Trouthe Is the Highest Thing

by Robert B. Waltz

Revised Edition

To
Barbara Edson and Mathea Erickson Bulander
who gave trouthe *without even knowing what it was*

and to my parents
Dorothy and Frederick Waltz
and
Aurora Adams
who kept me going just long enough

My trouthe*: An Autistic's Pledge to a Special Friend*

To be honest with you, and to strive to be honest with myself.
Not to try to be more than I am, but neither to be less.
To always behave with gentleness.
To forgive, and learn by forgiving.
To be silent and listen when you need someone to hear.
To speak when you need someone to speak.
To trust you, and to be trustworthy.
To never do less for you than I can do.
To ask no more of you than you can give.
To think of you as well as myself.
To respect you as well as myself.
To admit my mistakes, and make amends, and strive to do better.
To help when you need help.
To be there when you need me.
To be a true friend to you in every way I can.
This is who I strive to be. This is my pledge. This is my life. This is my trouthe.

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Acknowledgments

All non-fiction authors include acknowledgments. Like most others, I have many debts. But my chief debt is an odd one: I owe Elizabeth and Patricia Rosenberg for teaching me what *trouthe* is. The word is Chaucer's, but I learned to understand it from them. I know Dorigen's dilemma; I have felt Griselda's pain. I could not have written this book without the Rosenbergs. To them it should be dedicated, save that I have already dedicated books to them.

There seems to be a tendency for Chaucer scholars to be folk song scholars as well. So I also wish to thank to my Ballad Index colleagues, David Engle, Ed Cray, Ben Schwartz, Paul Stamler, and Don Nichols. I would also thank Wendy M. Grossman and Kamakshi Tandon. And my parents, who kept me going as this work was written. Ben, David, and my father also proofread the work.

I also owe credit to J. R. R. Tolkien and his biographers, for showing that there are others who still seek *trouthe.* Tolkien's motto, like mine, was the tag from the *Franklin's Tale,* "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe"; when I first read the line with understanding, it was world-changing for me.

And, of course, I owe even more to Geoffrey Chaucer.

I should note that I am not a Chaucer scholar; most of my understanding is derived from the many scholars cited in this work. I'm not an expert on autism (including the kind formerly known as Asperger's Syndrome), either, except in the sense of having lived it. But I *am* an expert on *trouthe,* for having lived with *it*, and I recognize it in Chaucer's work. I can only hope that is justification enough for writing. And that Chaucer scholars will accept that I have pitched this paper primarily at people who are not Chaucer experts, because, while I want to make a point about Chaucer, I want even more for everyone to understand *trouthe.*

As this book will show, the work of John Stevens was largely responsible for my realizing that the emotion of loyalty and devotion that I felt was the same as Chaucer's *trouthe.* I do not know Stevens, who was a very old man before I even came across his book, but I owe him much. I suspect, if he had felt *trouthe* as I feel *trouthe,* there would be little need for this book, because he would already have written it.

The cover illustration is from Wikimedia Commons, and shows Edward Burne-Jones's image of "Dorigen of Bretagne Waiting for the Return of Her Husband" (1871). The internal image of the Wheel of Fortune and those of the Knight and the Franklin are also from Wikimedia. The other images of Chaucer manuscripts are from the Digital Scriptorium. The image of a pilgrimage is not from a copy of Chaucer; it comes from a reproduction of Richard Pynson's 1511 printing of the *Pylgrymage of Sir Richarde Guylforde.*

Today, Middle English is, if not a closed book, at least a very dimly lit volume for most readers. Different authors have handled this in different ways. In this book, I have chosen to print Middle English in the text (the Chaucer texts being from *The Riverside Chaucer),* with "translations" in the footnotes. My goal in these translations — which are often inspired by the *Riverside* glosses — is to convey the "feel" of the texts rather than to supply the most accurate translation.

Preface

Our greatest virtues are our emotions.

That is, a virtue is something we hope to have and to perform — it is something we want to feel. So, for instance, one may strive to be brave. Bravery is thus a virtue which one attempts to display. This is a good and noble thing. But some people simply *are* brave. For them, there is no hesitation. Being inherently brave may not be as noble as a person *forcing* himself to be brave, but it is probably more deeply felt.

In other words, a brave man *feels* bravery as an emotion but *displays* it as a virtue; a kind woman *feels* kindness but *displays* kindness as a virtue.

Bravery when no one is looking, kindness when there is no one to remember — these are not "rational" acts. Yet people do them every day. To give a drink to a dying man in a desert, to stand up for what is right when you could just "go along to get along" — these are virtuous acts, but people do them because their emotions bid them to. *The virtue is the emotion.*

This article is about a virtue — *trouthe,* which Geoffrey Chaucer once declared "the highest thing that man can keep." But although regarded as a virtue, it also is an emotion. Today, *trouthe* does not seem to be a virtue people feel — but when I first read of it, I knew that this was "my" virtue, as bravery and obedience are the crucial virtues of a soldier or compassion and learning the great virtues of the cleric.

And I rather suspect that Geoffrey Chaucer, too, felt *trouthe* as an emotion. It is the central theme of The *Franklin's Tale*, one of the most delightful of *The Canterbury Tales* — but in more subtle forms it seems to motivate all the Canterbury Romances. In them, *trouthe* works itself out in almost the same way that *wyrd* (fate) was seen in the Old English epics. How could anyone write such tales who did not feel the draw of this emotion?

I cannot prove this. I am autistic; my emotions are abnormal. Most people do not seem to feel *trouthe.* Did Chaucer feel it? Was Chaucer autistic? We cannot know.

This article is not intended to add significantly to Chaucer criticism. Most experts would agree that Chaucer valued *trouthe;* from the standpoint of the literary critic, all I am doing is arguing that he valued *trouthe* even more than most critics think. My argument, instead, is that this is a real virtue which was expressed by Chaucer, and more strongly than we realize today.

Virtues go out of date. "Chivalry" is dead. It seems *trouthe* is, too. Perhaps the end of feudalism, which was based on ties of loyalty, and the rise of capitalism, made it less useful. I do not know. I certainly can't bring it back. But I hope to let others see a noble emotion in a new light.

I am not an artist, but I am autistic, and I truly need a muse to think creatively — or even to live a proper life. The idea of this book — that Chaucer's *trouthe* was the same emotion that I feel toward my muses — came when I had a muse, but was written after my muse friends had abandoned me. So the writing is not what it should be. I can only hope that you will be able to understand my message anyway — and perhaps help other autistics whose needs are like mine.

Introduction

Magna est veritas, et praevalet.[1]

The words are from the book called 3 Esdras, and are no longer considered canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. And they are only a translation anyway, the Latin Vulgate version of the Greek book known as 1 Esdras, itself an expanded and modified translation of the Hebrew book of Ezra. But they are in the Bible that Geoffrey Chaucer knew. Today we would translate, "Great is truth, and it prevails."

But what is truth? The question is Pontius Pilate's,[2] but simple as it sounds, different societies give slightly different answers. There is "truth." There is "The Truth." And, in Middle English, there was *trouthe*.

Trouthe is the same word as Modern English "truth." But continuity of meaning doesn't necessarily suggest that a word has the same meaning now as in Chaucer's time! Take, for instance, the verb "doubt." It used to mean "I am convinced" — a usage still familiar, for instance, in the King James Bible. Now it means "I am *not* convinced"!

Trouthe has not changed as dramatically as that. In Chaucer's time as in ours, it *could* mean "something that is factually verifiable." But it is better to think of it as (at least) two words — words we now know as "truth" (something correct and real) and "troth" (a pledge of constancy).[3] And because those words are themselves rich and full of meaning, it took on a very great constellation of secondary meanings not found in the Modern English versions of the words:

> "Trouthe"… means at least four things [to Chaucer].... The first three meanings, which shade into one another are:
> (1) *trouthe* as a "troth," a pledged word, the promise you give another person;
> (2) *trouthe* as integrity, the truth to your own inmost self;

[1] 3 Esdras 4:41. The reading *magna est veritas, et praevalet* does not appear to be original. It is the reading found in the Catholic Church's Clementine Vulgate, as well as in the Vulgate copies made in Paris in the thirteenth century, but the first hand of the great Codex Amiatinus reads *et* instead of *est,* and the Paris manuscript Q omits the word *est* altogether. The critical edition of the Vulgate, p. 1917, also omits the word. But Chaucer would have known late Bible copies, so chances are that "*magna est veritas, et praevalet*" were the words Chaucer encountered.

[2] John 18:38: "quid est veritas"; Vulgate, p. 1692.

[3] Definitions of *trouthe* include the following:

Howard, p. 65: "'Truth' (better, 'troth') was your ability to make good all vows and obligations owed in a hierarchical world — to God, to your overlord, to all oaths you have made, to your lady, to your vassals."

Burrow/Turville-Petre (text modified to spell out the sources they cite): "**treuthe, trouthe** *n.* pledge [Peterborough Chronicle], justice [*Piers Plowman, St. Erkenwald],* integrity, honesty [*Piers Plowman],* **treothes** *pl.* pledged [Peterborough Chronicle] [OE *trēowþ].*"

Tolkien's glossary in Sisam has "**Treuthe; Trouthe, Trowthe** [Gower]; **Trawþe** [Gawain-poet]; **Truth(e)** [*Gest Hystoriale]*; *n.* truth [*Gest Hystoriale];* (personified) [*Piers Plowman];* fidelity [Gower]; faith, (plighted) word, troth [*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Piers Plowman, Confessio Amantis];* compact [*Sir Gawain];* honesty [*Piers Plowman];* equity [*The Pearl].* [OE *trēowþ.*]"

> (3) *trouthe* as loyalty, the bond of dependence that keeps society stable and united.... [4] Behind these shifting connotations lies, finally, a much deeper concept. In Chaucer, "trouthe" is a philosophical and religious term for the ultimate reality, the "universal." It is this final, transcendental Truth which gives the lesser "truths" (of human fidelity and integrity) their validity.[4]

Or, as E. Talbot Donaldson put it, "it has the moral meaning of 'integrity' and the philosophical meaning of 'reality....' [I]t is perhaps permissible to identify the quality with everything that is godlike in man."[5]

It is the sort of pledge that wishes
To hold togider at everi nede
In word, in werk, in wille, in dede.[6]

It is this virtue, not our pedestrian facts, to which Chaucer refers when he makes his amazing statement "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe."[7]

This is an extremely strong and an extremely interesting assertion on Chaucer's part. And it isn't just a passing comment; the whole *Franklin's Tale* is about *trouthe,* and as we shall see, it plays a role in the other Chaucerian romances as well.

I wonder if Chaucer meant this as a practical demonstration. There is reason to think that Chaucer doubted the value of poetry in society — *The Parson's Tale* (which is in prose) directly attacks story-telling in verse, and there are other instances of Chaucer seemingly questioning what he was doing.[8] How else to justify his work if not by using it to make a case for a high form of virtue? And how better to make that case than by producing brilliant romances about it? "When we talk about such words [as the nobler virtues], we find ourselves in heated, convoluted discussions that come to no conclusion: we define them best by telling stories."[9] It appears that that is just what Chaucer did with *trouthe.*

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[4] Stevens, pp. 64-65. Dr. David Engle points out to me that this same constellation of meanings is associated with the German word "treue."

[5] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1127.

[6] "To hold together at every need [situation], In word, in work, in will, in deed." *Amis and Amiloun,* lines 151-152; cf. Gervase Mathew, "Ideals of Knighthood in Late-Fourteenth-Century England," Fox, p. 69.

[7] "*Trouthe* is the highest thing that man may keep." *The Franklin's Tale,* line 1479.

[8] Bisson, pp. 25-27.

[9] Howard, pp. 65-66.

Chaucer's Prioress wore the motto "amor vincit omnia," "love conquers all,"[10] which we tend to think of as the key belief of romance. But just as the Prioress seems to fall a little short of her vocation,[11] so does her motto. Love does *not* conquer all for Chaucer. We see this in the vision of Venus's temple in *The Parliament of Fowls;* much of the imagery there is of blighted, disastrous, ugly love[12] — and what attractive love there is is usually the faithful sort. An even more extreme example of the imperfection of love is *Troilus and Criseyde,* which is so masterful an examination of failed passion that some have suggested that it was Chaucer's last word on romantic love.[13] Yet Chaucer returns to the theme of love in the *Canterbury Tales* — and still doesn't show it succeeding. Consider *The Knight's Tale*, in which there are three love relationships: Palamon and Arcite, Palamon and Emelye, Arcite and Emelye. *Two of the three fail.* If love conquered all, then either Palamon or Arcite would have stepped aside for the other, or Emelye would have chosen and the one who was not chosen would have accepted. Neither happened.

Nor do medieval romances in general involve the theme of love conquering all. Love themes in the romances are common but by no means universal.[14] "The conflict between… loyalties or their testing was to provide both the psychological tension and the plot of most fourteenth century romances."[15] What we see instead in the romances is a restoration of what "ought to be." Much of the power of romance, indeed, derives from this striving to *make things right;* it is why many even in our cynical modern world still admire the romances of writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien (who deserves much of the credit for reviving the medieval-type romance)[16] and J. K. Rowling.

