LOVE, TROUTH, AND THE HAPPY ENDING OF THE FRANKLIN’S TALE

The scholarly tradition inclined to favor the Franklin and his tale has had less than perfect success in connecting the marriage to the story’s happy ending, particularly because Arveragus’s insistence that Dorigen keep trouthe with the squire Aurelius seems to violate his courtly submission to Dorigen’s will.¹ In their recent contribution to the opposing tradition, Angela M. Lucas and Peter J. Lucas limit their analysis to the marriage itself, possibly because they consider the marriage so incoherent that discussion of the tale’s ending is irrelevant. They maintain that the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus, an apparent attempt to find a formula that will demonstrate the compatibility of amour courtois and [medieval Christian] marriage, founders on the ‘literally impossible’ task of reconciling the ‘mutually exclusive’ terms of these two concepts.² The Lucases find the marriage to be ‘not only muddled in conception but adopted for inappropriate reasons’ and the cause of the lovers’ troubles. ‘It is no wonder’, they conclude, ‘that difficulties are encountered when we see the marriage in action under pressure’.

I question the validity of this interpretation, which upon examination weakens the position of the Franklin’s detractors rather than strengthens it. The Lucases’ comparison of the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus to the ‘standard medieval view, indeed the standard Christian view, of marriage’³ is unjustified and misleading, and their literalistic approach to poetry compounds the problem introduced by their inappropriate paradigm. To remove objections to the coherence of the marriage stops short, however, of a full appreciation of the tale. By further clarifying how the ending of the tale proceeds from the marriage agreement, I hope to establish more firmly what many readers have seen in the tale, that the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus is a poetic expression of freedom and love brought to life by the power of trouthe—the essence of the marriage vows and the soul of true nobility. The lovers’ response to the crisis

¹ See Derek Pearsall, The Canterbury Tales (London, 1985) pp. 152-7, for an appraisal of Arveragus’s role as an obstacle between the lovers in the marriage and the denouement of the tale. More recent studies focusing on aspects of this problem are cited where appropriate in the course of this essay.
³ Lucas and Lucas, 511-12.
⁴ ibid., 563.
brought on by Dorigen’s rash promise proves their loyalty to the spirit of their vows, moves the story from tragedy to comedy, establishes the ascendancy of trouthe over illusion, and converts the squire and magician to the rule of gentilesse. Most important, Arveragus’s commanding Dorigen to keep her promise, rather than compromising the integrity of the drama, is a key element in the success of these transformations.\(^5\)

The Lucases assert that seeing the marriage as Christian is necessary ‘to follow the main narrative thread of the story’.\(^6\) They devote the opening quarter of their essay to discussing the alleged ‘dubious propriety’\(^7\) of the marriage, claiming it deviates from the medieval Christian norm. To prove the marriage is Christian, they make two main points: first, a pagan marriage ‘would have been accompanied by far more ceremony’; second, a pagan bride ‘would not have been free to agree to the marriage of her own accord’.\(^8\)

Neither of these proofs withstands scrutiny. Omission of a description of a marriage ceremony is not proof that the marriage is Christian; that the marriage is Christian is the assumption behind regarding the absence of ceremony as significant. The Lucases attribute significance to the Franklin’s presentation of marriage partly because a similar presentation is not found in Chaucer’s probable source, Boccaccio’s Filocolo: ‘[The] importance [of the Franklin’s dilation on the marriage relationship] accrues not only from its length and position but also from the fact that it is an addition to the story as Chaucer inherited it. Moreover, that addition was not strictly necessary’\(^9\). But neither does Boccaccio mention a marriage ceremony, and one asks on what grounds the addition of a ceremony in Chaucer’s tale would have been necessary, strictly or otherwise. The Lucases are simply assuming what is to be proven, for there are any number of reasons Chaucer may have failed to mention the marriage ceremony, including the one apparently behind its omission from the original story — its being not ‘strictly necessary’ to the ‘narrative thread’. Moreover, the Lucases offer no proof that a late fourteenth-century English audience was aware of any such distinctions in marriage customs, even if it could be proven that such distinctions are valid.

Nor is Dorigen’s alleged self-giving proof that the marriage is Christian. Though female self-giving was not by any means the norm in pagan Germanic marriage customs, it was not unknown.\(^10\) As the Lucases’ own authority points out, self-giving has historical precedents that antedate even pagan antiquity.\(^11\)

\(^6\) Lucas and Lucas, p. 501.
\(^7\) ibid. 502.
\(^8\) ibid. 501n4.
\(^9\) ibid. 501.
\(^10\) Concerning the status of women among Vikings in the great age of their expansion, C. Warren Hollister in his Medieval Europe: A Short History, 7th ed. (New York, 1994) p. 108, writes: ‘... women enjoyed a somewhat greater freedom of action than their counterparts in Western Christendom: they could own and grant property, marry whomever they chose, and govern the affairs of their family if their husbands were absent or dead’.
Self-giving was not the Church’s innovation, but was simply adopted from pagan Roman legal practice. Like the later Christian marriage customs derived from it, the Roman marriage was ‘a consensus sponsalitius, or free agreement between the man and the woman’. Once again, the Lucases offer no proof that an English audience of the fourteenth century would have known of such historical distinctions.

