



George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage

WE are prone to read and study the Canterbury Tales as if each tale were an isolated unit and to pay scant attention to what we call the connecting links, -- those bits of lively narrative and dialogue that bind the whole together. Yet; Chaucer's plan is clear enough. Structurally regarded, the Canterbury Tales is a kind of Human Comedy. From this point of view, the Pilgrims are the *dramatis personae*, and their stories are only speeches that are somewhat longer than common, entertaining in and for themselves (to be sure), but primarily significant, in each case, because they illustrate the speaker's character and opinions, or show the relations of the travelers to one another in the progressive action of the Pilgrimage. In other words, we ought not merely to consider the general appropriateness of each tale to the character of the teller: we should also inquire whether the tale is not determined to some extent, by the circumstances, -- by the situation at the moment, by some thing that another Pilgrim has said or done, by the turn of a discussion already under way.

Now and then, to be sure, the point is too obvious to be overlooked, as in the squabble between the Summoner and the Friar and that between the Reeve and the Miller, in the Shipman's intervening to check the Parson, and in the way in which the gentles head off the Pardoner when he is about to tell a ribald anecdote. But despite these inescapable instances, the general principle is too often blinked or ignored. Yet its temperate application should clear up a number of things which are traditionally regarded as difficulties, or as examples of heedlessness on Chaucer's part.

Without attempting to deny or abridge the right to study and criticize each tale in and for itself, -- as legend, romance, exemplum, fabliau, or what-not, -- and without extenuating the results that this method has achieved, let us consider certain tales in their relation to Chaucer's structural plan, -- with reference, that is to say, to the Pilgrims who tell them and to the Pilgrimage to which their telling is accidental. We may begin with the story of Griselda.

This is a plain and straightforward piece of edification, and nobody has ever questioned its appropriateness to the Clerk, who, as he says himself, has traveled in Italy and has heard it from the lips of the laureate Petrarch. The Clerk's 'speech,' according to the General Prologue, was 'sowning in moral vertu,' so that this story is precisely the kind of thing which we should expect from his lips. True, we moderns sometimes feel shocked or offended at what we style the immorality of Griselda's unvarying submission. But this feeling is no ground of objection to the appropriateness of the tale to the Clerk. The Middle Ages delighted (as children still delight) in stories that exemplify a single human quality, like valor, or tyranny, or fortitude. In such cases, the settled rule (for which neither Chaucer nor the Clerk was responsible) was to show to what

lengths that quality may conceivably go. Hence, in tales of this kind, there can be no question of conflict between duties, no problem as to the point at which excess of goodness becomes evil. It is, then, absurd to censure a fourteenth-century Clerk for telling (or Chaucer for making him tell) a story which exemplifies in this hyperbolic way the virtue of fortitude under affliction. Whether Griselda could have put an end to her woes, or ought to have put an end to them, by refusing to obey her husband's commands is *parum ad rem*. We are to look at her trials as inevitable, and to pity her accordingly, and wonder at her endurance. If we refuse to accept the tale in this spirit, we are ourselves the losers. We miss the pathos because we are aridly intent on discussing an ethical question that has no status in this particular court, however pertinent it may be in the general forum of morals.

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Furthermore, in thus focusing attention on the morality or immorality of Griselda's submissiveness, we overlook what the Clerk takes pains to make as clear as possible, -- the real lesson that the story is meant to convey, -- and thus we do grave injustice to that austere but amiable moralist. The Clerk, a student of 'Aristotle and his philosophye,' knew as well as any of us that every virtue may be conceived as a mean between two extremes. Even the Canon's Yeoman, an ignorant man, was aware of this principle:

**'That that is overdoon, it wol nat preve
Aright, as clerkes seyn, -- it is a vyce.'**

Chaucer had too firm a grasp on his dramatis personae to allow the Clerk to leave the true purpose of his parable undefined. 'My story is not told,' says the Clerk in substance, 'to exhort wives to imitate Griselda's humility, for that would be beyond the capacity of human nature. It is told in order that every man or woman, in whatever condition of life, may learn fortitude in adversity. For, since a woman once exhibited such endurance under trials inflicted on her by a mortal man, *a fortiori* ought we to accept patiently whatever tribulation God may send us. For God is not like Griselda's husband. He does not wantonly experiment with us, out of inhuman scientific curiosity. God tests us, as it is reasonable that our Maker should test his handiwork, but he does not tempt us. He allows us to be beaten with sharp scourges of adversity, not, like the Marquis Walter, to see if we can stand it, for he knoweth our frame, he remembereth that we are dust: all his affliction is for our better grace. Let us live, therefore, in manly endurance of the visitations of Providence.'

And then, at verse 1163, comes that matchless passage in which the Clerk (having explained the universal application of his parable, -- having provided with scrupulous care against any misinterpretation of its serious purport) turns with gravely satiric courtesy to the Wife of Bath and makes the particular application of the story to her 'life' and 'all her sect.'

Here one may appreciate the vital importance of considering the Canterbury Tales as a connected Human Comedy, -- of taking into account the Pilgrims in their relations to one another in the great drama to which the several narratives are structurally incidental. For it is precisely at this point that Professor Skeat notes a difficulty. 'From this point to the end,' he remarks, 'is the work of a later period, and in Chaucer's best manner, though unsuited to the coy Clerk.' This is as much as to say that, in the remaining stanzas of the Clerk's Tale and in the

Envoy, Chaucer has violated dramatic propriety. And, indeed, many readers have detected in these concluding portions Chaucer's own personal revulsion of feeling against the tale that he had suffered the Clerk to tell.

Now the supposed difficulty vanishes as soon as we study vv. 1163-1212, not as an isolate phenomenon, but in their relation to the great drama of the Canterbury Pilgrimage. It disappears in what we may call their dramatic context, we that is (to be specific) when we inquire what there was in the situation to prompt the clerk, after emphasizing the serious and universal moral of Griselda's story, to give his tale a special and peculiar application to the Bath, her life, 'her sect,' and her principles. To answer this question we must go back to the Wife of Bath's Prologue.