One well-known and noteworthy feature of the *Canterbury Tales* is that it contains a mixture of story types. In most cases, Chaucer writes standard tales of whatever type he is using — brilliant

[10] *The General Prologue,* line 162. Note that Latin "amor" is a somewhat ambiguous word, since — unlike "caritas," commonly used to render the Greek word *agape* — it is often used of romantic love. It may well be that Chaucer is using it here ironically, of a nun who thinks a little too much of the secular world — but this point is disputed; ChaucerNorton, p. 465. It is certain that there was a tendency in Chaucer's time to blur the distinction between religious experience and the feelings of ordinary love, and this blurring is perhaps most evidence in the romances; Stevens, chapter 6, "Religion and Romance," especially p. 135; also p. 138, which explicitly cites *Troilus and Criseyde.*

[11] ChaucerNorton, p. 464, notes that Prioresses — who after all already lived in a consecrated community — were not supposed to go on pilgrimages. And many have observed that she seems somewhat less demure than fits her station.

[12] ChaucerBrewer, p. 20.

[13] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1129; also quoted in Benson, p. 44.

[14] Waltz, p. 5. Stevens, p. 84, notes that even the Tristan legend, usually considered a pure love tale, is not always so; "far from being a great love-story, Beroul's telling of the legend seems to stress other idealisms, idealisms in fact which I see as being more apposite to the condition of Man Alone than the condition of Man in Love."

[15] Gervase Mathew, "Ideals of Knighthood in Late-Fourteenth-Century England," Fox, p. 69. Mathew, p. 72, goes on to suggest that French romance, and Chaucer, were by this time moving past this sort of loyalty. But while the other romances may have been changing, Chaucerian irony seems to be much more prevalent in his other writings than in his romances; in the romances, he (mostly) held to the old virtues..

[16] Howard, p. 442, points out that Tolkien's success has made Chaucer more understandable to modern readers than he had been before the publication of *The Lord of the Rings,* and Stevens, p. 9, observes that Tolkien's work is one of several that have collectively eliminated the need to justify the romances.

examples, but not atypical ones. The romances are an exception. "It is as if Chaucer, who seems so much at home in the fabliau, the miracle of the Virgin, and the saint's life, felt less easy with the very genre which we regard as most characteristic of the period, the knightly romance."[17]

I don't think this is quite right. The Host called on his tellers to balance depth of meaning and pleasure — "Tales of best sentence and most solaas."[18] We shouldn't expect all the parts to yield the same moral; "the method of the work is not additive."[19] Rather, the different genres allow us to experience different feelings; by telling many types of tales, Chaucer keeps everyone interested.[20] For fun, Chaucer has the fabliau, "short comic tales in verse, dealing mainly with sexual or other advantages won by tricks and stratagems"[21]— *The Miller's Tale, The Reeve's Tale,* and so forth. But — it seems to me — Chaucer wants the romances to do something more, and hence made them much more complex than most romances before him. What makes him a genius is not that he makes his romances more complex but his ability to do so without making them obnoxiously long. Chaucer was certainly able to write a romance; *Troilus and Criseyde,* the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and The *Franklin's Tale* clearly show that! And these are among his most-loved tales, and seem to be among the stories which he has given the most attention.

Some might object that Chaucer would not have included so many other tale-types if he intended his romances to present a unified theme. Of course, it might be that Chaucer wasn't deliberately portraying a theme, simply that his definition of a romance involved certain characteristics. But I don't think we need such a qualification. Great writers will mix elements of many types in their works — as Shakespeare might put some comic relief in a tragedy, or Mark Twain would make a serious point in a funny tale.

It seems to me that the real difference between Chaucerian and other romances is not some alleged defect in the Chaucerian romances but the fact that Chaucer was trying for more. Sometimes, at least, the goal of a romance is to educate,[22] and Chaucer wanted to teach. The

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[17] J. A. Burrow, "The *Canterbury Tales* I: Romance," Boitani/Mann, p. 109.

[18] "Tales of greatest significance [the best lessons} and most solace/pleasure/fun." *The General Prologue,* line 798; for the significance, see Bisson, p. 40.

[19] ChaucerNorton, p. 471.

[20] This principle — of ornamentation or even, one might say, of distraction — is known to every teller of folktales. Most tales have some sort of lesson or moral. This lesson can usually be expressed in a sentence, and the plot can be summarized in two or three. But no one would listen to that. It is the surrounding detail that keeps our interest and attention. Consider, for example, "The Three Little Pigs." We can summarize the whole plot by saying, "Three pigs built three homes. Two built hastily, of straw and of sticks. The third took more time and built a strong home of stone. A wolf was able to knock down the homes of hay and sticks, and eat the two pigs. It could not break the home of stone; so that pig lived. Moral: Do the work you need to do." But do *you* care about this telling? No, you listen because of the two foolish pigs enjoying themselves, and the Big Bad Wolf huffing and puffing, and the conversations along the way.

[21] Burrow/Turville-Petre, p. 288.

[22] Bisson, p. 131.

ideals in many romances are pretty low — in *Gamelyn*,[23] for instance, we in essence see a younger son fight his way into an inheritance with brute strength and massive ignorance.[24] Even the love romances produced before Chaucer are often pretty feeble. The one of Chaucer's tales that resembles a standard romance is *The Squire's Tale,* which is unfinished. It looks as if Chaucer wanted to use the romances to show the triumph of something greater than mere force or even ordinary love. And that something seems to be *trouthe.* It is *trouthe* that conquers all; each of the stories Chaucer tells is of how *trouthe* somehow came to be set aside, and how in the end *trouthe* triumphs.

"*Trouthe* is exalted again and again in [Chaucer's] works, positively as the Knight's principle virtue and, in the *Franklin's Tale,* as the highest contract that man may keep, and negatively as the quality that Criseide most offends."[25]

But why is *trouthe* so important? To me at least, it matters because it is a genuine virtue. To paraphrase Stevens in his summary, it is fidelity, it is responsibility, it is truthfulness, it is being what one *ought* to be. This is certainly an emotion I have felt — and toward more than one person. This feeling seems to be hard for some people to understand. I think Chaucer felt it, though. Else he would not have written as he did. The following chapters try to examine just how *trouthe* is revealed in the completed Canterbury romances.

Note to Readers: If you are not a Chaucer scholar, or are not overly familiar with the *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer's other works, note that the Dramatis Personae at the end of this book (page 63) gives short biographies of most of the major Chaucerian characters cited here, while the Catalog of Chaucer's Works (page 67) describes the major works of Chaucer discussed below.

[23] A tale, ironically, preserved only in certain manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* (Sands, p. 154), where it is used as a substitute for the truncated *Cook's Tale* (ChaucerRiverside, pp. 1121, 1125). But *Gamelyn* is closely related to the tales of Robin Hood; if Chaucer had chosen to use it, it would surely have been the tale of the Yeoman. Contrary to some editors, though, I do *not* think Chaucer would have used *Gamelyn,* at least in anything like its current form. Even Chaucer's most bitter tales — e.g. the *Merchant's Tale* — often revolve around a clever trick, as May tells January that her adultery was all to bring back his sight. *Gamelyn* is simply too mindless for Chaucer.

[24] Sands, pp. 154-155. Stevens, p. 83, declares that *Gamelyn* is "for all the world like a good TV western." The description is apt, although I'm not so sure about the "good" part. Stevens, pp. 81-83, mentions *Bevis of Hampton* as another romance of "the fantasy of the rippling biceps."

[25] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1127.

The Canterbury Romances: Chaucer's Tales of *Trouthe*

The Clerk's Tale

Most discussions of *trouthe* in Chaucer start with *The Franklin's Tale,* because it is built around the question of how *trouthe* is to be met. But I am inclined to start in another place, with that most extreme of romances (so extreme that many refuse to regard it as a romance[26]), *The Clerk's Tale*.

We may summarize *The Clerk's Tale* as follows: Walter the marquis is urged by his followers to take a wife. He agrees, but insists on choosing her himself, in his own time, rather than submit to an arranged marriage to some noble lady. In due time, he locates Griselda, the poor daughter of a peasant. He keeps her existence a secret until the very day he has set for his wedding, when he raises her up and — after extracting a promise of obedience — marries her. They have a daughter and a son.

But he is resolved to test her. First he takes away her daughter, implying that the child will be killed. Then he takes away her son, again claiming the boy will die. Then he degrades her. Then he declares (using forged letters from the Pope as his excuse) that he will take another wife, and insists that Griselda serve the new bride. The bride he produces (as he knows but Griselda does not) is their own daughter, who has been brought up in a foreign household. Griselda is thus made to wait on a girl the age of her daughter. And Griselda does it.

At this, Walter finally relents, and admits that he has been testing her (in Boccaccio's version, "Griselda, it is time now for you to reap the fruit of your long patience, and it is time for those who have considered me cruel, unjust, and bestial to realize that what I have done was directed toward a pre-established goal, for I wanted to teach you how to be a wife"![27]). Their children are alive; they are in fact present with him; Griselda is restored to her place as Walter's wife, and all ends happily.

Happily except for the post-traumatic stress Griselda feels, anyway, and the shock the children feel upon being reunited with birth parents they never knew. Even the song that follows the tale says that such a result is not really possible in the time when the tale is told:

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[26] J. Burke Severs, "The Tales of Romance," Rowland, p. 272. As a matter of fact, I omitted it from the list of romances in my own *Romancing the Ballad*. Not having studied Chaucer's motives at that time, I omitted *The Clerk's Tale;* after all, it has none of the hallmarks of typical romances — no magic, no big special cause, no larger-than-life characters. In hindsight, I think I was wrong; *The Clerk's Tale* is a romance, but of a special, uniquely Chaucerian kind.

[27] DecameronMusaBondanella, p. 141.

Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience,
And bothe atones buryed in Ytaille....[28]

It is a dark, dark narrative, very hard for moderns to read. I always stall in trying to finish it; I can't take the brutality. Many treat the Clerk's Tale as a horror story, and James Sledd's *The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics*[29] has only partly changed that. Walter is a sadist, and Griselda is a masochist, and she should have abandoned him long before the tale ended. The story goes back to Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Chaucer made much use of Boccacio as a source); Petrarch translated it into Latin, and this is likely Chaucer's direct source.[30] Boccaccio's other stories for Day Ten of the *Decameron* seem to have been intended to instruct, sometimes with a sledgehammer[31] — but what is he trying to teach here? The problem is so extreme that some have tried to excuse it by maintaining that the tale is a sort of rationalized version of the Cupid and Psyche myth,[32] an hypothesis which "explains" the situation but gives no reason for why actual human beings to do such a thing. Others try to write it off as an allegory,[33] though it is not clear how this actually helps (and Chaucer doesn't seem to have liked allegory much anyway, as we shall see below). It is no excuse to say, as George Lyman Kittredge did a century ago, "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.... We miss the pathos because we are aridly intent on discussing an ethical question that has no status in this particular court."[34]

It may have no status, but it *is* an ethical question. "In the Tale of Griselda the moral positives seem to be confused, and there appears to be a lack of real motive and purpose in the actions and thoughts of the characters."[35] "[G]iven a tale of inhuman cruelty and of endurance equally inhuman, how can the author make it believable in human terms?"[36] Why did Chaucer, who was unusually modern in his rejection of the sort of rigid Augustinian harshness common in the medieval mind, tell such a tale? Why did he even, it has been suggested, make Griselda's suffering

[28] "Griselda is dead, and also her patience, And both together buried in Italy." *The Clerk's Tale,* lines 1177-1178. It is not clear whether this is to be the Clerk's epilogue or Chaucer's; the point is that this was the way the world used to be — evidently it's a standard account of the "good old days." (Great. The Good Old Days were the days when men were sociopaths and no one cared....) Howard, p. 445, suggests that the song cancels all that has gone before — but, in another sense, it attests that the event is something that could actually happen, somewhere, once upon a time.

[29] Reprinted in Wagenknecht, pp. 226-239.

[30] Many argue that Chaucer, in addition to using Petrarch and/or Boccaccio, had before him a French version of the tale. Haldeen Braddy, "The French Influence on Chaucer," Rowland, p. 145; ChaucerRiverside, p. 880. But this French version, assuming it has been correctly identified, itself derives from Petrarch.

[31] DecameronMusaBondanella, p. 161.

[32] James Sledd, "*The Clerk's Tale:* The Monsters and the Critics," Wagenknecht, p. 229; compare ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1080, who calls it "a moralized version of a very old folk-story about the mating of a mortal woman with an immortal lover whose actions are controlled by forces entirely incomprehensible to her human mind."

[33] Robert P. Miller, "Allegory in the Canterbury Tales," Rowland, p. 337.

[34] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, p. 189.

[35] Hoy/Stevens, p. 52.

[36] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1081.

more extreme than in his sources?[37] On its face, "we are asked... to tolerate an intolerable tyrant, and to admire a dolt."[38] Why? What does *Chaucer* see in the tale of Griselda?

