for England, and Dorigen's contentment changes into a passionate grief. This grief is described in a long passage (8.15-46) which takes us from her first agonies, through her friends' attempts at comfort, to her final subsidence into a kind of resignation which creates a new, if provisional, stasis. Two features of this passage are important: the first is that Dorigen's experience is, once again, placed in a general context.

For his absence wepeth she and siketh", Asdoonthis noble wives whan hem likethb. (8.17-18; my italics)

Secondly, her experience is not only generalized, it is also abbreviated:

She moorneth, waketh, waileth, fasteth, pleymeth. (819)

Dorigen experiences her grief intensely and at length, but it is described summarily and — ipso facto — with a sort of detachment. This does not mean, however, that we need to qualify what was said earlier about the identification established between character, writer and reader; the detachment here is not due to lack of sympathy or to criticism, but to a difference of position in time. Dorigen moves slowly through a 'process' which is for her personally felt and unique; the image of the slow process of engraving on a stone emphasizes its gradualness, its almost imperceptible development. The teller of the story (and the reader of it), on the other hand, can from the outset see Dorigen's experience in a general context of human suffering, and from a knowledge of the general human experience which is embodied in the formulae of traditional wisdom — 'Time heals', 'It will pass' — can appreciate not only what is pitiable about Dorigen's misery but also the inevitability of its alleviation, and thus, what is slightly comic about it. The amusement denotes no lack of sympathy, no sense that Dorigen's grief is melodramatic or insincere; it is the kind of amusement which might well be felt by Dorigen herself, looking back on her former agonies six months after her husband's safe return. As time goes on, and Dorigen succumbs to the natural 'proces' of adjustment, she herself comes nearer to this view, so that the passage ends with a rapprochement between her position and that of the storyteller and the reader, and the calmer wisdom of 'we' she saugh that it was for the beste' is shared by all three.
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The celebrated Chaucerian ‘ambiguity of tone’, of which this passage might well be taken as an example, is often regarded as an equivocation between praise and blame, a confusion in our impulse to approve or disapprove. Complex the tone may be, but it does not lead to confusion if we read it right. The complexity is often due, as it is in this case, to Chaucer’s habit of fusing with the narrative account of an event or situation the differing emotional responses it would provoke — and with complete propriety — at different points in time. Different contexts of place and time allow and even demand quite different emotional and intellectual responses. In common experience we take this for granted; we find it entirely proper and natural that a widow should be consumed with grief at her husband’s death and equally proper and natural that several years later she should have found equanimity. Time thus affects not only decorum, but also morality; were the widow to show at the time of her husband’s death the reactions of a widow several years later, we should find her behaviour unfeeling and wrong. Chaucer’s complexity arises from the fact that he encourages us to bring to bear our knowledge of both points in the process at the same time. He is helped in this by the fact that a story always abbreviates experience; the protracted time-scale of experience is condensed in the time-scale of the narrative, so that we can more easily and more swiftly achieve those shifts of perspective which are in life so laboriously accomplished. This is, of course, even more true in short narrative, because in such a narrative the disparity between the time-span of the occurrences and the time-span of the relation of them is most striking. Chaucer’s interest in short narrative, the beginnings of which can be seen in the Legend of Good Women, and which finally achieved success in the Canterbury Tales, seems to me, therefore, to be a natural consequence of what he sees as interesting in human experience. The short narrative is a powerful way of provoking reflection on the process of change and of vitalizing our sense of the moral and emotional complications created by change, by our existence in the ‘proces’ of time. And a multiplicity of short narratives can suggest the multiple individual forms in which a common experience manifests itself, and the constitution of common experience out of a multiplicity of variant instances.