The Lucases’ paradigm of Christian marriage disappears against the romantic and ahistorical background of the tale’s pagan setting, a setting which makes the addition of a marriage ceremony ‘not strictly necessary’ to follow the narrative thread. The poem is replete with pagan references, and, reflecting the imaginative possibilities of romance, with historically incongruous elements. For example, Aurelius prays to Apollo and his sister, ‘Lucina the sheene’, for aid in winning Dorigen (1031-79). Apollo’s shrine, to which Aurelius promises to make barefoot pilgrimage, was closed by the Emperor Theodosius in 392 yet coexists in the poem with the University of Orleans, founded in the thirteenth century. Dorigen’s prayer to ‘Etere God’ (865-93) may suggest a Christian orientation, but Kathryn Hume demonstrates that the phrase is not necessarily Christian. Pointing out that ‘we can find close parallels and even probable sources ... in ... Ovid’s Metamorphoses and Boethius’s De Consolatione’, Hume shows that Dorigen’s distress is based on the classical conception of the creation as one which brought order out of chaos: even Dorigen’s ‘reminding’ God that man is made in his image has a close parallel in Ovid. Hume’s point is supported by Dorigen’s addressing her discourse on ‘deeth or elles dishonour’ to Fortune (1355), alluding not to Christian saints but to classical figures. The most telling indication of the tale’s pagan setting is the Franklin’s commentary on the magician-clerk of Orleans and his works. He refers to the magician’s powers of illusion as ‘swiche illusions and swiche meschaunces / As hethen folk useden in thinke dayes’ (1292-93). ‘Thilke dayes’ are ‘those same days’ of heathen wretchedness, not late fourteenth-century Christian England. Given the ahistorical, pagan, and imaginative setting of the

---

12 ibid. I, 291. Frances and Joseph Gies corroborate this view in their account of the development of the concept of consent from ancient Roman customs to its adoption by the Church. The ancient legal formula was Nuptias consensus non concubitus facti (consent, not intercourse, makes marriage). See their Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages (New York, 1987), pp. 16-42.


15 All citations of Chaucer’s works are to The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987).


19 See also 1131-34.
*Franklin’s Tale*, it is hard to believe that the *Franklin’s Tale* is concerned primarily with lecturing on the folly of deviating from medieval canon marriage law or censuring the Franklin’s character on this account. It is unlikely that the Franklin’s audience would have had this question uppermost in mind, or that they would have found intolerable the idea that pagans could marry (apparently) without ceremony, or that pagan ladies could give themselves in marriage. In the absence of proof that they had sufficient knowledge of these matters in the first place, such scruples are improbable. If Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* may be taken as a pattern, for all his audience knew or cared, Trojan warriors and maidens differed little in customs and manners from the knights and ladies of medieval times.

In addition to noting the impropriety and problematic nature of the marriage viewed against Christian standards, the Lucases attempt to show the inherent contradictions and incoherence of the marriage. However, their analysis depends on a literalistic approach to poetic narrative that significantly changes the meaning of both simple terms and major concepts. Reading literally, the Lucases find textual evidence that the Franklin is the author and source of the problematic incoherence in the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus:

We have the impression of a narrator using a form of words which transcends the meaning he apparently intended them to have. Certainly he is not portrayed as consistent. If love is *as any spirit free* and both women and men *desire libertee then frendes cannot obeye each other. Perhaps such self-contradiction on matters of deep personal emotion and commitment is all that can be expected from a narrator who regards love as a *thyng.*

The literalness of the Lucases’ approach to the *Franklin’s Tale* is at odds with the more flexible terms of the New Testament, which they cite to support their view that the marriage contradicts the principle of male dominance in Christian marriage. If this source is to be credited, mutual obedience in marriage must not be as contradictory as the Lucases say it is, for it is to be cultivated even among Christians. Speaking of marriage itself, Paul emphasizes the mutual obedience and forbearance required of married persons in terms that defy a literalistic approach.

1Let the husband render the debt to his wife: and the wife also in like manner to the husband.  
2The wife hath not power over her own body; but the husband. And in like manner the husband hath not power of his own body; but the wife. (1 Cor. 7.3-4)

The terms of the above passage may seem contradictory, but they are nonetheless presented as good advice in matters of sex and marriage. Taken literally,

20 Lucas and Lucas, p. 504-5.  
21 *ibid.* 503.  
22 *The Holy Bible*, New Testament, Douai-Rheims ed. (1582; New York, 1853), p. 886. Chaucer would have known the passage as:  
*uxori vir debitum reddat similiter autem et uxor viro  
mulier sui corporis potestatem non habet sed vir similiter autem et vir sui corporis potestatem non habet sed mulier*

the advice is contradictory; taken in the spirit offered, its terms are a meaningful paradox meant to guide Christians into the sense of mutual esteem and forbearance necessary in marriage.

The Lucases’ literalism yields unfortunate renderings in lesser but still important matters. By using thing to refer to an abstract entity the Franklin is no more callous than the Parson, quoted by the Lucases as expressing ‘the standard medieval view, indeed the standard Christian view, of marriage’.23 The Parson refers to Penitence (94), remembrance (‘of the passioun that oure Lord Jhesu Crist suffred’) (254), and even to grace itself (683) as thynges. A similarly literalistic reading sees the use of the pronoun his in the Franklin’s praise of patience as revealing Arveragus’s hidden dominance of Dorigen — further evidence, the Lucases claim, of the Franklin’s muddled conception of love and marriage. They quote lines 771-75:

Locke who that is moost pacient in love,
He is at his avantage al above.
Paciece is an heigh vertu, certeyn,
For it venquysseth, as thise clerkes seyn,
Thynges that rigour sholde never atteyne.

These lines supposedly belie the Franklin’s advocacy of patience, revealing instead not a love of patience but a masculine determination to dominate: ‘The kind of avantage al above apparently envisaged seems to be a masculine one, since the pronoun He is reinforced by the possessive his’.24 However, in their attempt to draw out the implications of the word his taken literally, the Lucases wrench it out of context. The relevant context of these lines includes those just prior, the last three lines of the Franklin’s discussion of maistre:

Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreyneyd as a thrall;
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal. (768-70)

Including these lines makes it clear that his applies equally to the sexes: women as well as men can overcome opposition both personal and impersonal through the exercise of patience.

