Invention and Disjunction: Chaucer’s Rewriting of Boccaccio in the 
Franklin’s Tale

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The Franklin’s Tale has, in recent years, attracted considerable and conflicting critical interpretation, ranging from the early view of it as part of the “Marriage Debate” through, in the last two decades, a flood of feminist and conflicting analyses, to a number of exegetical anagogical views. Most of this activity has focused, quite naturally, on Dorigen and the question of “maistrye” or “freedom in marriage”. A summary of these critiques would take a chapter; however, for the most part they are uniform in implicitly accepting that the tale is artistically and intellectually coherent, and that “all is meant for our doctrine”. The process and structure of the narrative tend, therefore, to be subordinated to a totalizing allegorization which extracts sections of the text as Keys to the tale’s “mythology”. Apart from a chapter by N. S. Thompson, an essay by Karla Taylor, and Robert Edwards’s essays, which concentrate largely on the question of establishing Boccaccio’s Il Filocolo as Chaucer’s direct source, studies of the Franklin’s Tale as Chaucer’s confrontation with the problem of fin’amor/courtly love within the bounds and bonds of marriage have tended to avoid Chaucer’s relationship to his sources in Boccaccio. Citing C. S. Lewis’s magisterial study of the relationship of Troilus and Criseyde to Il Filostrato, Elizabeth Salter pointed out:

No real confidence, for instance, could now be placed in judgements of the poem which are not prepared to take into account Chaucer’s dealings with his sources. Minute or major changes and redispositions of material are crucial to our understanding of “the poet at work”, and, ultimately to our understanding of the work itself.

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1For comprehensive surveys up to 1987 see Fyler, 321–37; The Riverside Chaucer, 895–6. For more recent surveys see Thompson, 257, n.1; Schildgen, chap. 5; Mann, vii–xii; and Haas, 45–63.


3Lewis, 56–75.

4Salter, “Troilus and Criseyde,” 87.
She is referring here, of course, to scholarly studies—not primary responses of the Practical Criticism kind or to what Lee Patterson calls “pre-emptive ideologies”\(^5\), and her view of the importance of comparison with known sources is reaffirmed, in a more inclusive and current way, by David Wallace in *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales*, a recent collection of essays on the relationships of the two works:

comparative readings may prove as instructive in moving texts further apart—in textual, cultural, and political terms—as when they explore areas of overlap; differential readings articulate the contours of specific cultural formations that may never touch at all.\(^6\)

In fact, the *Franklin’s Tale*, like so many of Chaucer’s works, is not wholly original but, like some of the best of them, is a rewriting of identifiable sources—here, as so often, Boccaccio’s works. And, as in the *Knight’s Tale*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Merchant’s Tale*, and the *Shipman’s Tale*, the principal architecture of the narrative, the “problem” and the event-conclusion are all accepted by Chaucer as “fixed”. Comparisons with sources have tended in the past to concentrate on demonstrating the “originality”, and often implied or declared superiority of Chaucer. That Chaucer rewrites Boccaccio in a uniquely original way, and that he is as creative with his source material as Shakespeare was with his, can be taken for granted. Until recently, because of the long-standing view that Chaucer did not know the *Decameron*, the *Franklin’s Tale* was thought to have as its source either a lost Old French work or one of thirteen “Love Questions” in Boccaccio’s *Il Filocolo*. However, the *Decameron* has a shorter, simpler version of the story which contains the principal elements of the narrative both in Boccaccio’s earlier, more elaborate version and in Chaucer. In the recent *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, Robert R. Edwards supports the view that the *Filocolo* is Chaucer’s direct source, which is also central to his earlier argument in *The Decameron and The Canterbury Tales*. On the other hand, Helen Cooper in *The Canterbury Tales*, published before the new *Sources and Analogues* (in which she provides the introductory essay, itself based on an earlier publication in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*),\(^7\) doubts that the *Filocolo* was the source and, while stating that “the differences between the two versions are not sufficient to identify either finally as Chaucer’s source, especially since he changed the story so much”,\(^8\) seems to favour “memorial recollection” on Chaucer’s part.

The *Filocolo* and the *Decameron* versions, though both have the same basic plot, differ greatly in length and in some details. The main narrative events of both versions are: a married lady of high status, pursued by an unwanted suitor, tries to rid herself of his attentions by requesting an impossible feat as the price of her favours,

\(^5\)Patterson, 694.
\(^8\)Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 233.
the creation of a May garden in January; the suitor employs a magician to create the