The processes of time and change are not all, however, a matter of the development of inner feeling; change, as we have already observed, can equally originate in the outer world — in its most dramatic form, in the kind of sudden chance or accident for which Chaucer uses the Middle English word ‘aventure’. This is a word that can be used with deceptive casualness to refer to the most mundane and minimal sort of occurrence, but also, more emphatically, to refer to the strange and marvellous. The other words which Chaucer uses to mark the operations of chance are ‘hap’, ‘cas’ and ‘grace’, the last of these being usually reserved for good luck unless accompanied by an adjective like ‘evil’ or ‘sory’. Chaucer’s concern with the problems of chance, with human helplessness before it, and with the difficulties it opposes to any belief in the workings of a co-ordinating providence, is something that can be observed throughout his literary work. The operations of ‘aventure’ are often examined, (as they are in the Franklin’s Tale) in the sphere of love, and for good reason. The disruptive, involuntary, unforeseeable and unavoidable force of love is perhaps the most powerful reminder of the power of chance over human lives. What is more, it increases human vulnerability to other chances, as Dorigen, in her persistent fears for her husband’s possible shipwreck on the ‘grisly rokkes blakke’, is only too well aware. What she at first fails to perceive is her possible vulnerability to an ‘aventure’ which is closer at hand: the ‘aventure’ of Aurelius’ love for her.

This lusty squier, servant to Venus, Which that clype4 was Aurelius, Hadde loved hire best of any creature Two yeer and moore, as was his aventure. (937–40)

Chaucer’s description of the wearing away of Dorigen’s grief means that we can dimly see several possible patterns into which the coalescence of inner ‘proces’ and outer ‘aventure’ might fall. Were Arveragus’s ship in fact, to be wrecked, we could visualize not only Dorigen’s passionate grief but also its susceptibility to slow assuagement, so that when healing processes of time have done their work, Aurelius might hope at last to win his lady (as Palamon does). Or Arveragus might
simply be forced to stay away so long that by the same process of imperceptible adaptation, Dorigen finds Aurelius a more vivid and powerful presence to her thoughts and feelings than her husband, and changes her initial rejection into acceptance—in which case the story would come closer to the pattern of *Troilus and Criseyde*. The openness of Chaucer's stories to other possible developments makes us aware that they are not fixed into inevitable patterns; like life itself, they are full of unrealized possibilities. In this case, the menace symbolized in the black rocks is not realized, and the other possibilities thus evaporate. ‘Aventure’ does not take the form of shipwreck and Arveragus returns. But that there is no other kind of disaster is due also to the power of patience, of the ability to ‘suffer’ the shocks of ‘aventure’.

In order to understand this conception of ‘suffering’ more fully, I should like to make some comparisons with another example of the genre to which the Franklin’s Tale belongs, the Breton lay, a comparison which will have the incidental advantage of suggesting why Chaucer assigns the tale to this genre, even though his source was probably a tale of *Boccaccio*.

The Franklin’s *Prologue* suggests that the Breton lays are centrally concerned with ‘aventures’.

Thisse *olde gentil Britouns* in hit dynes  
Of diverse aventures *madelai*  
(709–10)

The notion that this is the proper subject of the lays can be traced back to one of their earliest composers, the late twelfth-century writer Marie de France, who says that each lay was written to commemorate some ‘aventure’.

There is no direct evidence that Chaucer knew Marie’s work, but a brief comparison with some aspects of the lay of *Guigemar* will help to illustrate the literary tradition which lies behind Chaucer’s thinking on ‘aventure’, and also to understand the imaginative core of the Franklin’s Tale, the underlying pattern of experience which it shares with a lay like Guigemar. Like the Franklin’s Tale, Guigemar deals with ‘aventure’ in relation to love; it is interested both in the way that love is challenged by ‘aventure’, by the shocks of chance, and equally in the way that love itself is an ‘aventure’, a force which is sudden and overwhelming in its demands, and to which the only fitting response is surrender or commitment of the self. What we also find in Marie’s lays is the idea that such a surrender acts as a release of power. It is this pattern—surrender to ‘aventure’ followed by release of power—which can be linked with the ‘Patience conquers’ of the Franklin’s Tale.