The Lucases’ attempt to locate the origin of the alleged incoherence of the marriage in the Franklin’s moral deficiency is inappropriate, and it reveals the dangers of a too literal reading of poetry. The Franklin’s concept of mutuality, though presented in the context of a pagan marriage, partakes in some measure of the mutuality Paul advocates — a mutuality similar to that which the Lucases claim he omitted from Le Roman de la Rose and Ovide Moralisé, his probable sources in the tradition of courtly love: ‘In particular the ideas of companionship and equality between partners, that the wife should be sa pareille e sa compaigne (Roman 9427), and that love must be freely given Si veult

23 See above, n4.
24 Lucas and Lucas, p. 505.
avoir per, et non mestre (Ovid 4987)’. From their criticism of the Franklin’s ‘self-contradiction on matters of deep personal and emotional commitment’ it is clear that the Franklin included this idea, for it is precisely the Franklin’s use of these terms that the Lucases try to prove is logically contradictory. On the other hand, the Lucases find significant the Franklin’s omission of the argument of Le Roman that love cannot exist in marriage because the woman, subordinate in marriage, must have mastery in love. The Franklin omits this argument because he does not believe it to be true. He has Arveragus proffer Dorigen ‘so large a reyne’ because he does not believe maistre is appropriate either to love or to marriage.

The Lucases’ interpretation of the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus not only gives a false impression of its deficiency by invoking canon law, but it fails to appreciate the degree to which the Franklin’s idea of love excels courtly love, achieving a reconciliation of love and obedience of a different and higher order. They find the Franklin’s idea of mutual obedience ‘absolute’ in comparison with its probable source in Andreas Capellanus’s De Amore, and contradictory both to the husband’s dominance in Christian marriage and the woman’s dominance in courtly love. Quoting the Franklin’s diversio on marriage (761-70), they comment:

Although the idea That freendes everych oother moot obey echoes the last words of Andreas Capellanus’s De Amore, Bk II, ch. vi,

Singuli namque tenentur amantes in amoris exercendo solatia cunctis inter se mutuis voluntatis obedient.

‘For all lovers are bound, when practising love’s solace, to be mutually obedient to each other’s desires’, the Franklin’s statement is somewhat absolute by comparison. Mutual obedience is literally an impossibility, both in love and marriage. In courtly love the lover obeys his mistress, in marriage the wife her husband. If love wolt nat been constryned by maistrie then either kind of domination will prevent it, whether that of a husband or of a courtly mistress.

What the Lucases mean by ‘somewhat absolute’ is not clear. It is possible that since the above quotation from Capellanus is taken from a section dealing with the practice of ‘love’s solace’, Capellanus means mutuality in lovemaking only. The Franklin’s concept of mutual obedience is more transcendent, and in this sense more absolute, for he would not confine mutuality only to sexual gratification but would extend it throughout the whole marriage relationship, which for the Franklin is one of love.

The Lucases are right in seeing that the woman’s dominance in courtly love implies a contradiction, but they do not see how neatly the Franklin removes it. The Franklin’s concept of mutual obedience is at once less absolute and altogether more serious than that of courtly love, which, at least as presented in De

25 ibid. 510-11.
26 ibid. 511.
27 See Ruggiers, 230.
28 Lucas and Lucas, p. 504.
Amore, upholds neither mutuality nor female dominance. In courtly love a
woman cannot refuse her lover 'love's solaces' after the fourth stage of love has
been reached, the stage at which love has been 'ratified'. The conditions al-
lowing a woman to refuse her lover 'mastery' over her person are only those al-
lowing for the end of love. But her authority, residing principally in her veto,
consists only in deciding for or against love itself. While love lasts, her lover is
master of her person, and his desires cannot be refused. The woman, suppos-
edly mistress in courtly love, finds herself in a double contradiction: a sexual
thrall to her lover, yet always in a position to end her thralldom, but only by
ending love along with it. Courtly love with its lordly lady is an illusion con-
jured by poets, a false appearance the Franklin dispels by invoking trouthe.  
The Franklin's conception of love, bound up as it is with trouthe and gentil-
lesse, confronts maistrie as a vital problem. The dramatic challenge of the
Franklin's Tale is to give reality to love in the context of marriage — to work
out the interaction of unselfish mutuality and trouthe. The Franklin's answer is
what he calls gentillesse. In the passage cited above in the Lucases' criticism of
mutual obedience (761-70), the Franklin qualifies what he means by mastery,
explaining that women desire liberty, 'And nat to be constreyned as a thral;
/ And so doon men, if I soothe seyen shal' (769-70), a simple assertion that men
and women should not exercise mastery over one another in love, but should
serve one another in mutual obedience, conditions paradoxical but not imposi-
able.

The Lucases limit their analysis of the Franklin's Tale to the Franklin's al-
legedly garbled, emotionally deficient, and morally suspect view of love and
marriage — 8.5% of the poem, according to their reckoning. Having criticized
the marriage, the Lucases seem to regard the matter of the Franklin's Tale as
settled; they do not attempt to account for the lovers' success in overcoming the
crisis introduced by Aurelius. Contrary to the Lucases' view, the source of the
happy ending of the tale is in the virtues operating in the Franklin's presenta-
tion of love and marriage — the necessity of mutual obedience, the crucial
importance of the freedom of the will, and the gracious influence of a true sense
of honour, one grounded in trouthe:

cannot deny her lover 'solace' even if he previously agreed to keep a 'pure' love (167), one in-
cluding nude embraces but not 'the act of Venus' (122).
30 See Parry, pp. 156-7, for conditions ending a love relationship. The shallowness and absur-
dity of courtly love is shown in one condition that obviates all the rest: that an old love ends
when a new one begins. Since love is purely subjective, this condition is a loophole large
enough to accommodate any expediency.
31 The Franklin's word maistrie in the above-cited passage is cognate with mastery used by
Parry in the passage on the gravity of a woman yielding mastery of her person to another at
the fourth stage of love (42-3). For the Latin, see P. G. Walsh, Andreas Capellanus on Love
disponat arbitrio?' 'Mastery' translates arbitrium, defined in Charleton T. Lewis, An Eleme-
nary Latin Dictionary (1890; New York, 1915), p. 69, as 'Mastery, dominion, authority, power,
will, free-will, choice, pleasure'.
Of his free wyll he swoor hire as a knyght
That neuer in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
Agayn hir wyll, ne kitho hire jalousie,
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyll in al,
As any lover to his lady shal,
Save that the name of soveraynetee,
That wolde he have for shame of his degree.
She thanked hym, and with ful greet humbleesse
She seyde, “Sire, sith of youre gentillesse
Ye profre me to have so large a reyne,
Ne wolde neveere God betwixe us twoayne,
As in my gylt, were outer werre or styf.
Sire, I wol be youre humble trewe wyll —
Have heer my trouthe — til that myn herte breste”. (745-59)

Although scholars have not overlooked the link between the poem’s ending and the noble sentiments expressed in the vows, the exact connection has remained elusive. In particular, Arveragus’s seemingly brutal and morally compromising insistence that Dorigen keep trouthe with Aurelius is a serious obstacle to seeing the tale’s outcome as a realization of the values in the marriage. However outrageous Arveragus’s solution to the poem’s crisis may seem, the tale’s happy ending argues in his favor.