The Wife of Bath's Prologue begins a Group in the Canterbury Tales, or, as one may say, a new act in the drama. It is not connected with anything that precedes. Let us trace the action from this point down to the moment when the clerk turns upon the Wife with his satirical compliments.

The Wife has expounded her views at great length and with all imaginable zest. Virginitie, which the Church glorifies, is not required of us. Our bodies are given us to use. Let saints be continent if they will. She has no wish to emulate them. Nor does she accept the doctrine that a widow or a widower must not marry again. Where is bigamy forbidden in the Bible, or octogamy either? She has warmed both hands before the fire of life, and she exults in her recollection of her fleshly delights.

True, she is willing to admit, for convention's sake, that chastity is the ideal state. But it is not her ideal. On the contrary, her admission is only for appearances. In her heart she despises virginity. Her contempt for it is thinly veiled, or rather, not veiled at all. Her discourse is marked by frank and almost obstreperous animalism.

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Her whole attitude is that of scornful, though good-humored, repudiation of what the Church teaches in that regard.

Nor is the Wife content with this single heresy. She maintains also that wives should rule their husbands, and she enforces this doctrine by an account of her own life, and further illustrates it by her tale of the knight of King Arthur who learned that

**Wommen desiren to have sovereyntee
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie him above,**

and who accepted the lesson as sound doctrine. Then, at the end of her discourse, she sums up in no uncertain words:

**And Jesu Crist us sende
Husbandes meke, yonge, and fresshe abedde,**

**And grace to overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I preye Jesu shorte her lyves
That wol nat be governed by her wyves.**

Now the Wife of Bath is not *bombinans in vacuo*. She addresses her heresies not to us or to the world at large, but to her fellow pilgrims. Chaucer has made this point perfectly clear, The words of the Wife were of a kind to provoke comment, -- and we have the comment. The Pardoner interrupts her with praise of her noble preaching:

**'Now, dame,' quod he, 'by God and by seint John,
Ye been a noble prechour in this cas!'**

The adjective is not accidental. The Pardoner was a judge of good preaching: the General Prologue describes him as 'a noble ecclesiaste' and he shows his ability in his own sermon on Covetousness. Furthermore, it is the Friar's comment on the Wife's preamble that provokes the offensive words of the Summoner, and that becomes thereby the occasion for the two tales that immediately follow in the series. It is manifest, then, that Chaucer meant us to imagine the *dramatis personae* as taking a lively interest in whatever the Wife says. This being so, we ought to inquire what effect her Prologue and Tale would have upon the Clerk.

Of course the Clerk was scandalized. He was unworldly and an ascetic, -- he 'looked holwe and therto sobrelly.' Moral virtue was his special study. He had embraced the celibate life. He was grave, devout, and unflinchingly Orthodox. And now he was confronted by the lust of the flesh and the pride of life in the person of a woman who flouted chastity and exulted that she had 'had her world as in her time.' Nor was this all. The woman was an heresiarch, or at best a schismatic. She set up, and aimed to establish, a new and dangerous sect, whose principle was that the wife should rule the husband. The Clerk kept silence for the moment. Indeed, he had no chance to utter his sentiments, unless he interrupted, -- something not to be expected of his quiet ('coy') and sober temperament. But it is not to be imagined that his thoughts were idle. He could be trusted to speak to the purpose whenever his opportunity should come.

Now the substance of the Wife's false doctrines was not the only thing that must have roused the Clerk to protesting answer. The very manner of her discourse was a direct challenge to him. She had garnished her sermon with scraps of Holy Writ and rags and tatters of erudition, caught up, we may infer, from her last husband. Thus she had put herself into open competition with the guild of scholars and theologians, to which the Clerk belonged. Further, with her eye manifestly upon this sedate philosopher, she had taken pains to gird at him and his fellows. At first she pretends to be modest and apologetic, -- 'so that the clerkes be nat with me wrothe,' -- but later she abandons all pretense and makes an open attack:

**'For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speken good of wyves,
But if it be of holy seintes lyves,
Ne of noon other womman never the mo....'**

. . .

**The clerk, whan he is old, and may noight do
Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho,
Than sit he doun, and writ in his dotage
That wommen can nat kepe his mariage.'**

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And there was more still that the Wife made our Clerk endure. Her fifth husband was, like him, a 'clerk of Oxenford' -- surely this is no accidental coincidence on Chaucer's part. He had abandoned his studies ('had left scole'), and had given up all thought of taking priest's orders. The Wife narrates, with uncommon zest, how she intrigued with him, and cajoled him, and married him (though he was twenty and she was forty), and how finally she made him utterly subservient to her will, -- how she 'got by maistrye al the soveraynetee.' This was gall and wormwood to our Clerk. The Wife not only trampled on his principles in her theory and practice, but she pointed her attack by describing how she had subdued to her heretical sect a clerk of Oxenford, an alumnus of our Clerk's own university. The Wife's discourse is not malicious. She is too jovial to be ill-natured, and she protests that she speaks in jest. But it none the less embodies a rude personal assault upon the Clerk, whose quiet mien and habitual reticence made him seem a safe person to attack. She had done her best to make the Clerk ridiculous, He saw it; the company saw it. He kept silent, biding his time.

All this is not speculation. It is nothing but straightforward interpretation of the text in the light of the circumstances and the situation. We can reject it only by insisting on the manifest absurdity (shown to be such in every heading and endlink) that Chaucer did not visualize the Pilgrims whom he had been at such pains to describe in the Prologue, and that he never regarded them as associating, as looking at each other and thinking of each other, as becoming better and better acquainted as they jogged along the Canterbury road.