The answer is probably found in the way Walter and Griselda came to be married. Walter, when he wed Griselda, had asked her to be a loyal wife:

> "I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
> To al my lust, and that I frely may,
> As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
> And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
> And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'
> Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
> Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance."[39]

In other words, Walter calls on her to obey him absolutely, not just in deed but in word and appearance. What is her response?

> But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.
> And heere I swere that nevere willyngly
> In werk ne thought, I nyl yow disobeye...."[40]

In other words, he has asked of her an extreme vow — and she gives an even stronger vow than is asked of her. She gives *trouthe* to the extreme.

Much of the problem here, I think, come about because Griselda is Walter's wife. In Chaucer's time, men expected to lord it over their wives, so Walter was considered to have the right to be abominable to Griselda. Critics think the tale is about the marriage. But it isn't. We can only understand it if we realize it is about the vow.

The vow is not Chaucer's invention; it is in Petrarch, his probable source, where Griselda says "I know myself unworthy, my lord, of so great an honor [as to marry the ruler of the land]; but if it be your will, and if it be my destiny, I will never consciously cherish a thought, much less do anything, which might be contrary to your desires; nor will you do anything, even though you bid me to die, which I shall bear ill."[41]

In her sufferings, Griselda offered a mantra that maintains her *trouthe:*

> "I have," quod she, "said thus, and evere shal:

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[37] James Sledd, "*The Clerk's Tale:* The Monsters and the Critics," Wagenknecht, p. 231.

[38] James Sledd, "*The Clerk's Tale:* The Monsters and the Critics," Wagenknecht, p. 232.

[39] "I say this: are you ready, with good heart, To [obey] all my desire, and whatever I freely choose, As I think best, whether it causes you laughter or hurt, And never to begrudge it, night or day? And also, when I say 'yes,' you do not say 'no,' either by word or frowning countenance? Swear this, and here I swear our alliance." *The Clerk's Tale,* lines 351-357.

[40] "But as you yourself will/wish, just so will I, And here I swear that never willingly, *in work or thought,* will I disobey you." *The Clerk's Tale,* lines 361-363. Italics added; it is vital to realize that she won't even *think* of questioning.

[41] Miller, p. 143.

I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certayn,
But as yow list."[42]

Her next sentence accepts the killing of her two children because it is his command: "I have noght had no part of children tweyne."[43]

It is sometimes said that Griselda's actions parallel the submission of a good Christian to God — indeed, this was Petrarch's justification.[44] She is casting herself as a second Job (a comparison also made by the Clerk himself).[45] But even if we ignore the fact that this perverts scripture,[46] surely the logical flaw here is obvious. God is, in Christian doctrine, assumed to be the fountainhead of good; momentary trials are endured in hopes of earning, or becoming capable of receiving, a reward. But neither we nor Griselda have any reason to think Walter is such a source of good. "[T]he woman Griselda, unlike the man Job, never curses Walter, for to do so would be to give up the integrity for and through which she lives."[47]

What does it say that Chaucer, like Boccaccio but unlike Petrarch, "is critical of Walter's 'tyranny,'"[48] yet still tells the tale? Indeed, the *Clerk's Tale* stands closer to its sources than any other romance he uses; why not fix it, as he improved the *Knight's Tale* or the *Wife of Bath's Tale?*

Chaucer knows the situation is dysfunctional. Walter, in wedding Griselda, has asked too much — and Griselda has responded by giving even more than was asked. It is an unstable situation — and the instability quickly reveals itself as Walter goes out of control and Griselda sits there and takes it. Walter, with his request, has violated *trouthe.* Griselda, with her extreme *trouthe,* accepts and accepts and accepts, until the situation is so lopsided that it must be resolved. And it *is* resolved, with the right balance of things restored. All because Griselda kept her *trouthe* even when tested beyond what most of us could endure.

E. Talbot Donaldson had much to say on this topic.[49] I can't quote all of it, but Donaldson contends that Chaucer adopted a "daring plan" to keep Griselda human. "In the first place the virtue he endows her with is not really the traditional patience which often suggests... a kind of monumental passivity, but rather constancy. Unlike patience, which can be ascribed to a dumb animal, constancy demands that its possessor be fully aware of the cost of what he is doing even while he continues to do it." "The value Griselda places upon Walter does not blind her to the many other values of life; but of her own volition she has made constancy to him supreme."

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[42] "'I have,' said she, 'said thus, and always shall: I will nothing, nor omit nothing, certainly, Except as you list." *The Clerk's Tale,* lines 645-647.

[43] "I have never had any part of two children." *The Clerk's Tale,* line 650.

[44] Henry Barrett Hinckley, "The Debate on Marriage in *The Canterbury Tales,"* Wagenknecht, p. 220.

[45] Corsa, p. 151.

[46] Job, in the Bible, involuntarily loses all he has and complains about it vociferously; Griselda voluntarily renounces what is hers and doesn't utter a peep. She may have *thought of herself* as a Job, but she didn't act like one. A much better analogy is to the book of Genesis, and Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac: Abraham is called upon to kill his heir — and he is prepared to do it.

[47] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1083.

[48] PearsallChaucer, p. 109.

[49] ChaucerDonaldson, pp. 1081-1083.

"While Walter remains the visible symbol of the vow Griselda made him, it seems less Walter than the vow itself that Griselda is thinking of." "It is Griselda's perfectly human integrity — her *trouthe* — that she and the reader prize above all."

The Middle Ages had a very different view of Griselda from what we have today. She was praiseworthy, not crazy. Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio: "My object in thus re-writing your tale was not to induce the women of our time to imitate the patience of this wife, which seems to me almost beyond imitation, but to lead my readers to emulate the example of feminine constancy, and to submit themselves to God with the same constancy as did this woman to her husband."[50]

To them, *trouthe* was real. Especially, perhaps, to Geoffrey Chaucer. Fortunately, the rest of what he had to say on the topic was not so unpleasant.

Travelers on Pilgrimage

[50] Miller, p. 138.

The Knight's Tale

The first of the *Canterbury Tales* is also among the longest and most leisurely. As befits a member of the conservative English gentry, it is set, more or less, in the ancient Greece of Theseus, although the characters are all essentially medieval.

Interestingly, there is good reason to think that Chaucer wrote the tale before starting the *Canterbury Tales* in general; he refers to it in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women.*[51]

The tale — which eventually became the basis for *The Two Noble Kinsmen*[52] — is elaborate, but the plot comes down to this: Arcite and Palamon are cousins and blood brothers who have vowed always to love and support each other. When their city of Thebes is overthrown they are captured by Theseus, who imprisons them. While in prison, they both see Emelye, Theseus's sister-in-law. Both eventually manage to gain their freedom — and both try to pay court to Emelye. And to fight over her.

At this point, Theseus intervenes. He orders them to come back in a year with a hundred men each and battle over Emelye — the winner, obviously, gets her. Much is made of their preparations, and the noble warriors they gather, but the point is the fight. Although it is a real contest, the tournament rules are such that men need not die; if someone is seriously wounded, he is removed from the combat — an important point, because it means that Palamon or Arcite could lose the battle and yet live.

Before the fight, each of the primary characters prays. Arcite prays to Mars for victory in the combat;[53] Palamon prays to Venus that he will win Emelye; Emelye prays to Diana to remain free of either but, if she must be wed, to wed the one who truly loves her.

Both Arcite and Palamon fight well and are wounded. After much gore, Palamon suffers the first serious wound; he survives but loses the battle. But Arcite, although the victor in the battle, falls from his horse and is mortally wounded. He has won, but he cannot claim his prize. At the end, he makes peace with Palamon, telling Emelye to marry him and be happy; he will be a good husband.

So all prayers are answered: Arcite was victorious in battle, Palamon wins Emelye, and Emelye wins a good husband. But the fellowship of Arcite and Palamon, which seemed the point of the story at the start, has ended.

The *Knight's Tale* is most likely loosely based on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Teseida delle nozze d'Emelia,*[54] but Chaucer has been unusually free with the source; only about a third of the lines

[51] PearsallChaucer, pp. 151-152, and cf. note 61 below.

[52] Anderson, p. 248.

[53] Corsa, p. 105, writes, "'I moot with strengthe wynne her in the place/ … Thanne help me, lord, tomorwe in my bataille … and do that I … have victorie' (l. 2399-2405). [I.e. 'I must with power win her in this place … so help me, Lord, tomorrow in my battle … and make it so that I have victory.'] By the time his prayer is over it sounds suspiciously as if he wants victory even more than he wants Emily."

[54] ChaucerRiverside, p. 826.

correspond to Boccaccio.[55] What is interesting is that, although Chaucer has dramatically shortened the tale, the *Knight's Tale* is not simply an abridgment. Although much has been cut, much has been added as well — so much that Chaucer is considered to have transformed an epic into a romance.[56] "The crowning modification... is the equalization of Palamon and Arcite."[57] In Boccaccio, Arcita is the hero and Palamone "is a secondary figure, necessary to the plot because he brings about the death of Arcita."[58] Chaucer will have none of that. Although neither Palamon nor Arcite is really characterized, they are given almost exactly equal attention — and equal distinction. "Palamon and Arcite are differentiated in individual scenes, but neither stands out especially from the generality of brave, lovestruck young men."[59] "It seems that Chaucer has deliberately levelled the two, so that the outcome of the story will appear not nobly tragic but bleakly capricious."[60] I would say rather that the changes are such as to make the story require a resolution but not care which way it is resolved — we don't care who wins. The story is about *both* lovers, *and about their relationship.* Chaucer's reference to it in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* speaks of it as "the love of Palamon and Arcite"[61] — in other words, of the relationship they had and allowed to fail. As Charles Muscatine wrote, "the *Knight's Tale* is essentially neither a story, nor a static picture, but a poetic pageant, and that all its materials are organized and contributory to a complex design expressing the nature of the noble life."[62]

Possibly Chaucer was trying, in the *Knight's Tale,* to create something new; the result has been called the "philosophical romance."[63] But if it is to be a study in philosophy, it must partake of philosophical ideas. These ideas largely derive from *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius,[64] but there is more to it. Boethius supplied the philosophy of the ending, but it is Chaucer who supplied the conflict of loyalties.

"Though Boethius was a Christian.... he makes no specific references to Christianity and by avoiding the issue of the life to come places the emphasis of his thought on this world and man's

[55] ChaucerRiverside, p. 827, lists the *Knight's Tale* as having 2249 lines, and Boccaccio's tale as having 9904 lines, but says that "only 700 [lines] correspond, even loosely, to lines in the *Teseida."*

[56] J. Burke Severs, "The Tales of Romance," Rowland, p. 272.

[57] Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale,"* Wagenknecht, p. 68.

[58] J. R. Hulbert, quoted in Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale,"* Wagenknecht, p. 61.

[59] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1065.

[60] PearsallChaucer, pp. 156-157.

[61] *The Legend of Good Women,* line 420 in the "F" text, 408 in the "G" text;

[62] Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale,"* Wagenknecht, p. 69.

[63] ChaucerRiverside, p. 7. Frye, pp. 198-202, attempts a classification of the six parts of a "standard" romance, claiming that the first three parts derive from the form of tragedy, the last three from comedy. Not one of Chaucer's romances fits his schema — and it is noteworthy that Frye has only two brief mentions of Chaucer in his discussion, of the *Man of Law's Tale* on p. 199 and of the *Franklin's Tale* on p. 202. Yet a key element of Frye's second phase (p. 200) is present in the friendship of Palamon and Arcite: "The archetype of erotic innocence is less commonly marriage than the type of 'chaste' love that precedes marriage; the love of brother for sister, or of two boys for each other."

[64] Hoy/Stevens, p. 37; Corsa, p. 96, although she says that the Boethian ideas are "simplified."

deportment in it — precisely what Chaucer does in the *Knight's Tale.* It is this emphasis that makes Boethius's book and Chaucer's tale so strongly stoic: with no promise of reward or punishment man must adjust himself to life on earth as if there were no other."[65] But is this not exactly what Griselda did also? She obeyed Walter not in hope of reward but because it was her *trouthe.*

To Boccaccio, the earlier friendship of the Palamon and Arcite hardly matters. To Chaucer, the friendship of the two men — and its breakdown — is the key to the whole tale.

Palamon and Arcite begin the story as close friends. They have a bond, and that bond brings rules — to put it in Chaucerian terms, they have *trouthe* to each other. By making them equally significant characters, Chaucer makes the *trouthe* equal, and makes it binding both ways. "This conflict is a twofold one: there is the love conflict, but there is also the conflict of loyalty between the two young men; a loyalty of kinship since they were cousins, and a loyalty of friendship as sworn brothers, and also each was 'ybounden as a knyght' to the other."[66]

The first part of the poem shows love — perhaps the "courtly love" that was such a hot topic in the Middle Ages, although Chaucer's attention to "courtly love" has almost certainly been overstated[67] — overthrowing the two blood brothers' pledges to one another. The ending shows that the pledges are stronger than the love. To put it another way, the contest over Emelye violates Palamon's and Arcite's *trouthe.* The whole point of the plot is to restore it.