Chaucer uses the tenuous connection between the marriage and the ending of the tale to draw his audience into interpretive engagement with gentillesse, an engagement centered not merely on marriage as a theatre of gentillesse, but on the dilemma of freedom and the role of choice in effecting moral reality. The vows of Dorigen and Arveragus are both an epitome of gentillesse and a consecration invoking its influence for good. Nurtured by the love of trouthe, the

---

33 Pearsall, p. 157, discusses the special fictional terms that release the power in trouthe, a power to trust that triumphs over chaotic forces in both man and nature. Ian Robinson, in Chaucer and the English Tradition (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 193-6, sees saving virtue in trouthe, but sees the marriage as unreal until the crisis. Ruggiers, pp. 226-37, sees the tale as a thematic explanation of the values inherent in the marriage, but his argument is weakened by his seeing the plot as ‘situational’ rather than an ‘outgrowth of character’, thus compromising the matters of trouthe and gentillesse. Also, Ruggiers’s discussion of the mixture of Christian and pagan elements in the marriage leaves it open to the Lucases’ criticism. J. Burke Severs, in ‘Appropriateness of Character to Plot in the “Franklin’s Tale”’, Studies in Language and Literature in Honour of Margaret Schlauch (New York, 1971), pp. 385-96, argues that Chaucer’s depiction of character prepares the audience for the plot, but he shows no real connection between the characters, their actions, and the outcome of the tale. And John Edwin Wells, in A Manual of the Writings in Middle English: 1050-1400 (New Haven, 1916), p. 735, notes without explanation that gentillesse motivates the ‘vital actions’ of the principals.

34 Douglas J. Wurtele, in Chaucer’s Franklin and the Truth About “Trouthe”, English Studies in Canada, XIII, 4, December 1987, 359-74, reviews the critical history of opinion on Arveragus’s solution to the dilemma of Dorigen’s rash promise and reaches a judgment opposite my own. His critical paradigms are those used by the Lucases: ‘contemporary attitudes’, ecclesiastical authorities, and the code of courtly love.

35 Pearsall (p. 152) describes the reader's involvement in an interpretive conflict between the absurd and admirable in Arveragus’s action.
seeds of gentillesse grow from the lovers’ vows into a surprising comic vision of charity and forbearance. Arveragus believes in love and gentillesse, and his service to Dorigen in courtship and his deference to her will in marriage seem to conform closely to the practice of courtly love. But Arveragus also believes in marriage — the submission of love to the rule of trouthe, the ‘hyeste thyng that man may kepe’ (1479). As dramatic principles, his beliefs must be tested in action. Similarly, Dorigen’s promise never to be the cause of strife, to be a wife both humble and true, cannot escape trial. When she freely makes a rash promise to be Aurelius’s lover if he can make the ‘feendly rokkes blake’ disappear from off the coast of Brittany (989-1005), she initiates the crisis that leads to the vindication of the Franklin’s presentation of love and marriage.

Arveragus’s respect for the freedom of the will is both the center of his concept of trouthe and the essence of the challenge that confronts him through Dorigen’s promise. He is not willing that Dorigen should marry against her will, and he is willing to let her have her will in exchange for her true love, as promised by her trouthe. The dramatic crisis erupts when unexpected conditions arise that seem to fulfill the terms of her promise to Aurelius. Dorigen should never have made such a promise, but her intention was the opposite of the consequence. (One is reminded of the Friar’s Tale.) Her problem is how to be a humble and true wife to Arveragus without breaking her promise to Aurelius. She must keep her promises, for if there is no trouthe in her will, it is mere willfulness, and her marriage, or any of her other relationships, is a sham.

Although some readers find this simple conception of trouthe hard to accept, the characters in the Franklin’s Tale take it at face value and act upon it. The concept of trouthe in the Franklin’s Tale is neither ambiguous nor relative to the viewpoints of the characters or the readers. The problems trouthe creates for the characters in the Franklin’s Tale do not arise from reductive application of a single value system such as ‘canon law, or civil law, or the expec-

36 Carruthers, p. 296.
37 ibid. 294.
39 Effie Jean Mathewson asserts in ‘The Illusion of Morality in the Franklin’s Tale’, Medium Aevum, 52:1 (1993), p. 28, that for Dorigen trouthe does not mean keeping her word, but only being faithful to Arveragus. If this were the case, she would simply not feel any obligation to Aurelius whatever. Her faithfulness to Arveragus is a matter not only of keeping her body, but her word, as well. See also Robinson, p. 194, who observes that equating the trouthe of the vows with the trouthe of Dorigen’s promise cannot be questioned without violating the fictional terms of the marriage, just as Gawain’s view of the terms of the oath in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight cannot be dismissed as dramatically incredible.
41 See David Seaman, “As thynketh yow”: Conflicting Evidence and the Interpretation of The Franklin’s Tale, Mediaevalia et Humanistica, 17 (1991), pp. 51-2. In ‘Character and Circumstances in The Franklin’s Tale’, Sydney Studies in English, 15 (1989-90), pp. 3-30, Diane Speed points out that trouthe, an element shared by all the pledged agreements in the tale, brings them ‘into line with each other as the tale nears its end’ (p. 18).
tations of the romance genre and cannot be reduced to conflicting points of view, since the principals of the drama read the implications of Dorigen's promise in exactly the same way. Trouthe is a grave matter not because people may see things differently, but because being true to one's word may entail great costs — death or dishonour. To criticize the characters' interpretation of trouthe from canon or civil law is irrelevant, as seen in the Lucases' attempt to read the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus as Christian; to excuse such criticism by faulting the Franklin is to argue futilely ad hominem to find the story 'problematic' from the expectations of genre may be a misplaced appreciation of Chaucer's genius, especially if the reader loses sight of the fact that the story's 'problems' are solved.