Chaucer might have given the Clerk a chance to reply to the Wife immediately. But he -- was too good an artist. The drama of the Pilgrimage is too natural and unforced in its development under the master's hand to admit of anything so frigidly schematic. The very liveliness with which he conceived his individual *dramatis personae* forbade. The Pilgrims were interested in the Wife's harangue, but it was for the talkative members of the company to thrust themselves forward. The Pardoner had already interrupted her with humorous comments before she was fully under way and had exhorted her to continue her account of the 'praktike' of marriage. The Friar, we may be confident, was on good terms with her before she began; she was one of those 'worthy wommen of the toun' whom he especially cultivated. He, too, could not refrain from comment:

**The Frere lough, whan he had herd al this:
'Now, dame,' quod he, 'so have I ioye or blis,
This is a long preamble of a tale!**

The Summoner reproved him, in words that show not only his professional enmity but also the amusement that the Pilgrims in general were deriving from the Wife's disclosures. They quarreled, and each threatened to tell a story at the other's expense, Then the Host intervened

roughly, calling for silence and bidding the Wife go ahead with her story. She assented, but not without a word of good-humored, though ironical, deference to the Friar:

**`Al redy, sir,' quod she, `right as yow lest,
If I have license of this worthy Frere.'**

And, at the very beginning of her tale, she took humorous vengeance for his interruption in a characteristic bit of satire at the expense of `limitours and other holy freres.' This passage, we note, has nothing whatever to do with her tale. It is a side-remark in which she is talking at the Friar, precisely as she has talked at the Clerk in her prologue.

The quarrel between the Summoner and the Friar was in abeyance until the Wife finished her tale. They let her end her story and proclaim her moral in peace, -- the same heretical doctrine that we have already noted, that the wife should be the head of the house. Then the Friar spoke, and his words are very much to our present purpose. He adverts in significant terms both to the subject and to the manner of the Wife's discourse, a discourse, we observe, that was in effect a doctrinal sermon illustrated (as the fashion of preachers was) by a pertinent exemplum:

**`Ye have here touched, al-so moot I thee,
In scole-matere great difficultee.'**

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She has handled a hard subject that properly belongs to scholars. She has quoted authorities, too, like a clerk. Such things, he says, are best left to ecclesiastics:

**`But, dame, here as we ryden by the weye,
Us nedeth nat to speken but of game,
And lete auctoritees, on Goddes name,
To preching and to scole eek of clergie.'**

This, to be sure, is but a device to `conveyen his matere,' -- to lead up to his proposal to telle a game about a summoner. But it serves to recall our minds to the Wife's usurpation of clerky functions. If we think of the Clerk at all at this point (and assuredly Chaucer had not forgotten him), we must feel that here is another prompting (undesigned though it be on the Friar's part) to take up the subject which the Wife has (in the Clerk's eyes) so shockingly maltreated.

Then follows the comic interlude of the Friar and the Summoner, in the course of which we may perhaps lose sight of the serious subject which the Wife had set abroad, -- the status of husband and wife in the marriage relation. But Chaucer did not lose sight of it. It was a part of his design that the Host should call on the Clerk for the first story of the next day.

This is the opportunity for which the Clerk has been waiting. He has not said a word in reply to the Wife's heresies or to her personal attack on him and his order. Seemingly she has triumphed. The subject has apparently been dismissed with the Friar's words about leaving such matters to sermons and to school debates. The Host, indeed, has no idea that the Clerk proposes to revive the discussion; he does not even think of the Wife in calling upon the representative of

that order which has fared so ill at her hands.

**`Sir clerk of Oxenford,' our hoste sayde,
 `Ye ryde as coy and stille as doth a mayde
 Were newe spoused, sitting at the bord;
 This day ne herd I of your tonge a word.
 I trowe ye studie about som sophyme.'**

Even here there is a suggestion (casual, to be sure, and, so far as the Host is concerned, quite unintentional) of marriage, the subject which is occupying the Clerk's mind. For the Host is mistaken. The Clerk's abstraction is only apparent. He is not pondering syllogisms; he is biding his time.

`Tell us a tale,' the unconscious Host goes on, `but don't preach us a Lenten sermon -- tell us som mery thing of aventures.' `Gladly,' replies the demure scholar. `I will tell you a story that a worthy clerk once told me at Padua -- Francis Petrarch, God rest his soul!'

At this word *clerk*, pronounced with grave and inscrutable emphasis, the Wife of Bath must have pricked up her ears. But she has no inkling of what is in store, nor is the Clerk in any hurry to enlighten her. He opens with tantalizing deliberation, and it is not until he has spoken more than sixty lines that he mentions marriage. `The Marquis Walter,' says the Clerk, `lived only for the present and lived for pleasure only' --

**`As for to hauke and hunte on every syde,
 Wel ny al othere cures leet he slyde;
 And eek he nolde, and that was worst of alle,
 Wedde no wyf, for noght that may bifalle.'**

These words may or may not have appeared significant to the company at large. To the Wife of Bath, at all events, they must have sounded interesting. And when, in a few moments, the Clerk made Walter's subjects speak of `soveraynetee,' the least alert of the Pilgrims can hardly have missed the point:

**`Boweth your nekke under that blisful yok
 Of soveraynetee, noght of servvse,
 Which that men clepeth spousialle or wedlock.'**

`Sovereynty' had been the Wife's own word:

**`And whan that I hadde geten unto me
 By maistrie al the soveraynetee';**

**`Wommen desyren to have soveryntee
 As wel over his housband as hir love,
 And for to been in maistrie him above.'**

Clearly the Clerk is catching up the subject proposed by the Wife. The discussion is under way again.

Yet despite the cheerful view that Walter's subjects take of the marriage yoke, it is by no means yet clear to the Wife of Bath and the other Pilgrims what the Clerk is driving at. For he soon makes Walter declare that 'liberty is seldom found in marriage,' and that if he weds a wife, he must exchange freedom for servitude. Indeed, it is not until vv. 351-57 are reached that Walter reveals himself as a man who is determined to rule his wife absolutely. From that point to the end there is no room for doubt in any Pilgrim's mind: the Clerk is answering the Wife of Bath; he is telling of a woman whose principles in marriage were the antithesis of hers; he is reasserting the orthodox view in opposition to the heresy which she had expounded with such zest and with so many flings and jeers at the clerkly profession and character.