garden; the lady, distressed that she may have to fulfil her promise, reveals her
dilemma to her husband, who orders her to fulfil it; the suitor, moved by the
husband’s generous action, releases her from her promise; and the magician,
impressed by the suitor’s generosity, refuses payment; the teller of the tale poses the
question, “Who was the most generous?” to the audience, who debate it. Either could
have furnished the basic narrative of Chaucer’s tale, though the Filocolo provides
more detail, but Chaucer’s rewriting closely follows neither, and differs from both in
important amplifications and alterations. Thompson’s suggestion that Chaucer may
have known both, and an earlier proposal by Edwards that Chaucer read the story in
a collection of “Love Questions” excerpted from the Filocolo, underline the
obvious, namely that while Chaucer had access to at least one of Boccaccio’s versions,
he has rewritten it so distinctively that either, or even both may have provided his
initial inspiration, but the abbreviations and changes made in the Decameron version
provide possible precedents for Chaucer’s alterations. In the Shipman’s Tale, for
example, he takes elements of two similar stories in the Decameron and creates
something which differs considerably from either; and in the Clerk’s Tale, which is
based mainly on Petrarch’s version of the story, elements of Boccaccio’s Griselda
story in the Decameron (which was Petrarch’s source) modify the Petrarchan
model. While it is important to identify as accurately as possible Chaucer’s direct
sources and possible additional influences, and from this draw conclusions about the
extent of Chaucer’s narrative originality, an examination of the differences and the
similarities not only enhances our understanding of “the poet at work” and the poem
in progress, but also reveals that here, as in other works based on Boccaccio,
Chaucer’s rewriting radically alters and somewhat subverts the genre of his source,
rather than merely contributing to a tabulation of Originality versus Dependence.
This comparison also alerts us to shifts in focus which tend to be missed or ignored in
single issue or moral allegoresis of the basic plot elements.

As some studies of the Franklin’s Tale have remarked, Chaucer makes several
major changes to the story, which are highlighted by comparison with his source and
can have important consequences for interpretation. He changes the geographical
context from the unnamed but Italian location in the Filocolo and Udine in Friuli in
the Decameron, both conceptually “real” and contemporaneous, to Brittany “once
upon a time” within the generic and “unreal” confines of the Breton lay. Thus, while
Boccaccio appears to give his improbable story some validity by locating it, as with
his fabliaux tales, in the real geography of contemporaneous Italy, Chaucer
immediately severs his tale from real time and place by locating it as a Breton lay,
a short form of romance. In both Boccaccio versions the social context is that of the
rich and aristocratic married woman who is loved and courted by “un altro cavaliere

9Thompson, 265.
chiamante Tarolfo: another gentleman named Tarolfo” (Filocolo, 220–1)¹³ and by “un nobile e gran barone: a great and noble lord” (Decameron, 238–9). In Boccaccio, while the situation is nominally that of fin’amor/courtly love, in that the beautiful wife is courted by an aristocratic suitor, the husband’s position is the orthodox one of master and, in fact, he is the one who decides the resolution of the problem.

Probably the single most important change that Chaucer makes is to begin the tale by establishing the relationship of Dorigen and Arveragus as courtly lovers before marriage. That is, we begin with Arveragus as suitor and Dorigen as independent woman, not wife; and then move on to the marriage being presented as a fulfilment and continuation of their relationship as courtly lovers, not master and wife:

Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knight
That nevere in al his lyf ne day ne nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie,
But hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,
As any lover to his lady shal,
Save that the name of soveraynetee,
That wolde he have for shame of his degree. (745–52)¹⁴

The narrator then comments on this to support and define their love bond:

Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye
Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon
Beteth his wynges, and farewell, he is gon!
Wommen of kynde, desiren libertee
.
.
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal. (764–70)
.
.
Thus hath she taken hir servant and hir lord—
Servant in love and lord in marriage. (792–3)

The rejection of “maistrie” in marriage here outlines the ideal of courtly love contained within the social bond, a theme raised in the Roman de la Rose¹⁵ and presented by Chaucer earlier in the Book of the Duchess.¹⁶ This presentation of an apparently ideal union of theoretical incompatibles, and its accompaniment by the narrator’s disquisition on love, marriage and freedom, introduces a centre of meaning and a potential dilemma to this story which is not even vestigially present in Boccaccio. In Boccaccio the focus of both versions is not on love but on the resolution of the Rash Promise by the actions of the husband and the reaction of the

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¹³Quotations from and references to Il Filocolo and to Decameron, 10.5 hereafter are to the texts in Edwards, “The Franklin’s Tale.”
¹⁴The Franklin’s Tale in The Riverside Chaucer. All quotations and references are to this edition.
¹⁶The Book of the Duchess in The Riverside Chaucer, 1270–86.
suitor: the wife confesses her Rash Promise; the husband, with great equanimity, orders his wife to fulfil her pact; and the suitor, impressed by the “gran liberalita del marito: the great generosity shown him by the husband” (Filocolo, 230–1)/“della liberalita di Giliberto commorso: moved by Gilberto’s generosity” (Decameron, 242–3), releases the lady from her promise. In the Filocolo the “question” considered at length after this resolution by the teller, Menedon, and the queen and the audience is, “which of them showed the greater generosity: the husband sending his wife to fulfil her promise; the suitor returning the wife unblemished; or the magician, who created the Magic Garden, giving back his fee to the suitor” (230–3). The Decameron version, though much briefer because it abbreviates the garden digression, effectively ends on an account of the same chain of generosity (244), but also has the suitor add: “God forbid that I be the one who soils the honor of the man who had compassion for my love” (Decameron, 242), which Chaucer transfers to Arveragus’ concern with his honour, a concern not in Boccaccio. That is, for Boccaccio the story is essentially not about the wife, or about love, or about the ethics of promises, but is about the discussion, in the frame structure of the narrative, of the generosity of all three men involved in the resolution of a silly promise. The principal narrative events in Chaucer and Boccaccio are the same, but the focuses of meaning and literary interest are very different, to which the large number of interpretative articles on love, marriage and female freedom in Chaucer testifies. The result in Chaucer’s tale is the creation of an identifiable “character” in Dorigen, and to a lesser extent in Arveragus, and the posing of greater complications for the resolution.