Admittedly one of the combatants lives and one dies. On the other hand, one is victorious and one is defeated — and, for a knight, reputation is often held to be worth more than life. So who wins the greater prize? It is not clear. What is clear is that *both* suffer for breaking *trouthe.*

Arcite's last words are of love, and yet not really of love, and they include perhaps the most famous in all the *Knight's Tale:*

> What is this world? What asketh men to have?
> Now with his love, now in his colde grave
> Allone, withouten any compaignye.[68]

Even in death, Arcite will be Emelye's servant:

> To yow, my lady, that I love moost,

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[65] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1062.

[66] Hoy/Stevens, p. 36.

[67] Indeed, the whole idea of "courtly love" is almost certainly overstated; "it existed more in song and story, in fantasy, and in conversation than in everyday behavior" (Howard, p. 104). "Every schoolboy knows, or thinks he knows, that in the twelfth century the poets of the south of France 'invented' the idea of romantic love — that is, of the sexual attraction of Man and Woman seen as a powerful imaginative experience — and 'codified' it as 'courtly love'. Fortunately it is now widely realized that 'courtly love,' *amour courtois,* is not a medieval term but one invented by nineteenth-century scholars as a convenient way of referring to a type of experience which seemed to them peculiar to the Middle Ages" (Stevens, p. 29).

[68] "What is this world? What do men ask to have? Now with his love, now in his cold grave, Alone, without any company." *The Knight's Tale,* lines 2777-2779.

But I bequethe the servyce of my goost
To yow aboven every creature....[69]

And when he lists the virtues he wishes still to hold, *trouthe* leads the list:

And Juppiter so wys my soule gye...
That is to seyen, trouthe, honour, knyghtehede,
Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kyndrede,
Fredom, and al that longeth to that art....[70]

Meanwhile, Palamon and Emelye form a true bond of *trouthe:*

For now is Palamon in alle wele,
Lyvynge in blisse, in richesse, and in heele,
And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,
And he hire serveth so gentilly,
That never was there no word hem bitwene
Of jalousie or any oother teene.[71]

It is a happy, hopeful, and *troutheful* ending. It is arguable that it even creates a second and better *trouthe* relationship, for Theseus uses the marriage of Emelye and Palamon to build unity in his realm.[72]

The intricacy of all this is noteworthy. Admittedly Chaucer did not invent this, since it was in his source, but his modifications make it more dramatic. There are many ways the tale could have ended. Palamon could have killed Arcite, or vice versa, or they could have killed each other. Emelye could have fled the city, or married someone else. All of these are resolutions, but they are not *solutions.* A true solution was required to satisfy *trouthe,* and that is what we have. This is important because some of our other romances (notably the *Franklin's Tale)* also require complicated solutions to work. *Trouthe* is hard — but it's worth it.

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[69] "To you, my lady, whom I love most, Now I bequeath the service of my spirit [or, perhaps, "I bequeath only the service of my spirit"], To you above every creature." *The Knight's Tale,* lines 2767-2769.

[70] "And Jupiter so wise my soul guide, That is to say, [to maintain] *trouthe,* honor, knighthood, wisdom, humility, status, and high lineage, Nobility [or Generosity], and all that goes with that state." *The Knight's Tale,* lines 2786, 2789-2791.

[71] "For now is Palamon well in all things, Living in bliss, in wealth, and in health, And Emilye loves him so tenderly, And he serves her so nobly/gently, That there never was a word between them, Of jealousy or any other vexation." *The Knight's Tale,* lines 3101-3106.

[72] Bisson, p. 222 — although she treats this as a domination of Emelye and a cynical move by Theseus rather than a useful result.

It is true that the *Knight's Tale* is followed by the elaborate obscenity that is the *Miller's Tale*, and the *Miller's Tale* subtly takes up and distorts the themes of the *Knight's Tale,*[73] so that it might seem that Chaucer is parodying or even denying the validity of his first tale. But this need not follow. The *Knight's Tale* shows the way an Eternal Triangle works in a world guided by *trouthe;* the *Miller's Tale* shows the world without *trouthe* — and then the *Reeve's Tale* shows things going even more downhill.[74] The Miller parodies the *world* of the Knight, and shows that not everyone is as virtuous as those in the Knight's world — but that is, in a way, the point: Virtue, particularly *this* virtue, makes things better. The *Miller's Tale's* "vulgar and lusty view of 'love' and 'justice' make the Knight's views in retrospect less incredibly idealized, less impossibly sentimentalized."[75]

Love did not triumph, but *trouthe* did, because Palamon and Arcite's betrayal of their blood brotherhood cost one of them his life.

Woodcut of the Knight, from Richard Pynson's 1490 edition of The Canterbury Tales.

[73] ChaucerRiverside, p. 8. ChaucerCawley, p. xxiii, goes so far as to claim that "The courtly Palamon and impetuous Arcite turn up again in homespun guise in the persons of Absolon and Nicholas in the *Miller's Tale,* and Emily, whose ethereal beauty reminds the Palamons of this world of the lily and the rose, has her rustic counterpart in Alisoun, whose physical charms are sensuously conveyed with the help of the sights and sounds of the fruitful countryside in which she lives."

[74] Howard, pp. 415-417.

[75] Corsa, p. 108.

The Wife of Bath's Tale

Of all the Chaucerian romances, the tale of Alisoun makes most urgent a warning that J. Leslie Hotson made about all the Tales: "Now the medieval readers did not understand 'art for art's sake'; they preferred useful stories: stories that taught, that satirized, or that pointed an excellent moral."[76] Although the tale of the Loathly Lady makes a point that the Wife of Bath wanted to make within the context of the Canterbury pilgrimage, *it must also make a point that Chaucer wanted to make.* Of course, Chaucer's point may not be the Wife's own point.

It is noteworthy that Chaucer has changed the Wife's tale from the usual versions of the Loathly Lady. We must be cautious in our speculations here, because the *Wife of Bath's Tale* was obviously in existence by 1400, and there is no attested English version of the tale that can be shown to be older.[77] Still, the other versions differ significantly from Chaucer's. The idea of the "loathly spouse" is common in folktale even today, as in the tales of "The Frog Prince" and "Beauty and the Beast."[78] English versions in which the woman is the ugly one seem to be less common. There are two major analogs,[79] the Tale of Florent in Gower's *Confessio Amantis,*[80] which is obviously contemporary with Chaucer, and the romance of *Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnall.*

Gower's version, found in book one of the *Confessio,* begins with line 1407.[81] A tale of the elite for the elite,[82] we can quickly summarize it and move on. The main character, Florent, is "nephew to the emperor,"[83] who "rod the Marches al aboute."[84] "Florent has to answer the [question 'What do women want?'[85]] because he has killed someone in battle. His 'loathly lady' gives him the answer 'all women most dearly desire to be sovereign in man's love.'[86] In the marriage bed, the usual question 'fair by day and foul by night or vice versa' is posed. Florent lets the 'loathly

[76] J. Leslie Hotson, "Colfox *vs.* Chauntecleer," Wagenknecht, p. 99.

[77] Loathly Ladies are older, to be sure — e.g. there is one in Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte del Graal (Percival)* (LoomisGrail, pp. 39-40, 50, etc.), which Chaucer might have known although he surely didn't use much. They are found even earlier in Celtic legend, which he pretty clearly did not know.

[78] Zipes, p. 47.

[79] J. A. Burrow, "The *Canterbury Tales* I: Romance," Boitani/Mann, p. 111 n.1. This cites three parallels to the Wife's tale, Gower's, the *Ragnall*, and the ballad romance "The Marriage of Sir Gawain," which is Child, volume I, #31, pp. 288-293, which will be alluded to below. But this piece is in the Percy Folio, which is at least two centuries later than Chaucer, and there is good reason to think several of its pieces are recreated from earlier romances (Waltz, p. 43). In any case, much of the text of the "Marriage" has been lost and can be understood only by reference to the other versions of the tale.

[80] ChaucerRiverside, p. 872.

[81] GowerPeck, p. 58.

[82] Nicolaisen, p. 72.

[83] GowerTiller, p. 70.

[84] "rode the Marches/boundaries all about." *Confessio*, line 1417; GowerPeck, p. 58.

[85] The actual wording of the question is "What alle wommen most desire"; *Confessio,* line 1480; GowerPeck, p. 60.

[86] "That alle wommen lievest wolde Be soverein of mannes love"; *Confessio,* lines 1608-1609; GowerPeck, p. 64.

lady' have her own way and she turns out to be beautiful[87] and the daughter of the King of Sicily.[88] Gower's version, about as long as Chaucer's, is painfully verbose and wandering."[89]

Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnall, found in a single poorly-written sixteenth century manuscript[90] but thought to have been composed around 1450,[91] is altogether more interesting — although sadly incomplete in the only manuscript copy.[92] Here the hero is Sir Gawain, but it is not *his* fault that he is yoked to the Loathly Lady. "In tyme of Arthoure thys adventure betyd."[93] Arthur, hunting, is taken prisoner by one Gromer Somer Joure,[94] who insists that Arthur has wronged him. A terrified Arthur declares,

> "Now," sayd the Kyng, "so God me save,
> Save my lyfe, and whate thou most crave,
> I shalle now graunt itt the...."[95]

Sir Gromer puts a demand: Arthur must return in a year, and "shewe me att thy comyng whate wemen love best in feld and town"[96] — in other words, Arthur must answer, "What do women want?" But he does not know the answer, and after spending most of the year searching, he cannot find anyone to tell him. Finally he meets a woman who will give him the answer, but she is "the fowlyst Lady That evere I saw"[97] — and she demands a condition:

> She sayd to me my lyfe she wold save —
> But fyrst she wold the to husbond have.[98]

In other words, the Loathly Lady will answer Sir Gromer's riddle, but her condition is that she be allowed to marry Sir Gawain, the most courteous knight in Arthur's court. Arthur goes to Gawain, and though he says he hates to ask, he clearly hopes Gawain will consent.

> "Ys this alle?" then sayd Gawen;
> "I shalle wed her and wed her agayn,
> Thowghe she were a fend;

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[87] "Of eyhtetiene wynter age, Which was of the faireste of visage That evere in al this world he syh" — "Eighteen years old, She had the fairest visage That ever in all this world he had seen." *Confessio,* lines 1803-1805; GowerPeck, p. 69.

[88] "The kinges dowhter of Cizile"; *Confessio,* line 1841; GowerPeck, p. 70.

[89] Sands, p. 324.

[90] MS. Oxford, Bodleian 11951, or Rawlinson C.86; Hahn, pp. 44-45.

[91] Sands, p. 325.

[92] It is likely that a page of about 70 lines is missing; Sands, pp. 325, 341.

[93] "In Arthur's time this adventure took place." Line 4 in Hahn's edition (p. 47); all references below are also to this edition.

[94] line 62.

[95] "'Now,' said the king, 'so God me save, Save my life, and what you most crave, I shall now grant it to you." Lines 79-81. Sands, p. 328, reads the first line differently: "Now said the king, 'So God me save.'"

[96] "Show me at your coming what women love best in field and town." Line 91; there are variants of the question in lines 406 and 485.

[97] "the foulest/ugliest Lady That ever I saw." Lines 336-337.

[98] "She said to me she would save my life, But first she would have you for her husband." Lines 338-339.

Thowghe she were as foulle as Belsabub,
Her shalle I wed, by the Rood,
Or elles were nott I your frende."[99]

Arthur has displayed no honor, but Gawain gives his *trouthe* to Arthur, and so gives it also (in a different form, obviously) to the Loathly Lady. Arthur hurries back to fetch her, and once she has been given the promise, she answers Sir Gromer's riddle:

"But there is one thyng is all our fantasye,
And that nowe shall ye know.
We desyren of men above alle maner thyng
To have the sovereynté, withoute lesyng."[100]

So Arthur is able to go to Sir Gromer and gain his release (learning in the process that the Loathly Lady, Dame Ragnall, is Sir Gromer's sister[101]), but Gawain is still on the hook. Arthur goes to fetch Dame Ragnall — and is told that she will wed Gawain openly;[102] the world will see both her and him. When Ragnall appears, Guinivere weeps for Gawain,[103] so hideous is his bride. But "Ther Sir Gawen to her his trowthe plyghte, In welle and in woo, as he was a true knyght."[104]

The wedding is held, and they proceed to the wedding feast, where the lady eats as much as any six men, and shows poor table manners as well.[105] Finally they reach the wedding night, and she challenges him, "for Arthour's sake kysse me att the leste."[106] He declares he will do his husbandly duty — and turns around and beholds "the fayrest creature That evere he sawe."[107] In his amazement, he asks "Whate ar ye?"[108] He is assured that she is his wife — but

"My beawty woll nott hold —
Wheder ye wolle have me fayre on nyghtes
And as foulle on days to alle men sightes,
Or els to have me fayre on days
And on nyghtes on the fowlyst wyfe —

[99] "'Is this all?' then said Gawain. "I shall we her, and wed her again, Though she were a fiend. Though she were as foul as Beezlebub, Her shall I wed, by the Cross, Or else I were not your friend." Lines 342-347.
[100] "But there is one thing [that] is all our fantasy/desire, And that you now shall know. We desire of men above everything else To have the sovereignty/mastery, without trickery/hesitation." Lines 420-423.
[101] Line 475.
[102] Lines 506-509.
[103] Line 544.
[104] "There Sir Gawain to her plighted his troth, In well and in woe, as he was a true knight." Lines 539-540.
[105] Lines 602-605.
[106] "For Arthur's case at least kiss me." Line 635.
[107] "The fairest creature That ever he saw." Lines 641-642.
[108] "What are you?" Line 644.