What is the tale of Griselda? Several things, no doubt -- an old *märchen*, an *exemplum*, a *novella*, what you will. Our present concern, however, is primarily with the question what it seemed to be to the Canterbury Pilgrims, told as it was by an individual Clerk of Oxford at a particular moment and under the special circumstances. The answer is plain. To them it was a retort (indirect, impersonal, masterly) to the Wife of Bath's heretical doctrine that the woman should be the head of the man. It told them of a wife who had no such views, -- who promised ungrudging obedience and kept her vow. The Wife of Bath had railed at her husbands and badgered them and cajoled them: Griselda never lost her patience or her serenity. On its face, then, the tale appeared to the Pilgrims to be a dignified and scholarly narrative, derived from a great Italian clerk who was dead, and now utilized by their fellow-pilgrim, the Clerk of Oxford, to demolish the heretical structure so boisterously reared by the Wife of Bath in her prologue and her tale.

But Chaucer's Clerk was a logician -- 'unto logik hadde he longe ygo.' He knew perfectly well that the real moral of his story was not that which his hearers would gather. He was aware that Griselda was no model for literal imitation by ordinary womankind. If so taken, his tale proved too much; it reduced his argument

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ad absurdum. If he let it go at that, he was playing into his opponent's hands. Besides, he was a conscientious man. He could not misrepresent the lesson which Petrarch had meant to teach and had so clearly expressed, -- the lesson of submissive fortitude under tribulation sent by God. Hence he does not fail to explain this moral fully and in unmistakable terms, and to refer distinctly to Petrarch as authority for it:

**'And herkeneth what this auctor seith therefore.
This is seyde, nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Griselde as in humilitee,
For it were importable, though they wolde;
But that for every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde; therfor Petrark wryteth
This storie, which with heigh style he endyteth.**

**For, sith a womman was so pacient
 Un-to a mortal man, wel more us ogthe
 Receyven al in gree that God us sent;
 For greet skile is, he preve that he wroghte.
 But he no tempteth no man that he boghte,
 As seith sent Jame, if ye his pistel rede;
 He preveth folk al day, it is no drede,**

**And suffreth us, as for our exercyse,
 With sharpe scourges of adversitee
 Ful often to be bete in sondry wyse;
 Nat for to knowe our wil, for certes he,
 Er we were born, knew al our freletee;
 And for our beste is al his governaunce:
 Lat us than live in vertuous suffrance.**

Yet the Clerk has no idea of failing to make his point against the Wife of Bath. And so, when the tale is finished and the proper Petrarchan moral has been duly elaborated, he turns to the Wife (whom he has thus far sedulously refrained from addressing) and distinctly applies the material to the purpose of an ironical answer, of crushing force, to her whole heresy. There is nothing inappropriate to his character in this procedure. Quite the contrary. Clerks were always satirizing women -- the Wife had said so herself -- and this particular Clerk had, of course, no scruples against using the powerful weapon of irony in the service of religion and 'moral vertu.' In this instance, the satire is peculiarly poignant for two reasons: first, because it comes with all the suddenness of a complete change of tone (from high seriousness to biting irony, and from the impersonal to the personal); and secondly, because in the tale which he has told, the Clerk had incidentally refuted a false statement of the Wife's, to the effect that

**'It is an impossible
 That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
 But if it be of holy seintes lyves,
 Ne of noon other womman never the mo.'**

Clerks *can* 'speak well' of women (as our Clerk has shown), and when women deserve it; and he now proceeds to show that they can likewise speak well (with biting irony) of women who do not deserve it -- such women as the Wife of Bath and all her sect of domestic revolutionists.

It now appears that the form and spirit of the conclusion and the Envoy are not only appropriate to clerks in general, but peculiarly and exquisitely appropriate to this particular clerk under these particular circumstances and with this particular task in hand, -- the duty of defending the orthodox view of the relations between husband and wife against the heretical opinions of the Wife of Bath: 'One word in conclusion, gentlemen. There are few Griseldas now-a-days. Most women will break before they will bend. Our companion, the Wife of Bath, is an example, as she has told us herself. Therefore, though I cannot sing, I will recite a song in honor, not of Griselda (as you might perhaps expect), but of the Wife of Bath, of the sect of which she aspires to be a doctor, and of the life which she exemplifies in practice --

**`For the wyves love of Bathe,
Whos self and al hir secte God mayntene
In high maistrye, and elles were it scathe.'**

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Her *way of life* -- she had set it forth with incomparable zest. Her sect -- she was an heresiarch or at least a schismatic. The terms are not accidental: they are chosen with all the discrimination that befits a scholar and a rhetorician. They refer us back (as definitely as the words 'Wife of Bath' themselves) to that prologue in which the Wife had stood forth as an opponent of the orthodox view of subordination in marriage, as the upholder of an heretical doctrine, and as the exultant practicer of what she preached.

And then comes the Clerk's Envoy, the song that he recites in honor of the Wife and all her sect, with its polished lines, its ingenious rhyming, and its utter felicity of scholarly diction. Nothing could be more in character. To whom in all the world could such a masterpiece of rhetoric be appropriate if not to the Clerk of Oxenford? It is a mock encomium, a sustained ironical commendation of what the Wife has taught.

'O noble wives, let no clerk ever have occasion to write such a story of you as Petrarch once told me about Griselda. Follow your great leader, the Wife of Bath. Rule your husbands, as she did; rail at them, as she did; make them jealous, as she did; exert yourselves to get lovers, as she did. And all this you must do whether you are fair or foul [with manifest allusion to the problem of beauty of ugliness presented in the Wife's story]. Do this, I say, and you will fulfill the precepts that she has set forth and achieve the great end which she has proclaimed as the object of marriage: that is, *you will make your husbands miserable, as she did!*'

**`Be ay of chere as light as leef on linde,
And let him care and wepe and wringe and waille!'**

And the Merchant (hitherto silent, but not from inattention) catches up the closing words in a gust of bitter passion:

**`Weping and wayling, care and other sorwe
I know ynough on even and amorwe.'
Quod the Merchant, `and so don othere mo
That wedded ben.'**

The Clerk's Envoy, then, is not only appropriate to his character and to the situation: it has also a marked dynamic value. For it is this ironical tribute to the Wife of Bath and her dogmas that, with complete dramatic inevitability, calls out the Merchant's *cri de coeur*. The Merchant has no thought of telling a tale at this moment. He is a stately and imposing person in his degree, by no means prone (so the Prologue informs us) to expose any holes there may be in his coat. But he is suffering a kind of emotional crisis. The poignant irony of the Clerk, following hard upon the moving story of a patient and devoted wife, is too much for him. He has just passed through his honeymoon (but two months wed) and he has sought a respite from his thralldom under color of a pilgrimage to St. Thomas.