Effectively, the introduction of a courtly love relationship to marriage, and the subsequent elaboration of Dorigen as a character with a specific emotional dilemma and motivation, radically alters the narrative balance of the basic story, and becomes the organizing point in Chaucer for a range of issues, concentrated mainly on her role in the action. The women in both Boccaccio’s versions are mere ciphers: in the Filocolo she has no name, but in the Decameron she is named Madonna Dianora. In both cases her only action is to make the Rash Promise and, later, to confess her dilemma to her husband, for him to resolve. In the Filocolo the lady’s despondency leads to the husband’s knowledge of the problem and, when she says she must fulfil her promise, she responds, “Facciano gl’idii da me lontano cocal fallo; in niuna maniera io faro questo: avanti m’ucciderei ch’io facessi cosa che disonore o dispacere vi vosse: May the gods keep such a blemish from me . . . I would rather kill myself than do something that would be dishonourable or displeasing to you” (230–1), which is clearly closer to Dorigen’s lament, with its examples of women who kill themselves to avoid dishonour, than the Decameron account: “dove altramenti non si potesse, per questa volt il corpo ma non l’animo gli concede: if you cannot do it otherwise, then this one time you may give him your body but not your heart” (Decameron, 242–3). Chaucer elaborates this motif considerably, of course, which has the primary effect of amplifying the “character” of Dorigen, and of presenting her as a focus of pathos. However, this episode, which creates suicide as a potential “solution” to her dilemma, plays no part in Chaucer’s resolution and, curiously, is
not mentioned by Dorigen when she reveals her problem to Arveragus. Here, not untypically, Chaucer amplifies an episode for local effect, but does not coordinate it with the overall narrative.

In Boccaccio, the husband makes the decision, and seems to have neither emotional difficulties nor concerns for his or his wife’s honour. Only the wife in the *Filocolo* raises the question of reputation, specifically that of her husband, but there is no development of the problem. Chaucer, however, elaborates this hint into a significant event, relating to Arveragus’ “honour”. Though Boccaccio has set his story in approximate present time and real geography, the personae are mere limited role figures that have no identity beyond their functions in the game of the Question of Generosity. That is, “reality” of setting is offset, indeed negated by the “unreality” of characters and narrative dilemma: they exist only as an illustrative text for the main business of the debate about degrees of Generosity. In contrast, Chaucer’s long introductory addition, which gives a unique cast to the relationship of husband and wife, makes the given dilemma the focus of emotional drama and empathy. That is, his “unreal romance” context is countered by a “realistic” emotional-moral conflict which, naturally, proved the focus of critical attention, rather than the Question of Generosity, which is the focus of Boccaccio’s story. Chaucer’s Dorigen is given prominence in the narrative not simply by her initiating the Rash Promise, but also by the integration of the Promise with her role as courtly lover and wife. She, unlike Boccaccio’s women, whose request is simply for the pleasure of a magical garden, is given credible, or at least selfless, motivation for her Rash Promise: she wants the rocks removed from the coast because she fears for her husband’s life, a fear which is presented before the suitor appears. She is also given the appearance of personal freedom of choice, rather than simply being ordered to fulfil her bargain by her husband, who, while emotionally distressed, nobly urges the importance of truth to one’s word.

Through Dorigen this improbable tale, which exists in Boccaccio only as a Question on the Generosity of three male characters, greatly amplified and almost dominated in the *Filocolo* by a self-standing excursus on the creation of the magical garden, is pushed in the naturalistic direction of the emotional-moral dilemma of the female protagonist and, to a lesser extent, of her lover-husband. Though not a Crisseyde or Griselda, Dorigen has been sufficiently fleshed out for pathos to be an appropriate response, and for her dilemma, joined to that of Arveragus, to become the central focus of the story, rather than the sterile intellectual game of the Question of Generosity. Arveragus, though recommending that his wife-lover fulfil her promise, is distinguished from Boccaccio’s husbands by being given an emotional-moral identity when, after high-mindedly saying, “Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe” (1479), he is given a more human reaction: “with that word he brast anon to wepe” (1480), and “As I may best, I wol my wo endure” (1484). That is, where Boccaccio’s husbands with great equanimity send off their obedient wives to pay up, Chaucer has Arveragus present a moral rationale of the decision, make it a recommendation, but not an order, and reveal that it will cause him extreme distress.
Aurelius, the suitor, is also given an emotional response to Dorigen’s submission to her promise, which separates him from the straitjacket of his role in Boccaccio’s story:

And in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe,
Considerynge the beste on every side,
That fro his lust yet were hym levere abyde
Than doon so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse
Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse. (1520–4)

His release of her from her promise is couched in terms which focus on the love bond of Dorigen and Arveragus with which the tale opened, and within which their separate dilemmas have operated:

I have wel levere evere to suffer
Than I departe the love bitwix yow two. (1531)

This sentiment is not in Boccaccio, where the suitor attributes the release from the promise solely to the “gran liberalita del marito: the great generosity shown him by the husband” (Filocolo, 230–1), with the significant addition in the Decameron of the suitor’s concern for the husband’s honour. In this part of the story Chaucer translates Boccaccio’s “liberalita” (generosity) by “gentillesse” (1524, 1527, 1575, 1595), and the associated term “gentil deed” (1543, 1608), which may echo the Wife of Bath’s discussion in her tale (1109 ff.), and its origins in Dante and the Roman de la Rose. That is, Aurelius’ sentiments and his language temporarily integrate Boccaccio’s question of Generosity with Chaucer’s invocation of the world of romance and fin’amor in the first part of his tale.