Such criticism does not give sufficient weight to the fact that Arveragus resolves the tale without compromising a word of the marriage vows or of Dorigen's rash promise. Her vow never to be the cause of strife in their marriage is in his power to maintain, for where there is no offense there is no strife. Were the matter one of merely personal offense, he simply could have forgiven her. But Dorigen has offended trouthe itself, that which binds together personal and social relations, and her actions show that she knows what she has done. Regarding Aurelius's claim on Dorigen's body as an unfair construal of trouthe is a patently easy way out of the dilemma that would not have escaped Arveragus. Had he chosen to view her promise as not binding, he would have been ready as a knight and a man of honour to defend that view against Aurelius's challenge. His vow to obey her will in everything is a different and more complex matter.

Arveragus's love of trouthe and gentillesse is the origin of both his vows with Dorigen and his solution to the poem's crisis. David Raybin calls Arveragus 'incapable of appropriate action'. On the contrary, Arveragus acts decisively and appropriately: by insisting Dorigen keep her promise he masters the temptation to trivialize her interpretation of trouthe and her desire to somehow live up to

---

42 Seaman, pp. 52-4.
43 Speed, p. 27n5, notes scholarship bearing on the connection between the Franklin and his tale. Carruthers's study cited above (n5) removes the opprobrium (and with it, the license for irony) with which some have viewed the Franklin as a less than 'gentle' son of Epictetus.
44 Speed (4,26,27n6), citing Gerald Morgan from his The Franklin's Tale from The Canterbury Tales, (London: 1980) 1, points out the problematic nature of the 'logical and generic expectation' of the 'typicality' of the characters of medieval stories, acknowledging that Morgan was referring to modern readers. In a 1986 article, Boccaccio's Filocolo and the Moral Argument of the Franklin's Tale, The Chaucer Review, 20/4 (1986) pp. 295-96, Morgan says: 'But generic affinities and the expectations derived from them are not to be set above the actuality of particular texts', implying that modern critics aware of medieval expectations need not conclude that medieval readers felt meaningful deviations from type to be 'problematic'.
45 Morgan, 'Boccaccio', p. 293.
46 See Raybin, p. 69 (p. 1, n. 2 above).
her vows. Arveragus's response to Dorigen's revelation is both noble and troubling, as if the disappearance of the crisis is like the disappearance of the black rocks — seemingly impossible, probably illusory, but, after all, only natural. At first sight, his command seems to reduce the question of Dorigen's will to insignificance, one possible purpose of the poem's crisis being to uncover his real dominance of their relationship.

This matter of dominance must be handled very delicately. It is true that Arveragus agreed to obey Dorigen's will 'in al'. But her reciprocal obedience is implicit in her agreeing to be a 'humble trewe wyf', ratified by her plight of trouthe. Her yielding to Arveragus does not necessarily compromise the spirit of mutuality: in a given situation, one may yield to the other on the principle of mutual obedience alone. The real question is whether Dorigen and Arveragus can keep the two-fold spirit of their vows: whether trouthe will rule the relationship, and whether 'freendes everych oother moot obeye' is more than hypocritical posturing. More exactly, the poem first gives depth to love by the power of trouthe, then asks how freedom, without which trouthe is meaningless, can function in the context of trouthe-plighted love. Dorigen's most important contribution to the tale is her function in acting out this question.

It is obvious that the illusory nature of appearances is an important theme in the Franklin's Tale; this theme has no greater importance than its involvement in the conversion of Dorigen's immature and sentimental will into a mature and sober sense of will, grounded in a fully conscious sense of trouthe. Keeping trouthe entails two essentials: possession of sufficient knowledge to assess the conditions affecting the fulfillment of the vow, and assurance of power to perform it. Dorigen has neither. Her inability to tolerate the 'black rocks' of her life is an emotionally immature response, in the Boethian sense, to adversity, and reveals the deficiency of her knowledge and the limitations of her power to act. Dorigen's prayer to Eterne God betrays her dissatisfaction with the administration of the cosmos and a mind poised between fearful contemplation of the evil in creation and simple hope that the God who makes the black rocks will also bring her husband home (865-93). Her promising to be Aurelius's lover on condition that the rocks be removed in fact relies on the certainty that 'Eterne God' is implacable, be he person or principle, and thus her prayer has (unintentionally) blasphemous implications.

In one important sense, Dorigen really does not want the rocks to be removed. The rocks' presence, emblematic of the irrational evil in creation, is the foundation of her sense of certainty, for it is on this certainty that she bases her defense against Aurelius's advances and her declaration of faithfulness to Arveragus. When the rocks disappear, she is confronted with the fact that she has no sure foundation of knowledge, and, implicitly, that she never had sufficient certainty of knowledge to afford any vow. That the disappearance of the rocks may be an illusion is irrelevant: what matters is her response to their

Carruthers, p. 295.

The question is similar to that posed in Sophocles's Antigone, where the issue is not whether Creon will yield to Antigone, but whether he will yield to reason and piety.
removal — at first, an outpouring of hysteria fixed on the implications of her promise. Although it is apparent that Dorigen had no intention that things should fall out as they do, her will is essentially expressed in her promise to be Aurelius's lover, since her promise is grounded in the only sense of certainty from which her will could operate. The confidence behind her promise is based on the black rocks — her fear that irrational evil is more enduring and trustworthy than an implacable god or the trouthe-plied word of an absent husband, whose absence occasions her complaint about the black rocks.