The one ye must nedes have.
Chese the one or the oder."[109]

Gawain, not liking either of the choices, finally declares, "The choyse I putt in your fyst."[110] And, because he has given the choice to her, "For now I am worshyppyd, Thou shalle have me fayre bothe day and nyghte."[111] She explains that she had been bewitched, but that his respect for her has freed her of the enchantment. The romance goes on for another hundred and fifty lines, but it all boils down to the fact that Gawain and Dame Ragnall are very happy although she does not live long.

It is a powerful and effective story, strong enough that it still survived, in a shortened but very similar form, in the seventeenth century ballad-like piece "The Marriage of Sir Gawain."[112] Chaucer probably knew the Ragnall version in some form or other. But this is not the tale he told.[113]

Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* is formally an Arthurian tale, but it dispenses with most of the Arthurian paraphernalia — which tells us something about Chaucer and romantic love, since by his time Arthur's court was regarded as "the fountainhead of true loving."[114] Chaucer's move away from an Arthurian setting may be another of his moves away from love themes. The *Wife's* story actually has less characterization than the *Ragnall;*[115] it opens with a rape — by a knight whose name we never learn![116] — who is therefore forced to abide the judgment of women and

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[109] "My beauty will not hold. Whether you will have me fair at night, And as foul during the day to all men's sights, Or else to have me fair during the days, And at night to be the foulest wife — One of these you must have. Choose the one or the other." Lines 658-664.

[110] "The choice I put in your hand." Line 678.

[111] "For now that I am worshipped [properly honoured], You will have me fair both day and night." Lines 687-688.

[112] Waltz, p. 50; Child, volume I, #31, pp. 288-293.

[113] There is disagreement about which version of the tale is oldest, Gower's, Chaucer's, or the *Ragnall.* I incline to believe it is the *Ragnall,* even though the only copy is relatively recent. This is because of the way the versions open. In the *Ragnall,* the action starts with a villain (Arthur) who gets in trouble, but the adventure is transferred to an innocent man (Gawain). Both Gower's and Chaucer's versions simplify this opening and give us only one character. Gower has eliminated the guilty character and placed the adventure on the head of the innocent Florent. Chaucer has eliminated the innocent character and placed the adventure on the guilty Sir Rapist. Both these changes simplify the plot, making them likely to be secondary. The argument which follows proceeds on this basis, but it isn't really dependent on this reconstruction.

[114] Stevens, p. 55. Note that Chaucer avoids Arthurian themes almost completely in his known works, even though this was the time when Arthurian romances were rampant.

[115] Sands, p. 323.

[116] "Chaucer's male lead is a rapist… and the Wife underscores this point brilliantly by refusing to describe him. In conventional romance a knight is loaded down with epithets, especially when he first appears.... In contrast, Alison's rapist knight is first described, appropriately, as a 'lusty bacheler' (3.883), and thereafter simply as 'this knyght' (3.891, 913, 983, 1030, 1098, 1228) or 'the knyght' (3.900, 1000, 1013, 1032, 1047, 1050, 1083, 1250). There is no male lead in any other romance known to me who is so unadorned with epithets; the absence of comment is the most effective insult possible" (Nicolaisen, p. 74).

made to find out what women want.[117] Like Arthur in *Ragnall,* Sir Rapist meets a Loathly Lady who can give him the answer — but in return will require him to marry her. He agrees. At the appropriate time she shows up looking beautiful — but, as in the analogs, demands he decide a question about her beauty. When he gives the choice to her, she becomes beautiful all the time, as in the other versions of the tale.

Chaucer obviously has given us a tale that is neither like Gower's nor like *Ragnall's.* Some of the changes are minor; "in all the English versions except Chaucer's, the loathly lady is described at some length,"[118] but Chaucer is content to keep things short.[119] Unlike *Ragnall* but like Gower, in the Wife's tale there is no Gawain taking on another's burden; the male main character is himself guilty of a fault which he must redeem. This is utterly unlike Gawain in the *Ragnall,* who in a very Christian way undertakes to redeem *Arthur's* fault.

Chaucer's version makes the question "What do women want?" far more relevant than in the other versions. In Gower, the question has no relevance at all; it's just a random demand on poor Florent. In *Ragnall,* although the question isn't directly relevant, there is a reason Sir Gromer asks it; he wants his sister to make a good marriage — which means he wants her to marry a man who can understand her. But in Chaucer, the question has real importance, because Sir Noname has shown, by raping his victim, that he has no respect for or understanding of women's feelings.

But the key change Chaucer made is not in the setting — it is barely possible that the association of the Loathly Lady with Gawain was made after his time. Instead, Chaucer changes the Loathly Lady's question to the knight. Most often, as in *Ragnall,* the Loathly Lady offers her new husband the choice "fair by day and foul by night," or the reverse. In the Wife's tale, the choice is "fair and faithless or foul and faithful":[120]

> To han me foul and old til that I deye,
> And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
> And nevere you displee in al my lyf,
> Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,

[117] Nicolaisen, p. 73, notes the strong contrast this makes to Gower. In Gower, Florent is an innocent man entrapped by a woman. Chaucer reverses that. "Alison's knight protagonist, unlike the worthies in the two analogues, has no virtue. Neither a warrior [as in Gower] nor a faithful servant [as in *Ragnall],* he is rather a rapist spared execution by Arthur solely through the intervention of Guenever and her court of ladies. (This is an exact role reversal of the power relations in *Florent,* where the faultless knight is unfairly tried by a criminal woman.)"

[118] LindahlEtAl, p. 246.

[119] Corsa, p. 144, and others think that the Wife is projecting herself into the Loathly Lady here — as the Lady becomes beautiful and young, the Wife wishes to recapture her youth. This is not unreasonable, since the lady is described as aged, but neither is it necessary; there is no imperative that the Loathly Lady be old, merely that she be physically undesirable. And Corsa, p. 148, admits that Alisoun does not try to use the Loathly Lady's tale to win personal sympathy for the Wife's own plight. In the reverse versions — "Beauty and the Beast" and the like — the Loathly Husband isn't shown as old; he's undesirable for other reasons. Chaucer deals with old husbands in the *Miller's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale* and elsewhere; these are not romances — and the Merchant *does* seek his audience's sympathy as the Wife does not.

[120] LindahlEtAl, p. 246.

And take youre aventure of the repair,
That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
Or in som oother place, may well be.[121]

Chaucer's Loathly Lady is actually a less complete character than Ragnall, who is if nothing else both logical and full of spunk — but Chaucer's lady, and *only* Chaucer's lady, asks a question which involves *trouthe.* Gower's version has little of *trouthe; Ragnall* involves Gawain's *trouthe* to Arthur, which is fine motivation enough — but in Chaucer we have marital *trouthe* as well. The knight has offered *trouthe* to the Loathly Lady, but only because he was forced to — now she *asks* him if he wants *her* to have *trouthe* to *him.* He does not choose, but he does give her the option. And so, when *both parties* have *trouthe,* we get the happy ending that she becomes beautiful all the time.

After the lady is transformed, we are told,
she obeyed hym in every thyng
That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.[122]

In other words, now that he has served her, she serves him. Some have accused Chaucer (or the Wife, or *somebody)* of wanting to have it both ways here — having made him serve her, she now takes on the standard medieval role of wifely subservience.[123] This ignores the fact that service can and does go both ways — as any good student of the Bible would know, for Jesus said that "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your servant."[124]. Sir Noname and the Formerly Loathly Lady are servants of each other, which — as the *Franklin's Tale* will show us — is the truest of *trouthe.*

So, for Chaucer, *trouthe* has conquered.

It is perhaps particularly touching that the Wife tells this tale, because — even though she has been married five times — she has never really had a *trouthe* relationship. Her first three husbands were old men she took advantage of (but did not enjoy particularly); her fourth marriage "was little more than nominal," and while she enjoyed her fifth, she had to offer up all the property gained from earlier pairings[125] — and suffered from him the blow that left her deaf in one ear. She is now seeking a sixth husband[126] — and, one suspects, is now at last looking for a marriage based on mutual respect.

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[121] "To have me foul and old till that I die, And be to you a true, humble wife, And never displease you in all my life [manner of living]. Or else will you have me be young and fair, And take your adventure [risk, chance] of th[ose who] repair, Who will come to your house because of me — Or, it may be, in some other place." Lines 1220-1226.
[122] "She obeyed him in every thing That might have done him pleasure or delight"; Line 1255-1256.
[123] Howard, p. 435.
[124] Matthew 20:26-27.
[125] Charles A. Owen, Jr, "The Crucial Passages in Five of the *Canterbury Tales:* A Study in Irony and Symbol," Wagenknecht, pp. 261-262.
[126] Henry Barrett Hinckley, "The Debate on Marriage in *The Canterbury Tales,"* Wagenknecht, pp. 218-219.

There is more to her tale. Sir Noname, having been stuck marrying Loathly Lady, makes it clear on their wedding night that he doesn't want to go near his new bride. And says so, as if her looks are her fault and as if he, despite being a rapist, is somehow superior to her. "She replies that a true gentleman honours goodness, not rank and family; honours the poor, not just the well-to-do; and honours the old and reverences them."[127] In other words, "handsome is as handsome does." *Trouthe,* not beauty, is the true measure of a person.

In a period when the Church was dominated by men, and society ruled by men, the Wife's attitude that women should have dominance over men was so profoundly shocking that, in the opinion of the time, "The woman was an heresiarch, or at best a schismatic."[128] This is true, in a way,[129] and her bold assertions, and the way the other pilgrims respond to them, leads to a suggestion that the *Wife's Tale* opens a "Marriage Group" of tales, in which Chaucer starts a discussion of the meaning of marriage, with the Alisoun opening the discussion and the *Clerk's Tale* of Griselda and the *Merchant's Tale* responding.

To a certain extent, this depends on the order of the fragments of the *Tales,* for the *Wife's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale* are in different fragments. If the *Clerk's Tale* was intended to precede the Wife's, the argument fails.[130] Still, the state of the manuscripts make it seem highly likely that the Clerk was answering the Wife. Although he was not given the last word; in the view of Kittredge, who originally proposed the "Marriage Group," *The Franklin's Tale* is the the final word.[131]

Whether Kittredge is right about the Marriage Group or not, there clearly is some interplay among the pilgrims on this topic, since the Wife wants women to have "sovereignty," and the Clerk soon discusses that very concept:[132]

> Boweth your nekke under that blisful yok

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[127] Stevens, p. 59.

[128] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, p. 193.

[129] It is true in the sense that medieval society saw social order and church order as one, so to subvert the former was to attack the latter. But the Wife wasn't the only one to subvert church order in Chaucer, although she did so most explicitly; it has been argued that the Miller, by asserting his own right to interpret the Bible, was equally guilty; Bisson, pp. 162-163.

[130] To be sure, all significant extant manuscripts of the *Tales* have the Wife's Tale before the Clerk's; ChaucerRiverside, p. 1121. But the *Wife's Tale* is in Fragment III and the Clerk's in Fragment IV, so it is possible that Chaucer meant, or at least considered, putting the *Clerk's Tale* earlier. Another interesting order is found in the "group b" manuscripts which include Caxton's first edition of the *Tales,* for in this edition the *Merchant's Tale* of January and May immediately precedes the *Wife of Bath's Tale* (this order is Prologue-Knight-Miller-Reeve-Man of Law-Squire-Merchant-Wife-Friar-Summoner-Clerk-Franklin). There is some sense in this, for the Wife and the Merchant take very different views of May/December (or May/January) romance. But there is no sign in the tale, or the Wife's Prologue, that she is responding to the Merchant — if anything, he responds to her.

[131] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, pp. 208-209.

[132] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, p. 197.

Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse,
Which that men clepeth spousialle or wedlock.[133]

The Wife's demand for "sovereignty" has another significance. Even if she wants to be boss in relationship, her version of marital relations is probably more equal than that of most men in the Middle Ages. And, as we saw in the *Knight's Tale,* equality increases the power and significance of *trouthe.*

Debates over fidelity and related topics were nothing new in the Middle Ages. The poem *The Flower and the Leaf,* once attributed to Chaucer, is typical: It involves a contrast of the followers of the flower — flirtatious but short-lasting — with the faithful and enduring leaf.[134] Chaucer himself used this motif in the portrait of the daisy in the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women.*[135]

But the bottom line is this: Chaucer has taken a tale that, all along, was about women's sovereignty — a tale which existed before the Wife of Bath and her supposed heresy — and made it *also* a tale of *trouthe.* And one in which *trouthe* triumphs.