Wallace’s statement, that the radical difference between Boccaccio and Chaucer is “Chaucer’s decision to bring his female protagonist to prominence”, identifies the single most important change from a tale in which the Rash Promise and its female giver exist only as motivators of fantasy and the Game question, “which man demonstrates the greater generosity”. However, the change is much more than simply giving Dorigen prominence, because in Boccaccio’s versions there was no comparable female persona. It alters the Question radically to the dilemma of the promiser, the equal dilemma of the lover/husband, the status of love and freedom within marriage, and individual sexual freedom within marriage. In the Filocolo, the ampler version of the story, the major part of the narrative is focused not on the woman’s dilemma, which is derogated to her husband, but on the magic creation of the garden (almost a self-standing episode), the love pangs of the suitor—the only developed character in Boccaccio’s story—and the brigata audiences’ reflections on the Question of Generosity. Both Boccaccio versions are entirely male-oriented and game-directed: the suitor is the major protagonist and the husband the other. In Chaucer, Dorigen

17Wallace, “Chaucer and Boccaccio,” 154. See also Greenberg, 344.
shares equal narrative space with the suitor and the magic garden, substantiated by her placing in the courtly love-marriage statement which begins the story, and her anxiety for the safety of her “adventuring” husband’s return, which provides a substantial motivation for her Rash Promise that contrasts with the absence of motive in Boccaccio and the triviality of the demand for a garden. This motivation comes from a character presented as devastated by the absence of her husband:

She moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyneth

They prechen hire, they telle hire nyght and day
That causeless she sleeth hirself, alas! (819–25)

This emotional depression may seem melodramatic (and has so been judged along with her lament in which she contemplates suicide to preserve her honour), but this view is a product of late twentieth-century attitudes to sexual chastity and love-loss, and to modern literary taste. In historical context, it plays to a taste for pathos, and is similar to the despairing speeches of the Man in Black in the Book of the Duchess, and of Troilus in Troilus and Criseyde. Until line 1005 of this tale of 1624 lines, Dorigen is the story. Her Rash Promise is delivered in line 996, whereas in Boccaccio it occurs in both versions in line 35 and line 40, respectively, that is, almost at the beginning of the story. Where Boccaccio presents a skeletal narrative on which to base a courtly debate Question, Chaucer, by his changes and additions, mainly to the persona of the female protagonist, poses other questions: how would this really affect the female; what kind of person is she; could the husband so easily give her permission to sleep with the suitor; and how would this situation be resolved in a marriage based on freedom in love? That is, he radically alters the nature of the story and the narrative balance of the structure, placing the literary and intellectual interest in the preparatory events, rather than in the resolution and the subsequent analytic debate on the Question of Generosity.

Most readings of the tale have, not unsurprisingly, concentrated on the figure of Dorigen, the union of love and marriage and, to a lesser extent, the “nobility” of Arveragus’ pronouncement of the principle of “trouthe” and his apparent ceding of decision to Dorigen. However, some aspects of Chaucer’s additions and also of his adherence to the story he borrowed have tended to be ignored. These aspects—illuminated by a comparison of Chaucer with his sources—create problems of narrative and conceptual coherence near the end of the story. It is, for example, too reductive to cast the roles of Dorigen and Arveragus as embodiments of Chaucer’s endorsement of almost modern views of women, love and marriage, or as a thesis on the role of Patience and gentillesse in marriage. Though at the beginning of the tale

18See Frank, 144 ff.; also Salter, “Medieval Poetry,” 17–18: “Dorigen’s unlikely rehearsal of just a few of the ‘thousand stories’ she could tell about wronged women . . . [is] presented not so much for their naturalness in a particular human dilemma as for their appropriateness in an ideal moral situation.” That is, assessments of psychological credibility are inappropriate in both this context and genre.
19See Cooper, The Canterbury Tales, 240, 245; Mann, 89–90.
he presents a marriage based on courtly love, through the narrator he also acknowledges the social realities of contemporary marriage in Arveragus’ commitment in these lines:

... hir obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al,
As any lover to his lady shal,
Save that the name of soverayntee,
That wolde he have for shame of his degree. (949–52, my italics)

That is, at the moment of the presentation of the courtly love structure of their marriage, Arveragus adverts to the difference between private contract and public status and, moreover, links this to his public reputation, thus foreshadowing the dilemma of the conclusion. When he urges his lover/wife to fulfil her promise, on the high moral principle of faithfulness to “trouthe” (“Trouthe is the hyest thing that man may kepe”, 1479), he reveals his deep emotional awareness of what this will cost him, which deepens the pathos of the whole scene between these noble, sentient lovers. However, in his speech there is a condition to his recommendation:

And seyde, “I yow forbade, up peyne of deeth,
That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf no breeth,
To no wight telle thou of this aventure—
As I may best I wol my wo endure—
Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse.” (1480–6)