The hero of the lay, Guigemar, is a young man endowed with every good quality, but strangely resistant to love. One day while out hunting he shoots a white deer; the arrow rebounds and wounds him in the thigh, and the dying deer speaks to him, telling him that he will only be cured of this wound by a woman who will suffer for love of him greater pain and grief than any woman ever suffered, and that he will suffer equally for love of her. Guigemar’s actions indicate an immediate and unquestioning acceptance of the doom laid on him by the deer. He invents an excuse for dismissing his squire, and rides off alone through the wood, not following any predetermined direction, but led by the path. That is, he follows not the dictates of his own wishes, but the dictates of chance. Eventually he comes to the sea, and finds a very rich and beautiful ship, entirely empty of people. Having boarded the ship, Guigemar finds in the middle of it a bed, sumptuously and luxuriously arrayed. The bed is an emblem of an invitation to rest, to relax, to surrender control—or rather to surrender it still further, since he in fact lost control at the moment when he shot the white deer. He climbs into the bed and falls asleep; the boat moves off of its own accord, taking him to the lady who is to be his love, and who is kept imprisoned by her jealous husband in a castle surrounded by a high walled garden, open only to the sea. The castle and the sea, and their relation to each other, are images that the tale endows with symbolic meaning. The sea (as often in medieval literature) is an image of flux or chance, of something vast and unpredictable which can carry one with the force of a tide or a current to strange harbours. The image of the imprisoning castle which is nonetheless open to the sea suggests the openness of even the most restrictive marriage relationship to the threat of ‘aventure’. The jealous husband cannot shut out the power of chance; his marriage—and equally the generous marriage of the Franklin’s Tale—must remain vulnerable to the assaults of chance.

Guigemar, in contrast, surrenders to the dictates of chance. When
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he wakes from his sleep on the boat, he finds himself in mid-ocean. Marie’s comment on this situation brings a new extension to the notion of ‘suffering’; she says

Suffrir l’aventure.

Both the infinitive ‘suffrir’ and the noun ‘aventure’ seem to call for a double translation here. ‘Aventure’ simply means, in the first place, ‘What was happening’; but the word also emphasizes the strangeness and arbitrariness of the event, its lack of background in a chain of causes. ‘Suffrir’ seems to ask to be translated not only as ‘suffer, endure’, but also as ‘allow’, a usage now familiar to us only in archaic biblical quotations such as ‘Suffer the little children to come unto me’. So that the line cannot be confined to a single interpretation: ‘He had to endure / allow / what was happening / chance’. Guigemar prays to God for protection, and goes back to sleep, another acknowledgement that control is not in his hands. So it is in the surrender or abandon of sleep that he arrives at the lady’s castle, is found by her, and becomes the object of her love.

Guigemar’s ‘suffering’ can help with the understanding of the ‘suffering’ urged in the Franklin’s Tale:

Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so moot I goon,
Ye schul it leme, whereso ye wole or noon.

This sort of ‘suffering’ is not simply a matter of enduring pain or vexation; it is a matter of ‘allowing’, of standing back to make room for, the operations of ‘aventure’, and thus of contributing to the creation of something new by allowing the natural process of change to work. It is the generous in spirit who do this, in both Marie’s work and Chaucer’s, and it is the mean-spirited, such as the lady’s jealous husband, who vainly try to close off possibilities for change, to wall up what they have and to preserve it in a state of fixity.

It is a later moment in the lay, however, that provides the most powerful image of a surrender of the self which miraculously releases power. After Guigemar and the lady have enjoyed each other’s love for some time, his presence is discovered by the lady’s husband, and he is put back on to the magic ship (which has miraculously reappeared) and sent back to his own country. After his departure, the lady suffers intensely, and finally she cries out with passion that if only she can get out of the tower in which she is imprisoned, she will drown herself at the spot where Guigemar was put out to sea. As if in a trance, she rises, and goes to the door, where, amazingly, she finds neither key nor bolt, so that she can exit freely. The phrase that Marie uses is another that seems to call for a double translation:

Fors s’en eissi par aventure.