It is to this meaning of will that Arveragus responds in commanding Dorigen to keep trouthe, and it is this sense of will that removes the charge that he violates her will to have his own. Her will, her confidence to act, was fixed on the black rocks, and with their removal the foundations of her will are also removed. Her will is in a sense forfeit, and she shifts the burden of responsibility to Arveragus, thus putting her will in his hands.49 Neither Arveragus nor Dorigen are truly willing that she should give herself to Aurelius, so there is no conflict of their wills in this sense.50 But each has made a vow, and each must keep trouthe or lose all sense of honour and truth. The lovers' loyalty to trouthe is a kind of crucible in which their intentions are purified and the concept of mutual obedience becomes more than a gesture. The purpose of the crisis is to test the virtues behind the lovers' vows, and so what they must not do is what people of the ordinary degree of integrity would likely do in their situation — abandon the virtues that got them into trouble for more pragmatic values that make them comfortable with their failure. Arveragus's handling of Dorigen's plight preserves their integrity as characters, even if at first it strains the audience's perception of their humanity. It is also an ingenious solution to the dramatic problems of the tale.

Arveragus's reaction to Dorigen's disclosure, touching at first, quickly dissolves into one that hardly foreshadows a happy resolution of the crisis. He threatens Dorigen's life if she tells of her tryst with Aurelius, a cruel response utterly contradicting gentillesses. His threat puts the whole matter of the poem in jeopardy, but it also reveals his humanity in a dramatically fitting way. Neither he nor Dorigen is a stock character: they are vulnerable and they are unpredictable. Arveragus grants largesse on one occasion; on another, he makes a deadly threat. He is willing to brook private pain, but stumbles before the prospect of public dishonour, just as he wished to keep secret Dorigen's large rein of freedom in their marriage.51 Dorigen vows death before dishonour one moment: the next, very much alive, she confides in her husband. Her melodramatic concept of death before dishonour probably did not prepare her for the emotional death of yielding herself to Aurelius for the sake of Arveragus's honour.

49 See Seaman, pp. 50-1. Both lovers have a significant part to play in the successful outcome of the tale, and shifting blame or praise wholly to one or the other distorts the mutuality animating the tale.
50 Morgan (‘Boccaccio’, p. 302) points out that Arveragus's taking Dorigen’s promise at face value is evidence that he imputed no blame to his wife's intention in making the promise.
51 Morgan, 'Franklin', pp. 90-91.
Perhaps the most realistic dilemma of the lovers' plight is their having to choose not between honour and dishonour, but, for honour's sake, among degrees of dishonour.52 One dramatic crisis truly inherent in the marriage vows is the ever-present potential conflict between honour as a function of free will, a moral reality centered on the self, and honour as a social reality, in constant engagement with the same dual sense of honour in other persons. In this sense, the negotiated give and take of the marriage vows, the dramatic crisis, and the tale's denouement are all of one poetic cloth.

Caught in this dilemma of dishonour, Arveragus does not threaten Dorigen with death if she does not keep her promise to Aurelius, but only if she tells anyone about it. This is a futile gesture, and the audience must see that it is only a gesture. Raybin,53 arguing that Dorigen is the decisive actor rather than Arveragus, sees Arveragus's outburst as an act of male dominance on the one hand, and evidence of his 'passivity' on the other. Raybin's assertion that '...there is nothing in Arveragus's command ... that precludes [Dorigen's] refusing to treat with Aurelius at all' contradicts the text. As David Seaman points out, Dorigen is the one who, unable to decide whether to 'treat' with Aurelius or kill herself, goes to her husband and puts the dilemma in his lap.54 If Dorigen refuses to keep trouthe with Aurelius she disobeys not only Arveragus, but trouthe itself, and this decision — to keep trouthe or not — is the serious matter of the poem. The lovers' actions are mutually decisive, and follow from how they themselves interpret the matter of trouthe. Dorigen must keep her promise to Aurelius, and Arveragus must insist that she do so: these are the conditions demanded by trouthe55 and the conditions alone that make possible the poem's happy ending.

Since the likelihood of Arveragus's silencing all parties privy to Dorigen's prospective adultery is slim (to say the least), his command does not signal the awakening of his dormant brutality so much as it reveals the emotional strain of facing up to principles he espouses when they confront him in practical reality.56 On the other hand, a milder acquiescence to the turn of events would perhaps sabotage Arveragus's credibility as a character even more than does his superhuman loyalty to his principles. As a character, he would be much less believable if his human limitations were not allowed expression.57 At first he meets Dorigen's confession with consummate gentleness, and his readiness to offer mercy and forgiveness makes his nobility seem almost instinctive. But his love for Dorigen struggles against his regard for his honour, and as this conflict, heightened by his love of trouthe, suddenly rises from his soul to his consciousness, he bursts out weeping and utters his threat, leading the audience along the razor's edge of the principle behind the dramatic conflict. That trouthe is a life-

52 Seaman, p. 52.
53 Raybin, pp. 69-70.
54 Seaman, p. 51.
55 ibid. p. 48.
56 Arveragus's will is hostage to trouthe. See Pearsall, p. 157.
and-death matter is simply the ultimate logical extension of its meaning. For Arveragus *trowthe* is the soul of *gentillesse*, and it is fitting that the Franklin should show the crisis of the drama erupting from Arveragus's own soul into his violent threat. The 'payne of deeth' Arveragus directs at Dorigen reflects his own anguish, and may in fact simply be aimed at the impossible situation. The only way out of this genuine dramatic dilemma is a miracle, realized in the exercise of true *gentillesse*, the power latent in the marriage vows.

It is crucial to recognize that the lovers' response to the crisis is not the turning point of the drama. The lovers have passed their test: their actions confirm their virtues and deflect the testing of character from themselves to Aurelius. As Dorigen goes her way weeping to keep *trowthe* with Aurelius, the drama is as much open to tragedy as to comedy, and she knows it. The real reversal of fortune happens with Aurelius's epiphanal response to the lovers' *gentillesse*. This is classic drama, the more powerful in Chaucer's hands because the story depends so much on the characters' individual understanding and ethical choices. The outcome of the tale does not depend on probabilities (literary or psychological) but on virtuous actions — actions rare and improbable, yet exquisitely human. Chaucer, master of artistic limits, flaunts both probability and decorum to capture the essence of moral freedom. He challenges the audience to see that virtue, creature of hard choices and sometimes desperate risks, is fittingly represented in fiction this way. As Pearsall notes, it happens this way 'this time' in the *Franklin's Tale*; it need never again happen just this way to be a valid fictional representation of moral reality. The *Franklin's Tale* turns on virtue, rare by definition, and free will, matters by their nature open to possibilities, to variations of response reflecting differing measures of growth, struggle, and change.