This statement, of course, pricks the lay fantasy of Dorigen’s “freedom”. Despite the language of courtly love, she is not really left entirely free to make her own decisions. Chaucer’s original creation of a courtly love marriage creates a conflict with Boccaccio’s narratives, in which the husband orders the wife to fulfil her duty. Arveragus’ speech may seem to bridge the gap, but it, like the removal of the rocks, is an illusion. He makes it plain—with an absoluteness that could come from Griselda’s Walter—that it is the only honourable thing she can do. While revealing the “wo” this moral nobility will cause him, he makes no reference at all to the distaste and shame that Dorigen might feel as a sacrifice to his sense of “trouthe”. He also reintroduces the real social incompatibility of the sexual independence of courtly love and the marriage contract by insisting that she do all she can to preserve his “good name” as sovereign lord in marriage, by concealing her own dereliction and shame from others, “upon peyne of deeth”. This condition rather limits her freedom to choose. Thus Chaucer, though humanizing the married lovers, reverts Arveragus to the position of the husband in the Decameron, who sends his wife off to give her body to the suitor, while assuring her that he will forgive her (242–3). Implicitly, truth to one’s word is more important than sexual chastity and female honour in the fictive worlds of both Chaucer and Boccaccio.

Arveragus, then, is not so completely, selflessly noble as most critics have asserted, ending, as he does, on a requirement that his honour is above all to be
maintained. Moreover, what is ignored in most critiques is the doubleness of “trouthe”: “trouthe” and “truth” are phonetic variants of OE “treowth”, and the ambivalence is as relevant here as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*

His “honour” could, in such circumstances, be only appearance—like the removal of the rocks—and certainly not “trouthe” as *veritas*, though some critics assert that the preservation of public honour with the wife’s collaboration is perfectly acceptable, which makes Arveragus considerably less scrupulous than Sir Gawain, and belongs to the world of social “face”, not moral probity. Indeed, in the press to identify Arveragus as a sentient man of “honour”, critics have mainly ignored the *in hoc mundo* statement of the narrator—a medieval man, not a twentieth-century critic—after Dorigen has been ordered to go to fulfil her promise:

Paraventure an heep of yow, ywis,
Wol holden hym a lewed man in this,
That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie. (1493–5)

The figure of the husband has been in Chaucer considerably elaborated and somewhat changed compared with the models in Boccaccio, but this elaboration is not quite as pure or consistent as is usually claimed; for all his moral principles and sensitive emotions, in actual fact he puts his “public” honour as a virtue above that of his wife/lover’s real chastity and personal honour. There is, at this point, a marked disjunction between the courly romance relationship of Dorigen and Arveragus, as created by Chaucer and the first part of the tale, and the “fixed” resolution of the Rash Promise structure. Effectively at this point Dorigen ceases to be an independent woman, free of “maistrie”. She simply accepts, without dialogue, what Arveragus forcefully recommends. The options of suicide or dishonour disappear from the discourse, and she reverts to the role of functionary in a game, which returns the focus of the work to the Boccaccian “Question” of which male demonstrates the greatest Generosity. The *Franklin’s Tale* begins with the proposition that love can exist in freedom in marriage, but ends with the observation that it must at least appear to conform to social conventions for the husband’s sake. Dorigen must be sacrificed on the altar of both moral principle and social appearance; and neither Arveragus nor Chaucer asks how Dorigen now feels about the whole situation. That is, while Chaucer creates an empathetic Dorigen, whose dilemma and emotions dominate most of the tale, he retreats from a direct, coherent resolution of the “love-maistrie” question in the last part of the narrative but, as my examination suggests, faces the narrator’s theories of the relationship of love to marriage with a conflict in the “reality” of the plot between freedom and sovereignty. Instead he turns to

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20See Dane, 161–7, on the semantics of “truth.”

21See Morgan, “Experience,” 210: “we must understand that the public reputation of a knight is the honour that is accorded to virtue and so cannot in principle be sacrificed.”

22Cooper, *Canterbury Tales*, 237, notes that the narrator’s statement occurs in only two manuscripts, but fails to indicate that one of these is the Ellesmere manuscript, generally regarded as the most authoritative.
Boccaccio’s ending—the act of generosity or gentillesse which saves the “honour” of both husband and wife by placing the control in the hands of the suitor. Here Chaucer, as in Troilus and Criseyde, creates substantial characters and emotions within a borrowed narrative, but invents no new or modified ending to resolve the conflicts between “character” and the dramatic exigencies of the source.