‘Par aventure’ is a casual, everyday phrase, meaning simply ‘by chance, as it happened’; thus on one level, all this line means is ‘By chance she got out’. But the miraculous nature of the event, and the way that the phrase recalls the other miraculous ‘aventure’ of the ship, suggest something like ‘By the power of “aventure”, she got out’. The intensity of the lady’s surrender to her grief, which is imagined in her wish to drown herself, to ‘immerse’ herself in her love and sorrow, magically transforms external reality. ‘Aventure’, which had earlier been a force that impinged on people and acted on them, here becomes something which is itself acted on by emotion, which miraculously responds to its pressure. When the lady goes down to the harbour she finds that the magic ship is once again there, so that instead of drowning herself, she boards it, and is carried away to an eventual reunion with Guigemar. Her readiness to ‘suffer’, the depth of her surrender, magically transforms her external situation and releases the power for a new departure. A surrender paradoxically creates power.

The surrender that leads to the release of power is also at the heart of the narrative in the Franklin’s Tale. It can be seen, first of all, in Arveragus’ surrender of ‘maistrye’, which wins in return Dorigen’s promise of truth and humility. Neither of them knows what their promises are committing them to, and it is precisely such ignorance that makes the commitments generous ones. But the underlying principle can operate in far less noble and generous situations, as Chaucer shows us by repeating such a pattern of reciprocal surrender in varying forms, through the rest of the Canterbury Tales. The most comic and ‘realistic’ version is to be found at the end of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, in the quarrel provoked by the Wife’s fifth husband, who insists on reading to her his ‘book of wikked wives’. The Wife, in fury, tears three leaves from his book, and he knocks her down. With instinctive shrewdness, the Wife exploits the
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moral advantage that this gives her, and adopts a tone of suffering meekness.

‘O! hastow slain me, false theef? I seyde.
‘And for my land thus hastow mordred me?
Erst be deed, yet wol I kisse thee’.  

Such a display of submissiveness elicits a matching submissiveness from the aghast Jankin, and he asks for forgiveness. The quarrel ends with the establishment of a relationship that follows, in its own more robust way, the pattern of that between Arveragus and Dorigen: the husband’s surrender of ‘governance’ is met by unfailing truth and kindness on the part of his wife. The description of this reconciliation stays within the sphere of comic realism, however, not least because every gesture of surrender carries with it an accompanying gesture — albeit softened and muted — of self-assertiveness: the ‘false theef’ of the Wife’s first speech; Jankin’s excusing of himself for striking the blow by insisting that she provoked him; the Wife’s final tap on his cheek to settle the score and make their kind of equality. The generosity here is a matter of letting these last little pieces of self-assertiveness pass, of ‘allowing’ them to be submerged in the larger movements of self-abasement which are being enacted. Such a comic-realistic version of the notion that surrendering power gives one back power enables us to see that although its operations may be ‘magical’ in the sense that they are not easy to rationalize, the roots of this principle lie in the everyday world of instinctive interaction between human beings. The fairyland world where wishes come true is not an alternative to the everyday world of instinctive interaction between human beings. The magic does not bring about the denouement of the tale: on the contrary, it creates the problem. The clerk from Orleans uses it to remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany so that Aurelius may make the choice over to her, to put himself in her ‘wise governance’, and the miraculous result of this is that the ugly old lady is transformed into a beautiful young one, who promises to be faithful in addition. As in the lay of Guigemar, a mental surrender has magical effects on physical reality. But the magical transformation in physical reality is the manifestation of an equally magical inward transformation which accompanies and causes it: the knight who began the tale with a particularly brutal assertion of masculine ‘maistrye’, the rapist of a young girl, is transformed into a husband who humbly relinquishes control to his wife. What is more, he must accept that possession can never be complete in the sphere of human relations; to accept happiness is to accept the possibility of its loss, and to take a beautiful wife is to incur the risk of unhappiness at losing her (‘Whoso wol han lief, he lief moot lete’, as Criseyde puts it).