All the main characters of the *Franklin's Tale* share this human capacity for growth and change, and they express this capacity in similar ways — through the kind of mutual give and take expressed in the Franklin's presentation of marriage. It is the lovers' loyalty to their vows that awakens similar virtues in the other characters — none of whom acted in true *gentillesse* before Dorigen's critical action and all of whom depended not on *trowthe* but on illusion to gain their ends. No character is perfectly virtuous, yet each responds to another's gesture of submission not by pressing rights but by responding in *gentillesse*. Of all the characters, Arveragus is hardest beset, being brought quite to his wits' end. He is given the burden of pressing the dilemma of freedom to its extreme, for he has promised not to contradict the will of Dorigen, and so he must neither take offense nor allow her to contradict her promise to be a humble, true wife. He yields not so much to Dorigen as to *trowthe* itself, his perplexity vented in threats that in essence call upon Dorigen to yield similarly.

58 Mann, p. 151.
59 Pearsall, p. 156. See also Robinson, p. 195.
60 See Jacobs, p. 133. However, on p. 135 Jacobs says that the lovers 'deny the autonomy of the individual', a non-sequitur view of the idea of 'self denial'. Their yielding is precisely what preserves their autonomy, which in the context of *trowthe* is traditionally called personal in-
He and Dorigen are chastened; Aurelius undergoes a moral revolution. Insofar as his response is the key to the tale's modulation from tragedy to comedy, it is the change in his thinking that is the key to the dramatic problem of the tale. However, without some explanation of how this change comes about, the Franklin's Tale retains the sense of having a deus ex machina lurking about, who, much like the magician, seems to have created a comic ending out of thin air.

Aurelius's change of heart, his seeing Dorigen in the light of pity instead of lust, has its origin first in Dorigen's decision to tell Arveragus about her plight. With this choice she leaves behind the black rocks and with them her immaturity, her anxiety, and her hysteria. Just as her promise to be Aurelius's lover with the removal of the rocks belied her confidence in 'Eterne God', so her decision to endure the crisis demonstrates confidence that things needn't turn out badly, that allegiance to trouthe can make the black rocks of life disappear. Her confession and communication confirm her as the loving, faithful, and humble wife she promised to be in her marriage vows. Her communication is the chill air of reality that begins to dissipate the mists of illusion and bring the breath of life to a grim situation. Dorigen's confiding in Arveragus proves her confidence in his good will and his wisdom, and in the integrity behind his vows of love and obedience. She has without suggestion of guile transferred the testing of the marriage vows from herself to Arveragus, perhaps not realizing that the key to their escape, given the code of trouthe that is the sine qua non of the tale, is in her husband's knowledge of her predicament. It is only by virtue of his knowledge that Arveragus can, like a magician or alchemist, convert the base metal of impending adultery into faithfulness.

It is not the fact that Dorigen keeps her agreement with Aurelius that changes him; she could have done that and become an adulteress in spirit as well as in letter. The power of her action is in her willing submission, in her humbling herself where her husband finds himself honour bound to endure humiliation, and the force of her action is in turn augmented by the pathos of his commanding her to keep her word in full knowledge of the implications of her keeping it. This is the give and take of mutual obedience. Both have embraced deep shame for the sake of trouthe. Their acts give reality to trouthe, and this reality breaks through to Aurelius, converting him to the service of true gentillesse.

Dorigen's giving her body to Aurelius under the cover of courtly love would have worked no such miracle. It is knowing that Arveragus knows, and that he has commanded Dorigen to keep trouthe, that effects the change in Aurelius. Were Dorigen to kill herself, the poem would be a melodramatic tragedy, and a less than convincing one, since Aurelius would be a patent cad, and the matter of trouthe, and of the marriage itself, would have come unravelled at Dori-
gen’s failure to believe her husband worthy of her confidence. Dorigen’s keeping 
trouthe with Aurelius outside of Arveragus’s knowledge is not 
trouthe-keeping at all, and the result would probably be a comedy like the 
Miller’s Tale or the Shipman’s Tale. Her failure to confide in Arveragus would have left no op-
portunity for him to prove his worthiness, and no mechanism for Aurelius’s 
epiphany.

Having witnessed Dorigen’s faithfulness, Aurelius reverses the direction of 
his interest from his amorous self to Dorigen’s plight:

Aurelius gan won dre on this cas,
And in his herte hadde greet compassion
Of hire and of hire lamentacioun,
And of Arveragus, the worthy knyght,
That bad hire holden at that she had hight,
So looth hym was his wyf sholde breke his trouthe; (1514-19)

Wolfgang E. H. Rudat reads these lines as heavily ironic, calling them a hy-
pocritical rationalization: ‘... if he now held Dorigen to her pledge, he would be 
compromising his own gentillesse, which Arveragus and Dorigen cleverly have 
brought into play’. Dorigen and Arveragus have done nothing ‘cleverly’ except 
attempt, in the face of great emotional pain and deep shame, to keep their 
word, even to Aurelius. It is hard to believe that one so deep in hypocrisy would 
have scruples about having his way with a woman; real hypocritical rational-
ization would be for Aurelius to have Dorigen and piously congratulate himself 
on teaching her a lesson in gentillesse. Aurelius contrives the ‘disappearance’ of 
the rocks to satisfy his foolish lovesickness: were it not for a genuine change of 
heart, such a lovesick fool would have taken Dorigen with joy. Rudat is correct, 
however, that by making everything open, the lovers expose Aurelius’ motives, 
which were neither noble nor charitable. But to change their resolution to keep 
trouthe into strategic ‘mutual manipulation’ that trumps Aurelius’s lust with his 
need to maintain appearances ignores the tremendous risk they took that Au-
relius would consummate the affair by enjoying Dorigen’s body. To say Aure-
lius had ‘no choice’ but to release her from her promise runs counter to his 
supposed veniality, and the lovers’ supposed strategy assumes his veniality.61