Most of the major amplifications of the Boccaccio story made by Chaucer are, then, directed towards making Dorigen and her dilemma the centre of the story, rather than merely the occasion for the Question of Generosity, though, as I have noted, Chaucer’s ending relapses, with modifications, into the basic Boccaccian structure and resolution. There is, however, another set of changes made by Chaucer to his sources which also bear examination in comparison with Boccaccio’s treatment. The focus of these changes is the suitor’s unforeseen fulfilment of the condition of the Rash Promise. In Boccaccio, both women, to get rid of the attention of the suitor, state that, if he will create a May garden in January for them, they will give themselves to him. In Il Filocolo, the suitor’s emotional agonies, his search for a magician, and the construction and elaborate description of the garden occupy more than half of the narrative (ll. 35–185 out of 260): that is, it shares equal space with the elaborate debate on the Question of Generosity. It also makes the suitor the only substantially realized character in the whole tale and thus, by its stress on his love pangs, efforts and financial commitment, lends weight to his final release of the lady from her Rash Promise. Structurally, it occupies more than the first half of the narrative, and has almost the status of a self-standing event. The Decameron version of the story reduces this episode to a few lines (ll. 35–60 out of 130), with none of the elaboration of love pangs and garden description of Il Filocolo. Clearly, the extended account in the latter work is Chaucer’s starting point for his treatment of the fulfilment of the condition of the Promise. As with Il Filocolo, Chaucer creates an almost independent episode which brings into prominence the love pangs of the suitor, his despairing efforts to find a way of fulfilling the condition of the Promise, and the magic through which he succeeds. Again, as in Boccaccio, the episode serves to make the suitor a substantially realized figure, and more prominent, until the conclusion, than Arveragus. But, Chaucer makes highly significant changes to the matter with which he fills this episode. The most important one is that the task the suitor is set is to remove the rocks which threaten the safe return of Arveragus (992–4). As I pointed out earlier, this alters the Rash Promise from a triviality, the provision of a garden, to a credible and worthy motivation which, at least initially, casts favourable light on Dorigen—emphasizing her love and anxiety, and her notional willingness to sacrifice her chastity for her husband’s safety, the stuff of opera. However, the magic that Aurelius eventually, after two years “in languor and in torment” (1101) finds, is presented not as straight, old-fashioned departure from the laws of nature, but as an indeterminate mixture of “magyk natureel” (1125), astrology, and illusion:

...this maister that this magyk wroughte
And yet remooved they nevere out of the hous,
While they saugh al this sighte merveillous. (102–6)
This is to seye, to maken illusion,
By swich an apparence or jogelrye—
I ne kan no termes of astrologye—

So atte laste he hath his tyme yfounde
To maken his japes and his wrecchednesse
Of swich a supersticious cursednesse. (1264–72)

The agent with whom Aurelius makes his contract for the removal of the rocks is designated as a magician, as in Boccaccio, and does perform, or appear to, the required service. However, Chaucer’s introduction here of the concepts of natural magic, astrology (related to tidal predictions), illusion and “jogelrye”, and superstition seems deliberately to confuse the issue, thus permitting the reader to question whether Dorigen is really contractually bound, since the removal of the rocks would seem to be an illusion, not a reality. Though it has been suggested that Dorigen is bound by particularly medieval views of the sanctity of promises,23 in real life everywhere promises are related to contingencies, and, at this point in the narrative, Chaucer has given the reader grounds for seeing the removal as an “illusion”, not a reality—not, therefore, strictly meeting the required feat. The fulfilment of the Promise is, of course, a necessary condition of the story, and in Boccaccio is not contaminated by possible doubts.

The status of the contract is further cast in doubt by another addition by Chaucer, which seems to have been overlooked by commentators. After Dorigen has made her Promise, Aurelius lies around, from line 1006 to line 1085, praying for a miracle: “Lord Phoebus, dooth this miracle for me” (1065). Then, we are told, Arveragus,

Is comen hoom, and other worthy men—
O blissful artow now, thou Dorigen. (1089–90)

The narrator shortly afterwards returns to report of Aurelius:

Two yeer and moore lay wrecche Aurelyus. (1101–2)

That is, Arveragus is safely home, while more than two years after his return Aurelius still has not met his part of the contract. Chaucer has not given a firm timetable for Arveragus’ return, but the important point is that in the narrative it is stated long before Aurelius gets round to hiring a magician. There is at least a considerable amount of doubt raised here, and this is compounded by the fact that no relationship is established in the text between the “illusion” of the removal of the rocks and Arveragus’ safe return. That is, the relationships between Dorigen’s anxious Promise, the safe return of Arveragus, Aurelius’ completion of the removal of the rocks, and

the status of the magic are all rather uncertain, unlike in Boccaccio. In his study of marvels in Chaucer, Scott Lightsey has suggested that by “temporarily subsuming the focus on gentillesse in the traditional romance into a narrative meditation on the nature of marvels, Chaucer reorients the perspective toward a critical analysis of mirabilia.” This switch of focus may, of course, be a result of Chaucer’s typical tendency to elaborate local, circumstantial matter, but its effect is, first, to introduce complications to the validity of Aurelius’ claim to have fulfilled the contract, and second, to dissipate the atmosphere of an unreal world created by the marvel in a romance structure which, in some critical views, is the only thing which makes the story tolerable. That is, this change to the episode of magic that Chaucer found in Boccaccio may spring partly from Chaucer’s interest in astronomy and astrology, but it also contributes to a pattern of changes that challenge the “unreal” world of courtly literature in which Boccaccio’s narrative exists, in effect subverting a prime property of the lay and courtly romance. The “magic”, courtly love freedom within marriage, and Arveragus’ principles of “trouthe” and honour are all subject to the intrusion of elements of “reality” which suggests that they are “illusions”, that can exist only within the confines of the literary structure of the lay.

There is, in fact, a considerable disjunction between the focus on Dorigen, her personality and her dilemma, which occupies the first, larger part of the narrative, and the second part, which begins with the “magic” of the removal of the rocks and ends on the Boccaccian resolution of the Question of Generosity. The first part is, of course, the most “original” in terms of material: Chaucer takes characters that are mere ciphers in both Boccaccio’s versions, and amplifies them and their situation enormously, and sympathetically. In the second part, Chaucer is much closer to the Boccaccio narrative and, in fact, his characters revert, to varying degrees, to the role functions they have in Boccaccio’s narrative. However, Chaucer does not revert totally to the Boccaccian position, namely that of the “resolution” of an artificial game question within the confines of a courtly debate structure. He adheres to the physical aspect of the resolution of the dilemma, but his alterations to the “magic” fulfilment of the contract by the suitor, and to the figure of the husband partially undermine the viability of the courtly, literary world within which the Question of Generosity exists. There is, moreover, a disjunction between the atmosphere and sympathies created in the first part and their narrative resolution in the second part. The two parts do not cohere, as do the parts of Boccaccio’s versions, precisely because Chaucer’s considerable original reshaping of the story in the first part generates problems which are not convincingly resolved by Boccaccio’s ending.