[133] "Bow your neck under that blissful yoke Of sovereignty/mastery, nought of service, Which men call espousal [marriage] or wedlock." *The Clerk's Tale,* lines 113-115.
[134] PearsallFlower, pp. 1-2.
[135] LindahlEtAl, p. 72; ChaucerStone, p. 153.

The Franklin's Tale

If the *Wife of Bath's Tale* offers a challenge to the established order regarding marriage and sovereignty, it is *The Franklin's Tale* which offers the last word. This is the tale where *trouthe* is the absolute key. It is noteworthy that, in this tale, even marriage is treated in part as a friendship[136] — meaning that it contains many sorts of *trouthe,* not merely fidelity.

And yet, the ending isn't really happy. Everyone in it has been tested, sternly, and all come out honorably — but they don't get what they want.

As with the other Chaucerian romances, the tale predates Chaucer himself — the tale is somewhat similar to elements of Boccaccio's *Filocolo* although the parallel is not very close.[137] The motivating element of the "rash promise" is a very common one in folklore, although the case in the *Franklin's Tale* is not very close to some of the frequently-cited (alleged) parallels.[138]

If the *Clerk's Tale* is a story of one woman's *trouthe,* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is of two people's *trouthe,* the *Franklin's Tale* involves *three* cases[139] — arguably four. The Franklin begins by announcing that

> Thise olde gentl Britouns in hir dayes
> Of diverse aventures maden layes,
> Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tongue....[140]

In other words, the tale will be a "Breton Lay," meaning a (probably musical) metrical romance in the style of the romances of Brittany, not Britain — although in fact none have survived in Breton;[141] the Breton Lays known to us are all French or English. English or not, they represent

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[136] Henry Barrett Hinckley, "The Debate on Marriage in *The Canterbury Tales,*" Wagenknecht, p. 225.

[137] ChaucerRiverside, p. 895. A small amount of the change may be due to the fact that the *Filocolo,* unlike most of Boccaccio's work, is in prose; DecameronMusaBondanella, p. 155. It has been claimed that Boccaccio based his work on *Floire et Blanceflor* (DecameronMusaBondanella, p. 156), but of this tale as it exists in English (as *Floris and Blanchefleur)* there is no trace at all in *The Franklin's Tale* — and no hint that Chaucer knew it, because, like *Sir Orfeo* mentioned below, it is a good enough tale that he might well have borrowed it had he known it.

[138] E.g. ChaucerRiverside, p. 895, cites the Middle English romance of *Sir Orfeo.* In the *Franklin's Tale,* however, the rash promise comes early and provides the justification for the tale. In *Sir Orfeo,* by contrast, the rash promise comes almost at the end, and supplies not the motivation but the "eucatastrophe" which produces the happy ending: the king of Faërie, having heard Orfeo play the harp, promises him any reward he wishes, and Orfeo wishes for Heurodis's freedom; Waltz, pp. 23-24. The real similarity to *Sir Orfeo* lies not in the fact that the *Franklin's Tale* is about a rash promise but in the fact that both are Breton Lays — and are pretty definitely the two best English examples of the genre.

[139] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, p. 210: "[The Franklin] takes delicate vengeance on the Host by telling a tale which thrice exemplifies *gentilesse* — on the part of a knight, a squire, and a clerk." Kittredge (p. 209) has already argued that the Franklin, who aspires to be of the gentry, values the gentle trait of *gentilesse* — but the real discussion is of *trouthe.*

[140] "These old noble Bretons in their days, Of diverse adventures [events] made lays, Rhymed in their first Breton tongue." *The Franklin's Prologue,* lines 709-711.

[141] MarieHanningFerrante, p. 3.

an important influence on Chaucer, since the romances, of which the Breton Lays were in many ways the best example, seem to have been the only substantial English literary sources Chaucer would have had before him[142] — if he had any English inspiration, they were it. Chaucer's own description of the type is brief, but we have a much fuller Middle English definition of the Breton Lays, which like Chaucer's description comes itself from one of the lays:

> We redyn ofte and fynde ywryte,
> As clerkes don us to wyte,
> The layes that ben of harpyng
> Ben yfounde of frely thing.
> Sum ben of wele, and sum of wo,
> And sum of ioy and merthe also;
> Sum of trechery, and sum of gyle,
> And sum of happes þat fallen by whyle;
> Sum of bourdys, and sum of rybaudry,
> And sum þer ben of the feyré.
> Of alle þing þat men may se,
> Moost *o* lo*u*e forsoþe þey be.
> In Brytayn þis layes arne ywryte,
> Furst yfounde and forþe ygete,
> Of aventures þat fillen by dayes,
> Wherof Brytouns made her layes.[143]

The above doesn't really tell us much — in essence, it says that the Breton Lays are simply romances. But they tended to be a particular *kind* of romance: "[T]he lays strove for many of the same effects as the modern short story. In length they had to be brief enough to be heard through on a single occasion.... In subject, though here the maker had a wide variety of lore to draw upon, they had to center upon some single character who must be brought through a series of critical situations to a happy end. In treatment they had to be dramatic."[144] Their brevity is shown by the tales of Marie de France, who created the earliest surviving Breton Lays; the longest of them has only 1184 lines and the shortest a tenth that.[145] Marie's tales are rather unlike the standard

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[142] David Wallace, "Chaucer's Continental inheritance: the early poems and *Troilus and Criseyde,*" Boitani/Mann, p. 20.

[143] "We often read, and find written — as scribes know so well — that songs played with the harp are based on marvelous things. Some tell of war, and some of woe; some tell of joy and mirth. Some tell of treachery, and some of guile; some of things that happened long ago. Some tell of bawdry and of ribaldry — and some are about Faërie. But of all the things that men may see, the most of them are about love. In Britain these songs are written — they were first found there and then sent forth. Tales of things in bygone days — of them the British made their lays." Translation from Waltz, p. 18. The text is from, Sisam, p. 14, where it represents the first 16 lines of *Sir Orfeo.* The same words appear in the *Lay le Freine,* and are omitted in the earliest and best manuscript of *Orfeo* (which is, to be sure, defective at that very point); Sands, p. 185. The relationship between *Orfeo* and *le Freine* is very vexed — but need not detain us; our point is that this is one popular poet's definition of a Breton Lay.

[144] Rumble, p. vii.

[145] MarieHanningFerrante, p. 1.

romance in another way: they deal heavily with relationships. "[T]he characteristic of Marie's view of love seems to be an almost invariable association with suffering."[146] The *Lays* do not, like many romances, tell primarily of adventures; they deal with the problems of lovers and friends.[147] Which, of course, is the subject of the *Franklin's Tale,* which makes me wonder if that might not be what Chaucer meant by a Breton Lay.[148]

There are only eight Breton Lays extant in Middle English,[149] summarized below:[150]

Lay	Extant MS. Copies	Format	# of Lines	Source
The Franklin's Tale	(dozens)	10-syllable couplets	895	
Emaré	1	12-line tail rhyme	1035	
The Erle of Tolous	4	modified tail rhyme	1224?	
Lay le Freine	1	8-syllable couplets	408?	Translation of Marie
Sir Degaré	6 + 3 print editions	8-syllable couplets	997?	
Sir Gowther	2	12-line tail rhyme	750?	
Sir Launfal	1	12-line tail rhyme	1044	*Sir Landevale*
Sir Orfeo	3	8-syllable couplets	604?	

Thus in length the *Franklin's Tale* is not atypical of the English Breton Lays — but in approach it is quite different, in part because it is in decasyllabic couplets (all the others are either in

[146] MarieBurgessBusby, p. 28.

[147] See the list of examples in MarieHanningFerrante, pp. 11-19.

[148] It has been speculated that the only Breton Lay Chaucer had seen was *Sir Orfeo,* and that he based his understanding of the genre on its preface; BennettGray, p. 141; MarieHanningFerrante, p. 24. However, Marie de France said something very similar to Chaucer's description in *Guigemar* (lines 19-20; MarieHanningFerrante, p. 30), and while Chaucer does not seem to have known Marie, he could have derived the phrasing from one of her followers or simply made it up himself. There is no clear sign that Chaucer knew *Sir Orfeo* — and it's a good enough story, told well enough, that he might well have used it had he known it. It is true that Chaucer mentions Orpheus in *The House of Fame* and elsewhere — but that could just as well be from Ovid and Boethius, which are, after all, the main medieval sources for the Orpheus legend. Also, *Sir Orfeo* is in octosyllabic couplets, a form Chaucer used early on but later abandoned almost entirely for the his own seeming invention, the decasyllabic couplet (Bennett, pp. 64, 87); would he have abandoned octosyllables so completely had he had a positive example like *Sir Orfeo* before him? It is *not* a trivial change; speaking as someone used to dealing with octosyllables in the ballads, reading *Sir Orfeo* with proper stresses takes little practice, but reciting *The Franklin's Tale* (which is in decasyllables) is surprisingly hard. Given that Orpheus is mentioned in *The Merchant's Tale* (line 1716), but not in the *Franklin's Tale,* Chaucer's supposed Breton Lay, I have to think the evidence on balance is that Chaucer *didn't* know *Sir Orfeo.* And the one time he mentions Orpheus's wife (*Troilus* IV.791), he calls her "Erudice," not "Heurodis," as in *Sir Orfeo.* Even if Chaucer knew the *Sir Orfeo* introduction, he might have known it from the *Lay le Freine*, which isn't nearly as worthy of borrowing.

[149] So Rumble, who prints them all. *Havelok the Dane* has also been claimed as a Breton Lay, based on an internal mention, but BennettGray, pp 154-155, rejects this with something approaching indignation.

[150] Material from Waltz, pp. 47-63. The statement that the *Lay le Freine* is a translation of Marie means that it is an English version of one of Marie de France's Breton Lays.

octosyllabic couplets or in tail rhyme) but also because there really is no main character — four characters share the stage almost equally.

The tale opens with the knight Arveragus courting Dorigen. They agree to wed. Out of respect for her, he agrees that he will not exercise sovereignty over her (although she will make a show of respect for him in public):[151]

> Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght
> That nevere in al his lyf he, 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.[152]

But then, like many other knights trying to build a reputation, he leaves Brittany for England to win fame.

In his absence, a squire named Aurelius courts Dorigen. She has no interest in him, and is truly devoted to Arveragus, but rather than simply bid Aurelius go away, she offers a deal: If he can remove all the rocks on the coast of Brittany (which make it dangerous for Arveragus to return home), she will grant him her love. The task seems impossible, but so strong is Aurelius's desire that he sets out to find someone who can do it — and finds a Clerk of Orleans who is strong enough in magic to perform the feat for a few weeks. Aurelius offers him a thousand pounds[153] if he can pull off the feat.[154]

By now Arveragus is safely home — and Aurelius, helped by his clerk, makes the rocks vanish and comes to claim his prize. Dorigen, desperate,[155] explains the situation to Arveragus.

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[151] It should be noted that this is a very revolutionary idea: "Chaucer explores the 'trouthe' that is uncovered when a wife gains the unconstrained choice that makes her something more than a rose in a flowering garden, and her husband something more than her gardener" (David Raybin, quoted in Bisson, p. 232).

[152] "Of his free will he swore to her as a knight, That never in all his life, day or night, Would he ever take upon him any mastery, Against her will, nor show her any jealousy, But her obey, and follow her will in all." Lines 745–749.

[153] To put this amount in perspective, at this time, a yearly income of forty pounds made one a knight; an earl was expected to bring in about six hundred pounds a year. So a payment of a thousand pounds was a lifetime's income for a member of the upper middle class, or a generation's income for a member of the gentry, or a year's income for one of the dozen wealthiest nobles in England. It is probably more than Aurelius has (ChaucerSpearing, p. 34), and surely more than he can really afford. And that's if it's *silver* pounds; in line 1560, he says it is a thousand pounds *of gold,* which is getting up toward the King's own annual revenue.

[154] In Boccaccio's version, the Aurelius character offers half his property. The promises here are both very strong; ChaucerSpearing, p. 28, observes that both Dorigen and Aurelius invoke *trouthe* in making their promises.

[155] Desperate enough, in fact, to consider suicide. ChaucerSpearing, p. 26, suggests that, since the story refers to classical gods, she should have done the proper classical behavior and killed herself. But suicide was a sin to the Catholic Church, so this would have eliminated any possibility of the tale being a lesson to Chaucer's audience.

Although they could perhaps dodge the issue,[156] they face it squarely. A lesser man might conclude that Dorigen had already, in effect, played him false. Arveragus, drawing her out, realizes that she had no desire but to be true to him.[157] But, noble man that he is, declares that she must do as she has promised, for "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe."[158] It is not easy for him — in his long discussion, this statement "is the last line of a speech in which he is desperately trying to rouse his wife from her misery, by not letting her see his own agony of mind. But, as he says it, his agony breaks through, and 'with that word he brast anon to weep.'"[159] Still, *trouthe* is binding. So she goes to Aurelius, and miserably prepares to keep her promise. Aurelius, recognizing Dorigen's love for Arveragus and the couple's nobility, shows his own by releasing her of her promise. He then goes to the clerk and prepares to make his payment. And the Clerk, seeing Aurelius's own nobility, in turn releases Aurelius of his oath.