`I have a wyf, the worste that may be!'

She would be an overmatch for the devil himself. He need not specify her evil traits: she is bad in every respect.

**`There is a long and large difference
Bitwix Crisildis grete pacience
And of my wyf the passing crueltee.'**

The Host, as ever, is on the alert. He scents a good story:

**`Sin ye so muchel knowen of that art,
Ful hertely I pray yow telle us part.'**

The Merchant agrees, as in duty bound, for all the Pilgrims take care never to oppose the Host, lest he exact the heavy forfeit established as the penalty for rebellion. But he declines to relate his own experiences, thus leaving us to infer, if we choose, -- for nowhere is Chaucer's artistic reticence more effective, -- that his bride has proved false to him, like the wife of the worthy Knight of Lombardy.

And so the discussion of marriage is once more in full swing. The Wife of Bath, without intending it, has opened a debate in which the Pilgrims have become so absorbed that they will not leave it till the subject is `bolted to the bran.'

The Merchant's Tale presents very noteworthy features, and has been much canvassed, though never (it seems) with due attention

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to its plain significance in the Human Comedy of the Canterbury Tales. In substance, it is nothing but a tale of bawdry, one of the most familiar of its class. There is nothing novel about it except its setting, but that is sufficiently remarkable. Compare the tale with any other version of the Pear-Tree Story, -- their name is legion, -- and its true significance comes out in striking fashion. The simple fabliau devised by its first author merely to make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o' the sere, is so expanded and overlaid with savage satire that it becomes a complete disquisition of marriage from the only point of view which is possible for the disenchanted Merchant. Thus considered, the cynicism of the Merchant's Tale is seen to be in no way surprising, and (to answer another kind of comment which this piece has evoked) in no sense expressive of Chaucer's own sentiments, or even of Chaucer's momentary mood. The cynicism is the Merchant's. It is no more Chaucer's than Iago's cynicism about love is Shakespeare's.

In a word, the tale is the perfect expression of the Merchant's angry disgust at his own evil fate and at his folly in bringing that fate upon himself. Thus, its very lack of restraint -- the savagery of the whole, which has revolted so many readers -- is dramatically inevitable. The Merchant has schooled himself to his debts and his troubles. He is professionally adept at putting a good face on matters, as every clever business man must be. But when once the barrier is broken, reticence is at an end. His disappointment is too fresh, his disillusion has been too abrupt, for

him to measure his words. He speaks in a frenzy of contempt and hatred. The hatred is for women; the contempt is for himself and all other fools who will not take warning by example. For we should not forget that the satire is aimed at January rather than at May. That egotistical old dotard is less excusable than his young wife, and meets with less mercy at the Merchant's hands.

That the Merchant begins with an encomium on marriage which is one of the most amazing instances of sustained irony in all literature, is not to be wondered at. In the first place, he is ironical because the Clerk has been ironical. Here the connection is remarkably close. The Merchant has fairly snatched the words out of the Clerk's mouth ('And lat him care and wepe and wringe and waille' -- 'Weping and wayling, care and other sorwe'), and his mock encomium on the wedded state is a sequel to the Clerk's mock encomium on the Wife of Bath's life and all her sect. The spirit is different, but that is quite proper. For the Clerk's satire is the irony of a logician and a moral philosopher, the irony of the intellect and the ethical sense: the Merchant's is the irony of a mere man, it is the irony of passion and personal experience. The Clerk is a theorist, -- he looks at the subject from a point of philosophical detachment. The Merchant is an egotist, -- he feels himself to be the dupe whose folly he depicts. We may infer, if we like, that he was a man in middle age and that he had married a young wife.

There is plenty of evidence that the Merchant has been an attentive listener. One detects, for instance, a certain similarity between January and the Marquis Walter (different as they are) in that they have both shown themselves disinclined to marriage. Then again, the assertion that a wife is never weary of attending a sick husband --

**'She nis nat wery him to love and serve,
Thogh that be lye bedrede til he sterve' --**

must have reminded the Pilgrims of poor Thomas, in the Summoner's Tale, whose wife's complaints to her spiritual visitor had precipitated so tremendous a sermon. But such things are trifles compared with the attention which the Merchant devotes to the Wife of Bath.

So far, in this act of Chaucer's Human Comedy, we have found that the Wife of Bath is, in a very real sense, the dominant figure. She has dictated the theme and inspired or instigated the actors; and she has always been at or near the center of the stage. It was a quarrel over her prologue that elicited the tale of the Friar and that of the Summoner. It was she who caused the Clerk to tell of Griselda -- and the Clerk satirizes her in his Envoy. 'The art' of which the Host begs the Merchant to tell is her art, the art of marriage on which she has discoursed so learnedly. That the Merchant, therefore, should allude to her, quote her words, and finally mention her in plain terms is precisely what was to be expected.

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The order and method of these approaches on the Merchant's part are exquisitely natural and dramatic. First there are touches, more or less palpable, when he describes the harmony of wedded life in terms so different from the Wife's account of what her husbands had to endure. Then -- after a little -- comes a plain enough allusion (put into January's mouth) to the Wife's character, to her frequent marriages, and to her inclination to marry again, old as she is:

**`And eek thise olde widwes, God it wot,
They conne so muchel craft on Wades boot,
So muchel broken harm, whan that hem leste,
That with hem sholde I never live in rest,
For sondry scoles maken sotil clerkis:
Wommen of many scoles half a clerk is.'**

Surely the Wife of Bath was a woman of many schools, and her emulation of clerkly discussion had already been commented on by the Pardoner and the Friar. Next, the Merchant lets Justinus note some of the Wife's very words -- though without naming her: `God may apply the trials of marriage, my dear January, to your salvation. Your wife may make you go straight to heaven without passing through purgatory.'