In the Franklin’s Tale, the magic has rather a different role to play. The magic does not bring about the denouement of the tale: on the contrary, it creates the problem. The clerk from Orleans uses it to remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany so that Aurelius may fulfill the apparently impossible condition for winning Dorigen’s love. As Dorigen herself says of their removal: ‘It is against the proces of nature’. The magic is used to create an ‘aventure’ — a sudden, disruptive happening that interrupts the gradual rhythms of natural change. It is as an ‘aventure’ that the situation created by the removal of the rocks presents itself to Arveragus; he says to Dorigen, ‘To no wight telle thou of this aventure.’ But he has also told her, ‘It may be wel, paraventure, yet today.’ There is the same kind of ‘hidden pun’ in the qualifying ‘paraventure’ here as there is in Marie de France’s use of the phrase. On the face of it, it simply means ‘perhaps’. But it also suggests a deeper appeal to the power of chance — the power of ‘aventure’ which has created the problem and which has, therefore, also the power to resolve it if it is allowed to operate. Arveragus allows it; he stands back, as it were, to make room for it, subduing his own claims and wishes. The test of his relinquishment of ‘maistrye’ is that he must submit himself to his wife’s independently-made promise so far that he is forced to order her to keep it; the test of Dorigen’s promise to be a ‘humble trewe wif’ is that she must obey her husband’s command that she fulfill her independent promise to be unfaithful. The structure of their relationship at this point, therefore,
PART THREE

is a poignant illustration of the simultaneity of 'lordshipe' and 'servage' which had earlier been described; each of the marriage-partners is following the will of the other and yet also acting out an assertion of self. And just as this moment in the tale provides an illustration of the fusion of 'lordshipe' and 'servage', so it provides an illustration of what is meant by the command 'Lerneth to suffre'. Arveragus 'suffers' in the double sense of enduring pain and 'allowing'; in bidding his wife to keep her promise, he provides a compelling example of patience in Chaucer's sense of the word, of adaptation to 'aventure', of allowing events to take their course. The easy course here would be to forbid Dorigen to go; Chaucer makes clear the agonizing effort that is required to achieve this adaptation.

'Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe.'
Hut with that word he brast anon to wepe.

(1479-80)

In this tale, as in Guigemar, a surrender to 'aventure' is met by a response of 'aventure'. In this case, it takes the form of the meeting between Dorigen and Aurelius, as she sets out to keep her promise. Chaucer emphasizes the chance nature of this meeting: Aurelius 'Of aventure happed hire to mette', he says, and a few lines later, 'thus they mette, of aventure or grace'. Yet nothing is more natural, since we are told that Aurelius was watching and waiting for Dorigen's departure. These comments point, therefore, not so much to the fact that this meeting is an amazing coincidence, as to the operation of 'aventure' within it. The intensity of Dorigen's surrender to the situation in which she has been trapped, perceptible in her anguished cry 'half as she were mad',

'Unto the gardin, as min housbonde bad. My trouthe for to holde, allatallas!' (1512-13)

has a dramatic effect on Aurelius; it mediates to him Arveragus's surrender to 'aventure' and stimulates him to match that surrender with his own. He releases Dorigen from her promise and sends her back to her husband. He accepts the chance by which he has come to a burst (into).

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too late, by which his love for Dorigen post-dates her marriage — one of the arbitrary cruelties of time — and having perceived the inner reality of the marriage, the firmness with which each is linked in obedience to the other in the very act of consenting to Dorigen's 'infidelity', Aurelius 'allows' that relationship its own being, undisturbed; he too exercises patience and 'suffers' it.