It is a beautiful ending — "The Franklin's is one of the gentlest, most gracious, smiling tales ever spoken with unhumorous dignity"[160] — but some have argued that it papers over the problem. It's true that a less honorable person could exploit all these generous people — but it also shows the power of *trouthe.* Dorigen made a rash promise, violating her *trouthe* to her husband — and came near to paying a high price. But it is interesting that, when confronted with Aurelius's miracle, she had three choices. She could have ignored her promise. She could have submitted to Aurelius secretly without telling her husband. Or she could tell Arveragus. She chose the difficult thing, but the *troutheful* thing; she told Arveragus. He told her to keep her word — in other words, to fulfill her *trouthe.* And once she agreed to do so, everything fell into place. It is not a happy ending, but it is a *noble* ending — and it all follows because Dorigen finally fulfilled her *trouthe.*

This by itself should pretty well demolish the idea that Chaucer's ideal was standard "courtly love." "The second recurrent motif in tales of romantic love is that of secrecy, privateness. Andreas [Capellanus, author of the textbook *De Amore]* has a 'rule' about this: *Qui non celat, amare non potest* (The man who cannot keep a secret cannot be a lover)."[161] But the whole triumph of the plot comes when Dorigen tells Arveragus the truth.

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[156] ChaucerSpearing, pp. 29-31, argues that the promise she made is not binding, at least without her husband's consent, and under medieval and church law he is correct — her vow to her husband has priority, and the church followed the Bible in saying that a husband had to approve his wife's vows anyway. But this is casuistry; all parties understood the promise as a promise. To make Spearing's claim is to deny Dorigen's moral dilemma — but no matter what she does, she will "know myselven fals" ("know myself false," line 1362) — either to her oath or to her husband.

[157] Corsa, pp. 180-181: "At first reading, the action of Arveragus shocks us, as it has the Franklin. But careful examination reveals that the Franklin respects both Arveragus'[s] belief that she has not been untrue to him in fact, and the pain of his grief. 'Is there oght elles, Dorigen, but this?' he asks, 'with glad chiere, in freendly wyse.' [Is there anything else, Dorigen, apart from this? with glad cheer and friendly visage.] Assured by her 'Nay, nay,' he makes her see that she must keep her part of the bargain."

[158] "*Trouthe* is the highest thing that man may keep." *The Franklin's Tale,* line 1479.

[159] "with that word he burst into tears." ChaucerSpearing, pp. 29-30.

[160] C. Hugh Holman, "Courtly Love in the Merchant's and the Franklin's Tales," Wagenknecht, p. 241.

[161] Stevens, p. 35.

The changes Chaucer has made in this tale are interesting. Many are trivial — among other things, he changed all the names (in Boccaccio, e.g., the Aurelius character is "Tarolfo"[162]). But there are some which appear to have deep significance. In *Il Filocolo* the Dorigen character is trying to play "a trick"[163] to rid herself of Tarolfo, and simply asks for a garden in winter[164] — pretty but not very relevant. In Chaucer, Dorigen instead asks for the rocks of coastal Brittany to be removed — important, because she had worried that Arveragus's ship would hit them and he would be killed. Even in making her rash promise to Aurelius, she is thinking of Arveragus.[165] It is not just a way of getting rid of Aurelius, as in Boccaccio; it is an expression of her love and fear for her husband.[166] But she has tempted the fates, and comes close to paying the price: If Arveragus had been less open-minded, or Aurelius less noble, she would have suffered. As it is, *trouthe* in its sense of nobility or gentleness triumphs.

"[A]s Neville Coghill says, 'how to be happy though married is not [the Tale's] true theme. The true theme is noble behavior.' By noble behavior he means *gentillesse*… but implicit in this idea of *gentillesse* is the concept of *trouthe,* which is another of the Tale's dominant themes emphasized here by Arveragus and Aurelius in showing their final generosity."[167]

Here again we see "philosophical" aspect we observed in *The Knight's Tale:* when Dorigen begs that the rocks be removed, "this apostrophe to God… is very similar to Palamon's questioning of the Almighty in 'the Knight's Tale.'"[168]

Some have questioned the fact that Arveragus, at the beginning of the tale, promises privately to accept Dorigen's will — and then *orders* her to keep her *trouthe,* against her will. I think this misses the point. Had Dorigen known what to do, she would have done it and he would have accepted it. But she is in a dilemma. He insists on what he thinks is right — the keeping of *trouthe* — and by so doing starts in motion the "eucatastrophe" of the tale.

The four romances we have examined show the full power and range of *trouthe* as Chaucer saw it. Griselda showed *trouthe* in her unshakable fidelity to Walter. Dorigen showed it by telling her husband the truth. Palamon and Arcite showed (the failure of) *trouthe* as integrity of the will and of promises made. And the knight of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* showed it by trying to be true to his unwanted wife's needs.

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[162] ChaucerNorton, p. 393.

[163] ChaucerNorton, p. 394.

[164] "The Question of Menedon," Miller, p. 123. Chaucer's deletion of the garden is particularly interesting because love gardens were a common theme in literature of the time, and Chaucer himself had one in *The Merchant's Tale;* ChaucerHussey, pp. 8-13. It is probably in some sense symbolic that Chaucer took the garden from his source and put it in *The Merchant's Tale,* where there is no *trouthe,* rather than in the *Franklin's Tale,* where *trouthe* conquers.

[165] Charles A. Owen, Jr, "The Crucial Passages in Five of the *Canterbury Tales:* A Study in Irony and Symbol," Wagenknecht, pp. 252-253.

[166] Hoy/Stevens, pp. 90-91.

[167] Hoy/Stevens, p. 100.

[168] Hoy/Stevens, p. 90.

"Dorigen lauds Arveragus' *gentilesse* toward her in refusing to insist on soveraynetee in marriage. Aurelius is deeply impressed by the knight's *gentilesse* 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."[169]

The *Franklin's Tale* resembles the *Knight's Tale* in that it is built around a relationship of equals[170] — even if, in this case, the equals are not all of the same sex. The Franklin declares,

> Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye.
> When maistrie comth, the God of Love anon
> Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!
> Love is a thyng as any spirit free....
> Looke who that is moost pacient in love,
> He is at his avantage al above.[171]

Yet we don't find *trouthe* only between Arveragus and Dorigen. The relationship between Aurelius and Dorigen is also about *trouthe*: although he desires her, he also respects her, and so frees her of her promise. Would a lesser man have done that?

"There is just sufficient realism to make the moral solution credible, and the difficult middle road is taken between the purely tragic (which the story so nearly becomes) and the right balance is struck between the worlds of courtly society, Armorik Brittany, commercial Orleans and the land of Faerie."[172]

There are plenty of bad marriages in the *Canterbury Tales.* Both the Host and the Merchant indicate that they have shrewish wives — and the Merchant shows it in his tale.[173] But the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus, despite their little problem, is very happy.[174] And all because it is based on honesty, sharing, respect — and a genuine *trouthe.*

It is hardly coincidence that the *Franklin's Tale* almost certainly follows those of the Clerk, the Merchant, even the Wife of Bath. "One need only pause to contemplate what might have been the effect of another sequence of the tales to rejoice that *The Franklin's Tale* is the last in the manuscript grouping.[175]

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[169] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, p. 210.

[170] J. A. Burrow, "The *Canterbury Tales* I: Romance," Boitani/Mann, p. 118, who notes that this equality is also found in the earliest Breton Lays, those of Marie de France.

[171] "Love will not be constrained by mastery. When mastery comes, the God of Love soon Beats his wings, and farewell, he is gone! This thing called love is, like any spirit, free.... Look who is most patient in love. He has advantage above all others." Lines 764-767, 771-772.

[172] Hoy/Stevens, pp. 100-101.

[173] Henry Barrett Hinckley, "The Debate on Marriage in *The Canterbury Tales,*" Wagenknecht, p. 217.

[174] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, p. 213.

[175] Corsa, p. 181.

"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."[176]

Image of the Franklin, from the margin of the Ellesmere Manuscript of the Canterbury Tales.

[176] George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," Wagenknecht, p. 215.

The Other Romances — And Other Writings

The four pieces studied above aren't in fact the only romances in the *Canterbury Tales.* But they are the only pure and complete romances.

"Medieval romance was, among other things, a great civilizing enterprise."[177] The goal was to teach rules by which society could thrive. Mostly, the idea was to create "'the means to regulate and refine erotic life.'"[178] But how, exactly, should it be regulated?

As we saw in the Introduction, the finished Chaucerian romances aren't typical examples of the form. The one tale Chaucer told that resembles a standard romance is *The Squire's Tale,* and that is unfinished — many have suggested that Chaucer didn't even *intend* to finish it; that the Franklin interrupted it[179] as the Host interrupts the other mock-romance, "Sir Thopas."

A complete romance, but of a different sort, is *The Man of Law's Tale.* This tale — of "Custance," or Constance, a Christian girl twice set adrift by those who hate her simple faith but eventually ending up back where she belongs — is a romance, but it operates on a different level, because faith plays such a large role in it. Belief is both the motivator and the cause of the eventual happy ending. It comes from a chronicle, but has been heavily expanded. And "Chaucer disengaged the story from its chronicle setting but preserved and even intensified the religious elements."[180] Would Chaucer even have thought of this as being of the same genre as the other romances? The *Man of Law's Tale* is about faith, and that certainly isn't the theme of the other romances, which aren't even Christian. And the *Man of Law's Tale* has a happier ending than the *Knight's Tale* or *Franklin's Tale,* where the ending is, in a sense, "Boethian" — propriety is maintained, but not everyone comes out well.

Sir Thopas, which Chaucer presents as his own initial attempt at a tale, is a romance in form — it is the only place where he uses the "tail rhyme" form popular in other romances[181] — but it is also clearly a satire, and it has no ending; the Host interrupts it. It is, perhaps, the clearest revelation that Chaucer wants to improve the romance form. *His* romances will reveal a high

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177 Stevens, p. 50.

178 Stevens, p. 51, quoting Huizinga.

179 ChaucerRiverside, p. 891. Howard, pp. 445-446, suggests that the *Squire's Tale* is another parody romance, with Chaucer deliberately letting the Squire bury his narrative in so much rhetorical excess that the young man cannot make the tale work.

180 Robert Worth Frank Jr., "The *Canterbury Tales* III: Pathos," Boitani/Mann, p. 150.

181 ChaucerRiverside, p. 917. Chaucer uses a six-line reduced tail rhyme, with the rhyme scheme *aabaab;* other romances use a twelve-line form. Of the 89 Middle English romances cataloged in Waltz, pp. 46-62, 36 use tail rhyme or a variation, making it the most popular stanza type. Most of the best romances, however, are in another format (among others, *Sir Orfeo*, *Floris and Blanchefleur, Lay le Freine, Havelok the Dane, Robert of Sicily, Sir Degaré,* and the three Robin Hood romances are in couplets; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in its alliterative/rhymed mix; *The Alliterative Morte Arthur* alliterative and the *Stanzaic Morte* using 8-line stanzas). It is interesting to note that the best parody of a romance, other than *Sir Thopas*, is probably *The Tournament of Tottenham* (for which see Sands, pp. 314-322), which at least intermittently uses tail rhyme. Corsa, p. 20, and others refer to the "jog-trot" sound of Chaucer's stanzas in *Sir Thopas*, a characteristic of tail rhyme.

theme (as does *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight)* and do it well (as in *Sir Orfeo),* not descend into the endless tediousness of (say) *Guy of Warwick.*[182]

When his telling of *Sir Thopas* is halted, Chaucer the pilgrim proceeds to the *Melibee,* a prose tale which is not widely esteemed today but which some have suggested was originally intended to open the *Tales.*[183] This is an intriguing possibility, since the *Melibee,* for all its tedium, is a plea for honesty and self-control and seeking good advice — all essential to *trouthe.* It also stresses that wives can give good advice (the main point of the tale is that Prudence, Melibee's wife, keeps him out of trouble) — a fact which gives *trouthe* direct social value, since a man who distrusts his wife obviously won't listen to her! Which makes it all the more interesting that Chaucer assigns this tale to himself, even if it is his second choice.

The *Physician's Tale,* with its horrid ending of Virginia's father executing his daughter to preserve her virtue, has something of the air of one of the tragic romances — and, yes, there are a number of romances with tragic endings in Middle English.[184] I would not list it as a romance, however; the motivation is too weak. I could argue that it *is* a tale of *trouthe* — or rather, of what happens when justice is so perverted that *trouthe* may no longer apply. For the whole point of the tale is what happens when justice is no longer available.[185] Virginia has two options: immorality or death. Of the two, she obtains the one she prefers. The unjust judge, who has violated his office, does not get what he wants, and is set upon by the crowd. Virginia's victory is small, but I can see how Chaucer might think it a victory. But I would not press this argument; the tale is simply too hard for moderns to understand.