Having seen the process of nature turned upside down in favor of Aurelius’s 
side of the bargain, the lovers would not have been in a state of mind to make 
so blithely confident and nice a calculation about Aurelius’s zeal to maintain 
the appearance of honour. Rudat says Arveragus’s initial error was neglecting 
the service of Venus for the ‘labour of Mars’: this inclination, coupled with his 
allegedly ungenerous and ‘unknightly’ nature, indicates Arveragus would have

61 Carruthers (p. 297) sums up Aurelius’s character before his conversion to true gentilesse per-
factly, from which summary I note in particular his lack of coherence, his irrationality, his 
misconstruing of Dorigen’s intentions, his disregard of the integrity of people and of nature. 
He is also devoted to appearances, but from his character one would expect him to find a way 
to devote himself to an appearance justifying his enjoyment of Dorigen, especially if he 
should look upon Arveragus as a fool with no regard for his own or his wife’s honor.
suggested a martial solution to the problem — an offer Aurelius would have been unable to refuse.62

The strategy called for by Rudat’s ironic reading would be foolish, and the opposite of how the lovers choose to act. They act as they do because to do otherwise would be to abandon *trowthe*: Aurelius acts as he does because their nobility opens his eyes to his own wretchedness. He perceives that his feeling for Dorigen is nothing but ‘... cherlyssh wretchednesse / Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse’ (1523-4). Seeing that Arveragus would rather embrace shame than break *trowthe*, Aurelius decides ‘evere to suffre wo’ rather than ‘departe the love bitwix’ the lovers (1531-32).

Only after Aurelius’s conversion from lust to pity does Chaucer disclose, and then only by implication, how the potential for this change has grown in Aurelius’s mind. From the moment he struck his bargain with the magician, Aurelius labored under a burden of doom less profound than the lovers’ but its equal in potential disaster. Having witnessed the magician’s power, Aurelius rashly promised to pay a thousand pounds for the disappearance of the rocks. He made this vow knowing full well he could not pay the magician for the ‘miracle’. He pledged more than his whole inheritance (1557-66) to a man who could possibly make him disappear, never mind his inheritance. Lust, a motive contrary to the lovers’ commitment to truth-giving love, blinded him to the gravity of his predicament, a condition in keeping with the tale’s theme of the power of illusion.

Aurelius had little to lose of true *gentillesse* but ends up gaining a moral elevation that forestalls ruin, disgrace, and perhaps even death. His escape is made possible because the lovers, facing the catastrophe Aurelius is blithely unaware of, remain true. Arveragus, a warrior by training and conviction, refuses to abandon the strategic advantage of the high ground of *gentillesse*, saying ‘Trowthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe’ (1479). Dorigen yields to *trowthe* and keeps her word to Aurelius, opening his mind to a world of moral virtue he seems never to have known. He learns by practical demonstration the meaning of the words *fredom, franchise, and gentillesse*, and immediately sets out to put his life in order.

His first act of contrition — and *fredom* — is to release Dorigen from her promise. He then goes to the magician and promises to pay his debt even though he gained nothing for all his lovesickness and trouble, asking forbearance in the face of his rash bargain, and knowing that the bargain was not that the magician would make Dorigen love him but only that the rocks should disappear. When the magician learns of his *largesse* toward Dorigen and of the lovers’ *trowthe*, he applauds their *gentillesse*, and responds, like the others, with *largesse*:

---

“Sire, I releeseth thee thy thousand pound,
As thou right now were cpopen out of the ground,
Ne never er now ne haddest known me.
For, sire, I wol nat taken a peny of thee
For al my craft, ne noght for my travaile.
Thou hast ypayed wel for my vitaille.
It is ynoth, and farewell, have good day!” (1613-19)

The magician’s largesse, like the disappearance of the rocks, has been called illusory and even cynically contemptuous. But these charges only emphasize the fact that he did not choose to press his claim but to release Aurelius from his vow. His questionable moral character would indicate that he had not only the inclination but the ability to collect his fee regardless of whether Aurelius chose to claim his right to Dorigen’s body. A conjurer and dealer in illusions, he would seem of all the characters least likely (barring a change of heart) to respond sympathetically to being defrauded, and least troubled by appearances, which are open to manipulation. Like the squire Aurelius, the clerk of Orleans may not have instantly become a perfectly virtuous man, but he seems, by his change of heart, to have become a new man.

Something in Aurelius’s response to the lovers’ sacrificial regard for trouthe — perhaps an authenticity conferred by the high costs of honour, perhaps the rarity of such acts and their value in the sight of a man so aware of the prevalence of fraud and illusion — awakens a similar response in the Magician, profound testimony to the power of trouthe in the service of gentillesse. The Franklin seems to have felt a paternal urgency (perhaps born of bitter experience) to confer upon the Squire the lesson Aurelius learned — that gentillesse is a deeper matter than the art of singing and fluting all day and loving all night. Gentillesse, or true nobility, is the keeping of trouthe, true humility, and true freedom. The Franklin was wise enough — at least among his fellow pilgrims — to spin his lecture into a story rather than a sermon. For a brief space of time on the road to Canterbury, he cast a spell of hope more wonderful than any of the Magician’s illusions. His presentation of marriage and love is not the source of confusion and deviance from which the lovers’ troubles arise. It is the essence of a unique poetic vision of trouthe, the bond of unfeigned faith, the source of moral power that leads the lovers through the crisis of Dorigen’s hasty promise to a higher plane of virtue truly miraculous for ‘hethen folk ... in thilke dayes’.

University of Mississippi

TIMOTHY H. Flake

63 Gaylord, pp. 349-50.
64 Rudat, 457.