**`Paraunter she may be your purgatorie!
She may be Goddes mene, and Goddes whippe;
Than shal your soule up to hevene skippe
Swifter than doth an arwe out of the bowe.'**

This is merely an adaptation of the Wife of Bath's own language in speaking of her fourth husband:

**`By God, in erthe I was his purgatorie,
For which I hope his soule be in glorie.'**

Compare also another phrase of hers, which Justinus echoes: `Myself have been the whippe.' And finally, when all the Pilgrims are quite prepared for such a thing, there is a frank citation of the Wife of Bath by name, with a reference to her exposition of marriage:

**`My tale is doon: -for my wit is thinne.
Beth not agast herof, my brother dere.
But lat us waden out of this matere:
*The Wyf of Bathe, if ye han understand,
Of mariage, which we have an honde,
Declared hath ful wel in litel space.
Fareth now wel, God have yow in his grace.'***

Are the italicized lines a part of the speech of Justinus, or are they interpolated by the Merchant, in his own person, in order to shorten Justinus' harangue? Here is Professor Skeat's comment: `These four parenthetical lines interrupt the story rather awkwardly. They obviously belong to the narrator, the Merchant, as it is out of the question that Justinus had heard of the Wife of Bath. Perhaps it is an oversight.' Now it makes no difference whether we assign these lines to Justinus or to the Merchant, for Justinus, as we have seen, has immediately before quoted the Wife's very words, and he may as well mention her as repeat her language. Either way, the lines are exquisitely in place. Chaucer is not speaking, and there is no violation of dramatic propriety on his part. It is not Chaucer who is telling the story. It is the Merchant. And the Merchant is telling it as a part of the discussion which the Wife has started. It is dramatically

proper, then, that the Merchant should quote the Wife of Bath and that he should refer to her. And it is equally proper, from the dramatic point of view, for Chaucer to let the Merchant make Justinus mention the Wife. In that case it is the Merchant -- not Chaucer -- who chooses to have one of his characters fall out of his part for a moment and make a 'local allusion.' Chaucer is responsible for making the Merchant speak in character; the Merchant, in his turn, is responsible for Justinus. That the Merchant should put into the mouth of Justinus a remark that Justinus could never have made is, then, not a slip on Chaucer's part. On the contrary, it is a first-rate dramatic touch, for it is precisely what the Merchant might well have done under the circumstances.

Nor should we forget the exquisitely comical discussion between Pluto and Proserpina which the Merchant has introduced

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near the end of his story. This dialogue is a flagrant violation of dramatic propriety -- not on Chaucer's part, however, but on the Merchant's. And therein consists a portion of its merit. For the Merchant is so eager to make his point that he rises superior to all artistic rules. He is bent, not on giving utterance to a masterpiece of narrative construction, but on enforcing his lesson in every possible way. And Chaucer is equally bent on making him do it. Hence the Queen of the Lower World is brought in, discoursing in terms that befit the Wife of Bath (the presiding genius of this part of the Canterbury Tales), and echoing some of her very doctrines. And note that Pluto (who is as fond of citing authorities as the Wife's last husband) yields the palm of the discussion to Proserpine. This, too, was the experience of the Wife's husbands. The tone and manner of the whole debate between Pluto and his queen are wildly absurd if regarded from the point of view of gods and goddesses, but in that very incongruity resides their dramatic propriety. What we have is not Pluto and Proserpine arguing with each other, but the Wife of Bath and one of her husbands attired for the nonce by the cynical Merchant in the external resemblance of King Pluto and his dame.

The end of the Merchant's Tale does not bring the Marriage Chapter of the Canterbury Tales to a conclusion. As the Merchant had commented on the Clerk's Tale by speaking of his own wife, thus continuing the subject which the Wife had begun, so the Host comments on the Merchant's story by making a similar application:

**`Ey, Goddes mercy,' seyde our Hoste tho,
`Now such a wyf I pray God kepe me fro!'**

'See how women deceive us poor men, as the Merchant has shown us. However, *my wife* is true as any steel; but she is a shrew, and has plenty of other faults.' And just as the Merchant had referred expressly to the Wife of Bath, so also does the Host refer to her expressly: 'But I must not talk of these things. If I should, it would be told to her by some of this company. I need not say by whom, 'sin wommen connen outen swich chaffarel.' Of course the Host points this remark by looking at the Wife of Bath. There are but three women in the company. Neither the highborn and dainty Prioress nor the pious nun who accompanies her is likely to gossip with Harry Baily's spouse. It is the Wife, a woman of the Hostess's own rank and temper, who will

tattle when the party returns to the Tabard. And so we find the Wife of Bath still in the foreground, as she has been, in one way or another, for several thousand lines.

But now the Host thinks his companions have surely had enough of marriage. It is time they heard something of love, and with this in view he turns abruptly to the Squire, whom all the Pilgrims have come to know as 'a lovyer and a lusty bachiller.'

**`Squier, com neer, if it your wille be,
And sey somewhat of love; for certes ye
Connen theron as muche as any man.'**

The significance of the emphasis on *love*, which is inevitable if the address to the Squire is read (as it should be) continuously with the Host's comments on marriage, is by no means accidental.

There is no psychology about the Squire's Tale, -- no moral or social or matrimonial theorizing. It is pure romance, in the mediaeval sense. The Host understood the charm of variety. He did not mean to let the discussion drain itself to the dregs.

But Chaucer's plan in this Act is not yet finished. There is still something lacking to a full discussion of the relations between husband and wife. We have had the wife who dominates her husband; the husband who dominates his wife; the young wife who befools her dotard January; the chaste wife who is a scold and stirs up strife. Each of these illustrates a different kind of marriage, -- but there is left untouched, so far, the ideal relation, that in which love continues and neither party to the contract strives for the mastery. Let this be set forth, and the series of views of wedded life begun by the Wife of Bath will be rounded off; the Marriage Act of the Human Comedy will be concluded. The Pilgrims may not be thinking of this; but there is at least *one* of them (as the sequel shows) who has the idea in his head. And who is he? The only pilgrims who have not yet already told their tales are the yeoman, two priests, the five tradesmen (haberdasher, carpenter,

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weaver, dyer, and tapicer), the parson, the plowman, the manciple, and the franklin. Of all these there is but one to whom a tale illustrating the ideal would not be inappropriate -- the Franklin. To him, then, must Chaucer assign it, or leave the debate unfinished.