But what if he had not? What if he had insisted on the fulfilment of the promise? For if Chaucer is pointing to the power of chance in human lives, he is bound to acknowledge that chance might well have had it so. One critic who correctly observes the perilous ease with which either development could realize itself at this point has written a conclusion to the episode in which Aurelius does just that. The freedom and openness of events in the Chaucerian world means that romance is always open to turn into fabliau — or into tragedy. But I think that in this tale the nature of such a tragedy would be qualified by our sense that Aurelius would have 'enjoyed' Dorigen in only a very limited sense; his possession of her would have been as much a matter of 'illusion' and 'appearance' as the removal of the rocks that made it possible. The magic, in this tale, suggests the illusory, forced quality of Aurelius's power over Dorigen (in contrast to the natural power won by Arveragus, spontaneously springing into life at the end of the long process of his courtship). That is why the magic removal of the rocks is presented as a laborious, technologically complex operation, rather than the wave of a sorcerer's wand. The real magic in this tale is Aurelius's change of heart, which is as miraculous as that of the knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale. The magic removal of the rocks is merely a means by which we can measure the immensity of this 'human magic'; we can gauge as it were, the size of the problem it is able to solve. And this 'human magic' is nothing other than the human power to change. What the development of the tale brings to our notion of the human tendency to change is that it is not just an everyday, humdrum matter of our moods fluctuating with the passage of time, but that it is a source of power; its role can be creative.

As I have already suggested, Chaucer is well aware of the tragic aspects of the human propensity to change, as his constant preoccupation with the theme of betrayal shows. He is also aware of the saving power of human resilience, a sort of comic version of patience,
which can nullify the tragic aspects of 'aventure'; thus beside the serious transformation of the rapist knight in the Wife of Bath's Tale, we can set the figure of Pluto in the Merchant's Tale, the ravisher who has clearly been worn down by feminine rhetoric so that he presents the ludicrous picture of a henpecked rapist. Romances such as the tales of the Knight and Franklin, however, offer us a serious celebration of patience, of the creative power of change. 'Pitee' may be the quality that leads Criseyde's emotions away from Troilus to Diomed, or it may be ironically appealed to as the cause of May's amazing readiness to respond to Damian's advances (Merchant's Tale), but it is also the quality that enables Theseus to adapt himself to each new claim that chance events impose on him (Knight's Tale), or that leads Dorigen to accept Arveragus' suit, and it is 'routhe' (another word for pity) that leads Aurelius to release Dorigen. Moreover, as the passage on patience makes clear, the responsiveness implied in the ideals of patience and 'pitee' must be exercised continually; the balance and poise achieved at the end of the Franklin's Tale is reached by a 'proces', a chain of ceaseless adjustment in which the magician-clerk, as well as the other three figures, must play his part. Ceaseless adjustment is, as we saw, something that characterizes the marriage, with its endless alternation of 'lordshipe' and 'servage', and it is for that reason that it can survive 'aventure'; it is founded on it. Only through ceaseless change can there be stability. Only through a perpetual readiness to adapt, to change, in each of the actors in the tale, can the status quo be preserved. Or, in Chaucerian language, 'routhe' is the product of patience.

Chaucer's strength is that he gives us a creative sense of order; he makes us aware that static formulae, of whatever nature – the husband's sovereignty, equality in marriage – are inappropriate to human beings, since they are subject to change from within and chance from without. What is needed instead is an ideal such as the ideal of patience, which is founded on change, on the perpetual readiness to meet, to accept and to transform the endless and fluctuating succession of 'aventures' that life offers.

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NOTES


a. Boccaccio tells the story in the Filocolo (IV, 4) and the Decameron (X, 5). See the section on the Franklin's Tale in W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster, Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. (New York, 1941).


6. The magic in the Filocolo story is of a much more traditional kind, involving the concoction of a magic potion from exotic herbs, roots, stones, etc.

7. Even this has its comic version, in the Shipman's Tale, where a chain of unshaken selfishness creates the same sort of final balance and poise.