In many ways, a comparison of Chaucer with his sources would seem to confirm the observation of F. M. Diekstra, namely that many of the Canterbury Tales are “based on material with a very simple narrative and moral structure . . . an insoluble dilemma, or a conflict of loyalties”, and that in the Clerk’s, Franklin’s, and Physician’s Tales (and probably also the Merchant’s, and the Shipman’s Tales, Troilus and

24Lightsey, 304.
Criseyde, in my view) “the monolithic single-mindedness of the material is offset by a free-ranging interest in the complications which the material suggests.”25 Salter, dealing with the notable discordance between the body of Troilus and Criseyde, particularly Book III, and the resolution of Book V, came to a similar conclusion about Chaucer’s relation to his source: “Like many of Chaucer’s answers to complicated problems, the final answers given in Troilus do not match the intelligence and energy of the questions asked, the issues raised. For Chaucer, in the struggle between narrative authority and imaginative penetration, authority must win.”26

Clearly, the disjunctions in many of Chaucer’s works between his exploration and amplification of character and local detail, and the rigidity of the narratives he has adopted, do not lend themselves easily to the coherent allegorization of text which is the dominant mode of critical interpretation, that is to the proposition that a particular moral-philosophical-theological-social abstraction is the “meaning” or value of the work. However, it is possible to suggest that these disjunctions or discordances between characters, local situations and narrative structures are not all as accidental as, ultimately, Salter’s and Diekstra’s views of Chaucer’s “uncertain movement between narrative and dramatic principles of organization” imply.27 Chaucer owes most in terms of borrowed or suggestive material to the Filocolo, but the Decameron version’s radical abbreviation provides a precedent for refocusing and alteration. In the Filocolo interest is largely on the creation of the magic garden and on the rational consideration of the Question of Generosity; in the Decameron the focus is on the story of the Rash Promise, with the creation of the garden reduced to a few lines and the deliberations on the Question reduced to a four-line conclusion, not a debate. The Filocolo, despite its “real” geographical setting, essentially creates an unreal world of cipher-like characters, improbably motivated event, magic, insoluble dilemma, and idealistic resolution—all constructed to motivate a Question that belongs to the courtly demande d’amour genre28 in which the story or situation exists entirely as the subject for a debate. The Decameron version, while drastically reducing the courtly decorations of the creation of the garden and the rational, extended debate, retains the “unreality” of the story and, like its source, shows no interest in the characters or emotions potentially caught in the dilemma. Both Boccaccio’s versions, that is, have no relation to the potential “reality” of character, emotion and motivation even within the “unreality” of their narrative. Thus, Chaucer’s creation of Dorigen and exploration of her emotions both before and after the Rash Promise not only alter significantly the focuses and questions of the work, but also undermine considerably the nature of the genre by introducing a large element of naturalism. Similarly, his substitution of the magic garden with the removal of the rocks, accompanied by the dubiety of the “magic” involved, implicitly questions the donnees of this non-naturalistic, debate genre. The creation of a potential dilemma

26 Salter, “Troilus and Criseyde,” 106.
28 For a definition of the genre see Brewer, ed., 7–13.
for Arveragus, which is not paralleled in Boccaccio, may seem merely to heighten the Question of Generosity by invoking moral principle, where none is present in the source; but, in effect, the relevance of this principle is undermined by its reliance on restricted, and partly self-serving concepts of “truth” and “honour”. Finally, by omitting entirely the lengthy debate on the Question of Generosity which occupies one-third of the Filocolo and is the raison d’être of the narrative, its real conclusion, Chaucer in effect throws into question the viability of the genre. The Franklin’s Tale is not, of course, a deliberate parody of a genre29 as is the Squire’s Tale, but, like the Knight’s Tale, Clerk’s Tale, Merchant’s Tale and Shipman’s Tale, his rewriting of his sources involves exploring characters, amplifying and changing situations and motivations, and raising a variety of questions not present in them, which results in works that at a number of points undermine or blur the genre-conventions of these sources. In effect, by amplifying and humanizing the story of the Rash Promise he has cast into question the “unreal” literary world of the demande d’amour within which alone the Question of Generosity could exist.