At this point, the dramatic action and interplay of characters are beyond all praise. The Franklin is not brought forward in formal fashion to address the company. His summons is incidental to the dialogue. No sooner has the Squire ended his chivalric romance, than the Franklin begins to compliment him:

**`In feyth, squier, thou hast thee well yquit
And gentily . . .**

'You have acquitted yourself well and like a gentleman!' *Gentillesse*, then, is what has most

impressed the Franklin in the tale that he has just heard. And the reason for his enthusiasm soon appears. He is, as we know, a rich freeholder, often sheriff in his county. Socially, he is not quite within the pale of the gentry, but he is the kind of man that may hope to found a family, the kind of man from whose ranks the English nobility has been constantly recruited. And that such is his ambition comes out naively and with a certain pathos in what he goes on to say: 'I wish my son were like you.' It is the contrast between the Squire and his own son, in whom his hopes are centered, that has led the Franklin's thoughts to *gentillesse*, a subject which is ever in his mind.

But the Host interrupts him rudely: 'Straw for your *gentillesse*! It is your turn to entertain the company':

'Telle on thy tale withouten wordes mo!'

The Franklin is, of course, very polite in his reply to this rough and unexpected command. Like the others, he is on his guard against opposing the Host and incurring the forfeit.

Here, then, as in the case of the Merchant, the Host has taken advantage of a spontaneous remark on some Pilgrim's part to demand a story. Yet the details of the action are quite different. On the previous occasion, the Merchant is requested to go on with an account of his marriage, since he has already begun to talk about it; and, though he declines to speak further of his own troubles, he does continue to discuss and illustrate wedlock from his own point of view. In the present instance, on the contrary, the Host repudiates the topic of *gentillesse*, about which the Franklin is discoursing to the Squire. He bids him drop the subject and tell a story. The Franklin pretends to be compliant, but after all, he has his own way. Indeed, he takes delicate vengeance on the Host by telling a tale which thrice exemplifies *gentilese* -- on the part of a knight, a squire, and a clerk. Thus he finishes his interrupted compliment to the Squire, and incidentally honors two other Pilgrims who have seemed to him to possess the quality that he values so highly. He proves, too, both that *gentillesse* is an entertaining topic and that it is not (as the Host has roughly intimated) a theme which he, the Franklin, is ill-equipped to handle.

For the Franklin's Tale is a gentleman's story, and he tells it like a gentleman. It is derived, he tells us, from 'thise olde gentil Britons.' Dorigen lauds Averagus' *gentillesse* toward her in refusing to insist on soveraynetee in marriage. Aurelius is deeply impressed by the knight's *gentillesse* in allowing the lady to keep her word, and emulates it by releasing her. And finally, the clerk releases Aurelius, from the same motive of generous emulation.

Thus it appears that the dramatic impulse to the telling of the Franklin's Tale is to be found in the relations among the Pilgrims and in the effect that they have upon each other, -- in other words, in the circumstances, the situation, and the interplay of character.

It has sometimes been thought that the story, either in subject or in style, is too fine for the Franklin to tell. But this objection Chaucer foresaw and forestalled. The question is not whether this tale, thus told, would be appropriate to a typical or 'average' fourteenth-century franklin. The question is whether it is appropriate to this particular Franklin, under these particular circumstances, and at this particular juncture. And to this question there can be but one answer. Chaucer's Franklin is an individual, not a mere type-specimen. He is rich, ambitious socially, and profoundly interested in the matter of *gentillesse* for personal and family reasons. He is

trying to bring up his son as a gentleman, and his position as 'St. Julian in his country' has brought him into intimate association with first-rate models. He has, under the special circumstances, every motive to tell a gentleman's story and tell it like a gentleman. He is speaking under the immediate influence of his admiration for the Squire and of his sense of the inferiority of his own son. If we choose to conceive the Franklin as a mediaeval Squire Western and then to allege that he could not possibly have told such a story, we are making the difficulty for ourselves. We are considering -- not Chaucer's Franklin (whose character is to be inferred not merely from the description in the General Prologue but from all the other evidence that the poet provides) -- not Chaucer's Franklin, but somebody quite different, somebody for whom Chaucer has no kind of responsibility.

In considering the immediate occasion of the Franklin's Tale, we have lost sight for a moment of the Wife of Bath. But she was not absent from the mind of the Franklin. The proper subject of his tale, as we have seen, is *gentilesse*. Now that (as well as marriage) was a subject on which the Wife of Bath had descanted at some length. Her views are contained in the famous harangue delivered by the lady to her husband on the wedding night: 'But for ye speken of swich gentilesse,' etc. Many readers have perceived that this portentous curtain-lecture clogs the story, and some have perhaps wished it away, good as it is in itself. For it certainly seems to be out of place on the lips of the *f e*. But its insertion is (as usual in such cases) exquisitely appropriate to the teller of the tale, the Wife of Bath, who cannot help dilating on subjects which interest her, and who has had the advantage of learned society in the person of her fifth husband. Perhaps no *f e* would have talked thus to her knightly bridegroom on such an occasion; but it is quite in character for the Wife of Bath to use the *f e* (or anybody else) as a mouthpiece for her own ideas, as the Merchant had used Proserpine to point his satire. Thus the references to Dante, Valerius, Seneca, Boethius, and Juvenal -- so deliciously absurd on the lips of a *f e* of King Arthur's time -- are perfectly in place when we remember who it is that is reporting the monologue. The Wife was a citer of authorities -- she makes the *f e* cite authorities. How comical this is the Wife did not know, but Chaucer knew, and if

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we think he did not, it is our own fault for not observing how dramatic in spirit is the *Canterbury Tales*.

A considerable passage in the curtain-lecture is given to the proposition that 'swich gentilesse as is descended out of old noblesse' is of no value: 'Swich arrogance is not worth an hen.' These sentiments the Franklin echoes:

**'Fy on possessioun
But if a man be vertuous withall'**

But, whether or not the Wife's digression on *gentilesse* is lingering in the Franklin's mind (as I am sure it is), one thing is perfectly clear: the Franklin's utterances on marriage are spoken under the influence of the discussion which the Wife has precipitated. In other words, though everybody else imagines that the subject has been finally dismissed by the Host when he calls on the Squire for a tale of love, it has no more been dismissed in fact than when the Friar attempted to dismiss it at the beginning of his tale. For the Franklin has views, and he means to

set them forth. He possesses, as he thinks, the true solution of the whole difficult problem. And that solution he embodies in his tale of *gentillesse*.

The introductory part of the Franklin's Tale sets forth a theory of the marriage relation quite different from anything that has so far emerged in the debate. And this theory the Franklin arrives at by taking into consideration both *love* (which, as we remember, was the subject that the Host had bidden the Squire treat of) and *gentillesse* (which is to be the subject of his own story).

Averagus had of course been obedient to his lady during the period of courtship, for obedience was well understood to be the duty of a lover. Finally, she consented to marry him --

**To take him for hir housbonde and hir lord,
Of swich lordships as men han over her wyves.**

Marriage, then, according to the orthodox doctrine (as held by Walter and Griselda) was to change Averagus from the lady's servant to her master. But Averagus was an enlightened and chivalric gentleman, and he promised the lady he would never assert his marital authority, but would content himself with the mere name of sovereignty, continuing to be her servant and lover as before. This he did because he thought it would ensure the happiness of their wedded life.

But, just as Averagus was no disciple of the Marquis Walter, so Dorigen was not a member of the sect of the Wife of Bath. She promised her husband obedience and fidelity in return for his *gentillesse* in renouncing his sovereign rights. This, then, is the Franklin's solution of the whole puzzle of matrimony, and it is a solution that depends upon love and *gentillesse* on both sides. But he is not content to leave the matter in this purely objective condition. He is determined that there shall be no misapprehension in the mind of any Pilgrim as to his purpose. He wishes to make it perfectly clear that he is definitely and formally offering this theory as the only satisfactory basis of happy married life. And he accordingly comments on the relations between the married lovers with fulness, and with manifest reference to certain things that the previous debaters have said.

The arrangement, he tells the Pilgrims, resulted in 'quiet and rest' for both Arveragus and Dorigen. And, he adds, it is the only arrangement which will ever enable two persons to live together in love and amity. Friends must 'obey each other if they wish to hold company long.' Hence it was that this wise knight promised his wife 'suffraunce' and that she promised him never to abuse his goodness. The result, the Franklin adds, was all that could be desired. The knight lived 'in blisse and in solas.' And then the Franklin adds an encomium on the happiness of true marriage:

**'Who coude telle, but he had wedded be,
The ioye, the ese, and the prosperitee
That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf?'**

This encomium echoes the language of the Merchant:

'A wyf! a Seinte Marie! benedicte!'

**How mighte a man han any adversitee
That hath a wyf? Certes, I can nat seye!
The blisse which that is bitwixe hem tweeye
Ther may no tonge telle or hereto thinke.'**

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The Franklin's praise of marriage is sincere; the Merchant's had been savagely ironical. The Franklin, we observe, is answering the merchant, and he answers him in the most effective way -- by repeating his very words.

And just as in the Merchant's Tale we noted that the Merchant has enormously expanded the simple *fabliau* that he had to tell, inserting all manner of observations on marriage which are found in no other version of the Pear-Tree story, so also we find that the Franklin's exposition of the ideal marriage relation (including the pact between Arveragus and Dorigen) is all his own, occurring in none of the versions that precede Chaucer. These facts are of the very last significance. No argument is necessary to enforce their meaning.

It is hardly worth while to indicate the close connection between this and that detail of the Franklin's exposition and certain points that have come out in the discussion as conducted by his predecessors in the debate. His repudiation of the Wife of Bath's doctrine that men should be governed by their wives is express, as well as his rejection of the opposite theory. Neither party should lose his liberty; neither the husband nor the wife should be a thrall. Patience (which clerks celebrate as a high virtue) should be mutual, not, as in the Clerk's Tale, all on one side. The husband is to be both servant and lord -- servant in love and lord in marriage. Such servitude is true lordship. Here there is a manifest allusion to the words of Walter's subjects in the Clerk's Tale:

**That blisful yok
Of sovereynetee, noght of servyse;**

as well as to Walter's rejoinder:

**'I me reioysed of my libertee,
That selde tyme is founde in mariage;
Ther I was free, I moot been in servage.'**

It was the regular theory of the Middle Ages that the highest type of chivalric love was incompatible with marriage, since marriage brings in mastery, and mastery and love cannot abide together. This view the Franklin boldly challenges. Love *can* be consistent with marriage, he declares. Indeed, without love (and perfect gentle love) marriage is sure to be a failure. The difficulty about mastery vanishes when mutual love and forbearance are made the guiding principles of the relation between husband and wife.

The soundness of the Franklin's theory, he declares, is proved by his tale. For the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen was a brilliant success. Thus the whole debate has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion, and the Marriage Act of the Human Comedy ends with the conclusion

of the Franklin's Tale.

Those readers who are eager to know what Chaucer thought about marriage may feel reasonably content with the inference that may be drawn from his procedure. The Marriage Group of Tales begins with the Wife of Bath's Prologue and ends with the Franklin's Tale. There is no connection between the Wife's Prologue and the group of stories that precedes: there is no connection between the Franklin's Tale and the group that follows. Within the Marriage Group, on the contrary, there is close connection throughout. That act is a finished act. It begins and ends an elaborate debate. We need not hesitate, therefore, to accept the solution which the Franklin offers as that which Geoffrey Chaucer the man accepted for his own part. Certainly it is a solution that does him infinite credit. A better has never been devised or imagined.

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