The final, largely ignored change which Chaucer makes to Boccaccio occurs in the last three lines and, though usually misrepresented or ignored, is quite significant. The Franklin’s Tale ends not on the answer to the Question, but with the Question itself, not answered:

Lordynges, this question, thane, wol I aske now,  
Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?  
Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende.  
I kan namoore; my tale is at an ende. (1621–4)

That is, just as Menedon in Il Filocolo addresses the question to the brigata audience, Chaucer in the person of the narrator addresses the pilgrim audience. However, in Il Filocolo consideration of it occupies lines 260–406 (pp. 230–8) and ends with Fiammetta’s decisive answer, that the husband is the most generous. In the Decameron the narrator reduces this to a four-line (127–31) but equally decisive answer (pp. 234–44), that identifies the suitor as the most generous. By posing the question but not providing an answer, Chaucer distances himself yet again from Boccaccio’s concept of the function of the story. For the most part, commentators have silently assumed that the Franklin’s question, “Which was the mooste fre”, is Chaucer’s version of Boccaccio’s “which of them showed the greater generosity” (Filocolo, 230; Decameron, 244). In both versions Boccaccio uses the word “liberalita”, which Chaucer earlier translates as “gentillesse” or “gentil deeds”. But in posing the question Chaucer uses the word “fre”, not “gentil”, which the Riverside

29Linda Charnes, 300–15, sees what she calls the Franklin’s “generic ineptitude” (312) as the product of Chaucer’s rank-conscious, “ironic” perspective. Susan Crane similarly sees some of the blurring of “romance” conventions as “because his social rank is analogous to [Dorigen’s] gender status” (94), and also assumes an “ironic” stance on Chaucer’s part. The absolute identification of the Tale with the Franklin, and the view that he is of low social status and presented “ironically” by a socially superior author, has been generally rejected for some time.
Chaucer glosses contextually as “generous of spirit”, an interpretation which relates to conventional views of the tale. Edwards notes that Chaucer here is probably translating a corrupt reading of “liberta” for “liberalita”, and ventures that “fre’ . . . hovers among the chief meanings of the term”, which vary considerably. “Fre” has a much broader notion sphere than “gentillesse”. The Riverside Chaucer glossary offers many possible meanings: having the status of a noble or freeman; noble; generous of spirit; unrestrained; unconstrained; without obstruction; generous; liberal—all tied to contexts and, of course, editorial interpretation. Here, once again, it is assumed that Chaucer, having consistently translated “liberalita” by “gentillesse” and “gentil deeds”, means the reader to realize that by “fre” he means “gentil”, that is, that he is a little slipshod here in co-ordinating his conceptual terms. If, however, we allow that Chaucer is not being careless or inconsistent here, then the use of “fre” instead of “gentil” opens up the Question radically. Dorigen, by her submission to Arveragus’ recommendation, her wifely subordination and her inescapable position in the narrative, is not free in any sense. Arveragus, though apparently “gentil”, is in fact, constricted by his own pronounced principles and concept of honour, no more free. Only Aurelius and the magician are notionally free within the conditions of the story to decide whether or not to be generous or “gentil”. This, of course, would contradict the answers provided by Boccaccio. Once more, Chaucer’s rewriting muddies the clarity of his source’s Game structure and, typically, leaves us with a question and a humanizing expansion or loosening of the rigidities of the genres from which he borrows. However, leaving us with a Question rather than an analytic debate redirects us to the Tale, not the Game, almost as if “the Tale’s the thing”.

The authorial dialogue between Chaucer and Boccaccio’s stories is a progressive one, and the variations of the Franklin’s Tale between complete, extensive originality of amplification, modifications of source elements, small changes and apparent adoption of the conventions of the Rash Promise narrative-type do not lend themselves to an easy accommodation within a comprehensive thematic interpretation. The tale seems, in fact, to have developed progressively in Chaucer’s hands without any single significatio in mind. The considerable variety of critical interpretations of this work is, at least partly, a consequence of Chaucer’s sequential responses and reshaping of the narrative he takes as his base: his interests alter as he proceeds, raising ideas and then dropping them; first giving human and emotional substantiality to the Type figures of the story, and then abandoning this to speculate on magic; making Dorigen the “heroine” of the tale, and then consigning her to the literary convention from which he re-created her; and every now and again blurring

31Thompson, 262: “Chaucer retains the quaestio in the manner of the Filocolo narrative, regarding the merit of the three male protagonists”; Taylor, 68: “The squire’s sudden recognition transforms a competition between two men for a woman into a competition among three men as to ‘Which was the mooste fre’.”
32See Haas, 62: “The question . . . serves more as a reminder of the logical lack in the tale’s protagonists than as a genuine invitation to choose among a victimized lady, an overly literal knight, a lusty squire, and a practitioner of black magic.”
the traditional elements of both the Rash Promise folk-tale and the lay in which it is enclosed. The originality of Chaucer’s quasi-naturalistic, extensive preface to the plot creates an apparent major disjunction between his invention of characters and contexts, which have no place in his sources, and his adoption of the principal elements of Boccaccio’s narrative. However, a close comparison of Chaucer and Boccaccio suggests that his modifications to the “fixed” elements of the narrative are coherent with his inventions in the first part of the tale because they put into question the viability of the demande structure. That is, having created a mainly original preface—in effect, a pre-story—which raises issues that have no place in Boccaccio’s traditional story, he turns from interest in the human to confront the events and concepts within which these humans are caught. His rewriting of the event-narrative is conditioned by his pre-story: the main body of the story is modified in such a way as to undermine the conceptual and generic integrity of Boccaccio’s narrative, while appearing simply to replicate it. Here, as in many other works, Chaucer uses a borrowed plot and genre conventions as skeletal structures on which to hang a variety of observations and ideas, both material and moral, and ends, typically, in a favourite posture, that of the narrator who has no conclusion to offer—only a question, which has, of course, continued to be answered by interpreters who offer a plethora of sententiae.

References