The Pardoner's Tale is no romance, but the tragedy is a failure of *trouthe:* when the revelers have found the gold, their friendship fails as "the first villain begins to play on the mind of the second by appealing to the very qualities of brotherhood and loyalty which bind all three together"[186] — and which he is preparing to betray. Had the three stayed true to their *trouthe,* they would have at minimum survived and possibly even gotten the gold home.

The Wife of Bath isn't the only wife whose story we learn something about: "the Knight — the reluctant husband of a poor, ugly, and aged wife — has the opportunity to transcend stereotypical male thinking about women. Doing so enables both the Knight and his wife to achieve the kind of marriage each seeks."[187]

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[182] *Guy of Warwick A* is 3587 lines of tail rhyme, making it half again as long as *The Knight's Tale;* the interminable *Guy of Warwick B* is 11976 lines; Waltz, pp. 46-47. *Guy of Warwick A* is in fact regarded as one of the pieces Chaucer mocked in creating *Sir Thopas;* ChaucerRiverside, p. 917.

[183] Larry Windeatt, "Literary Structures in Chaucer," Boitani/Mann, pp. 207-208.

[184] Waltz, p. 5; examples include the two distinct versions of the *Morte Arthure* and the *Gest of Robyn Hode.*

[185] Robert Worth Frank Jr., "The *Canterbury Tales* III: Pathos," Boitani/Mann, p. 153.

[186] Hoy/Stevens, p. 126.

[187] Bisson, p. 240.

Troilus and Criseyde, although not part of the *Canterbury Tales,* is also a tragic romance[188] — and it refers to *trouthe* more than fifty times. Of course, to Pandarus, and even more to Criseyde, *trouthe* has little meaning: "her conception of honor is pitifully inadequate, as is her understanding of virtue and truth."[189] Even so, Criseyde tells Troilus that the reason she yielded to him was his "moral virtu, grounded upon trouthe."[190] This virtue *defines* Troilus — he "is a hyperbolist: whatever his hand finds to do, he does it with all his might."[191] He serves as "a mouthpiece for the ideal."[192] He is a hero with all his soul, a lover with all his heart, and is faithful with all his being. More: "his *trouthe,* his integrity, makes him in the long run a more fully realized person. This integrity, the quality that he will not surrender even to keep Criseide *(sic.)* with him, is the one human value the poem leaves entirely unquestioned; it is because of it that Troilus is granted his ultimate vision. It places him, of course, in sharp contrast with Criseide and her *untrouthe,* and since one of the meanings of *trouthe* is reality, he emerges as more real that she. The sad fact that integrity does him no practical good does not in any way impair its value...."[193] "Troilus's tragic error, if such an error can be called tragic, is to have tried to love a human being with an ideal spiritual love."[194] "Even in the progressively darker world of the final books, he continues to play by the rules; to give way to his mistress in all things, and — even when most sorely tried — to venture little or nothing in the way of reproach.... Boccaccio's Troiolo had been much more outspoken at the same point (F[*ilostrato]* VII.53-4, 58, 61)."[195]

"Critics have argued endlessly about how Chaucer expects readers to assess this love."[196] And yet, it is Troilus, and Troilus alone, whom Chaucer admits into his almost-Christian heaven[197] —

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[188] This, incidentally, is a significant change from the source, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato.* In Boccaccio's work, the "focus was on lust, on *caldo disio,* 'hot desire'" (Howard, p. 349). Chaucer made it much more courtly. It is still about two lovers who very much have the hots for each other — but it is a genuine romance, about their love, not their lust.

[189] D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Medieval Doctrines of Love," Benson, p. 87. With this point of Robertson's I agree, although I must confess to finding most of Robertson's views completely unbelievable. Robertson's views have always been highly controversial; see Robert P. Miller, "Allegory in the Canterbury Tales," Rowland, p. 327, which describes the reception to Robertson's *A Preface to Chaucer* from which "Medieval Doctrines of Love" is taken. Robertson sees everything as a matter of passion rather than honor, which of course is where the relationship of Troilus and Criseyde began — but what makes the poem interesting is that it does *not* end there. I would agree with Robertson's claim (p. 84) that Troilus by the end has "practically no free will left." But this is not because he is a "slave to his desire" but because he is bound by his *trouthe.*

[190] "His moral virtue, grounded upon *trouthe."* ChaucerNorton, p. 481, citing *Troilus and Criseyde,* IV.1672.

[191] Mark Lambert, "*Troilus,* Books I-III: a Crisdeyan Reading," Benson, p. 113.

[192] Stevens, p. 194.

[193] ChaucerDonaldson, pp. 1137-1138; also quoted in Benson, pp. 50-51.

[194] Alfred David, quoted in John P. McCall, "Troilus and Criseyde," Rowland, p. 451.

[195] ChaucerMills, pp. xxiv-xxv.

[196] Bisson, p. 234.

[197] E. Talbot Donaldson, "Troilus and Criseide," Benson, p. 55. The situation is even more striking if we realize that Chaucer borrowed this scene from Boccaccio's *Teseida,* the main source for *The Knight's Tale;* ChaucerMills, p. xxxi. In other words, Chaucer has given Troilus the ending Boccaccio intended for Arcite. Troilus, after all, kept his *trouthe;* Arcite did not.

from our standpoint, very close to a *deus ex machina,* but in a completely Christian society, in which the unbaptized were generally considered to be bound for Hell, a substantial reward indeed. What justifies this? Surely, in light of Chaucer's other writings, the gift is given for Troilus's *trouthe.*[198]

The Legend of Good Women has been called, unfairly, a compendium in which "Heroines… exist for love of man alone; none can even think of either revenge or an alternative strategy."[199] Far better to call it a collection of tales of "women whose faithful love has never been put in doubt"[200] — they don't *want* revenge. In other words, of women who never strayed from their *trouthe.* It is true that Chaucer never finished the book. It is widely believed that he grew bored with so many tales all on the same theme. But keep in mind that, even though he never finished it, he went back and supplied it with a new prologue (the "G" prologue, replacing the old "F" prologue).[201] This is one of the few clear instances of Chaucer revising. It is true that he never revised the *Legend* itself, or completed it — but the evidence is that he was still interested in the theme; he simply had no time for it as he grew old and the *Canterbury Tales* (which after all had their own tales of *trouthe)* fully occupied him.[202]

The short poem "Merciles Beaute" is thought to be by Chaucer although it is not attributed to him in the sole manuscript (Magdalene College, Cambridge, Pepys 2006). The last line of the first roundel (excluding the repeats) is "For with my deeth the trouthe shal be sene."[203] *Trouthe,* it seems, is not something that goes away easily! (To be sure, the final part seems to show the author rejecting love and counting it "not a bean"!)

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[198] Lewis, p. 195, is well worth reading in this regard. He sees Troilus as governed by love, not *trouthe,* but every word Lewis uses is utterly characteristic of autistics and other keepers of *trouthe*: "We never doubt his valour, his constancy, or the 'daily beauty' of his life. His humility, his easy tears, and his unabashed self-pity in adversity will not be admired in our own age.... Of such a character, so easily made happy and so easily broken, there can be no tragedy in the Greek or modern sense."

It is worth contrasting Chaucer's approach with Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid.* This is very largely based on *Troilus and Criseyde,* but Henryson adds to the story (Wittig, pp. 37-39; Ford, p. 56). Cresseid, abandoned by Diomedes, ends up largely abandoned, so she curses Venus and is stricken with leprosy. Troilus, who in this account is still alive, sees her in the leper colony and does not recognize her, but is reminded of Cresseid, so he leaves her a gift. When she learns of the gift, and the giver, she dies. It is a much more pathetic ending than Chaucer's, but arguably less tragic; there is little of *trouthe* in it, merely regret. Scholars argue over which tale is "better," but there can be no question that the emphasis is utterly changed.

[199] ChaucerStone, p. 155.

[200] Bennett, p. 63.

[201] ChaucerRiverside, pp. 1060-1061.

[202] Corsa, p. 37, has an variation on the explanation for why the *Legend* went unfinished: "Since it precludes the creation of opposing aspects of truth, it rules out any real tension." That is, because we know how all the stories end, there is never any real drama. What J. R. R. Tolkien called the *eucatastrophe,* the moment where everything hangs in the balance but all works out well, is impossible in a context like this. Most *eucatastrophes,* it seems to me, involve *trouthe* in some way. Where *trouthe* exists but does not bring a conflict, it is of little interest to Chaucer.

[203] "For with my death the *trouthe* shall be seen."

We see something very similar in "The Complaint Unto Pity." The poet has asked for pity, and will not receive it. What is his response?

> For wel I wot although I wake or wynke
> Ye rekke not whether I flete or synke.
> But natheless yet my trouthe I shal sustene
> Unto my deth, and that shal wel be sene.[204]

Chaucer rarely addressed his kings (he lived during the second half of the reign of Edward III, all the reign of Richard II, and the first year of Henry IV). His one bit of advice was "Lak of Stedfastnesse," which ends with the lines:

> Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthinesse,
> And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse.[205]

The *Manciple's Tale* is neither romance nor very attractive, with Phebus's wife committing adultery, Phebus killing her and regretting it, and the god taking away his crow's power of speech because it told the truth. Here we see both troth and truth violated — and with it a moral: "If you have a truth to tell, you must persuade your audience to hear and believe it."[206] Which is what Chaucer seems to want to do with *trouthe*.

Many of Chaucer's romances involve a question of love. The Franklin makes the question explicit: "Which was the mooste free?"[207] — in effect, who of the characters in his tale made the best choice and was most noble? But the *Wife of Bath's Tale* also forces the chooser to decide between seemingly-equal but different alternatives. We already saw that Chaucer rewrote *The Knight's Tale* to give us two seemingly-equal suitors. Tales of lovers asked to make choices between sort-of-equals were common in the Middle Ages — a woman might be asked, e.g., if she prefers a strong or a handsome man.[208] But they are mostly casual questions, asked for entertainment. Chaucer has made them serious, and the *way* he has made them serious is to add in questions of commitment and *trouthe*.

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[204] "For well I know although I wake or sleep, Yet not knowing whether I float or sink, But nonetheless still my *trouthe* I shall sustain, Unto my death, and that shall well be seen." *The Complaint Unto Pity,* lines 109-112.

[205] "Fear God, create laws, love *trouthe* and worthiness, And wed [lead?] your people again to steadfastness." "Lak of Stedfastnesse"*: Balade,* lines 27-28. The final section of this poem, lines 22-28, is labelled "Lenvoy to King Richard" on p. 654 of ChaucerRiverside, but there are 16 witnesses to this particular poem; five read simply "Lenvoy"; ten have no heading to the section at all; and and only one includes the words "Lenvoy to King Richard." Admittedly the one manuscript (Trinity College R.3.20) is a significant one, written by John Shirley before 1450; even so, the mention of Richard is highly dubious. Still, Chaucer clearly had advice for somebody....

[206] Howard, p. 494, describing the sad ending of the tale.

[207] "Who was most noble?" (Freedom in general meant being free with the gifts one should give to others.) *The Franklin's Tale,* line 1622.

[208] Examples of questions of this sort in ChaucerBrewer, pp. 10-11.

The Highest Thing?

Chaucer's romances really are unlike the run of the genre. "Perhaps it is true to say that in English, at least, only the Gawain-poet and Chaucer followed Chrétien [de Troyes] in the development of a self-conscious hero who realizes *in himself* the question at issue."[209] Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* has been proposed as something new, perhaps a "philosophical romance." And yet, if he created a new genre, why would he be satisfied with creating just one instance of the type? The fact that the *Knight's Tale* is the most obvious example doesn't mean that Chaucer isn't trying to make the same point elsewhere. Far more likely that he *is* trying to bring it home in his other writings. "It is... the great achievement of Chaucer, as I see it, in his *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Franklin's Tale* to have extended the courtly concepts involved in the definition of a 'gentil' man until their class-basis, their narrowly conceived aristocratic tenor, becomes irrelevant."[210]

To be sure, *trouthe* is not always rigidly followed — in one sense, the end of the *Franklin's Tale* sees none of the characters actually fulfill their promises, leading A. C. Spearing to argue that "True freedom is gained by going beyond *trouthe*."[211] But this is the narrow view. *Trouthe* puts the characters in a bind, and Spearing calls the solution by another Chaucerian word, *gentil(l)esse,* for which the closest thing to a modern equivalent is probably "nobility."[212] But *gentilesse* can only operate where *trouthe* is in force. *Trouthe* comes first.

The fact that Chaucer is trying to write so universally makes it noteworthy that we have found *trouthe* every time we have sought it in his romances. And, each time, it has been triumphant.

It should be conceded that this is not always so in the non-romances. *The Pardoner's Tale* is an obvious example: The three roisterers are "sworn brothers" who set out on a noble (if absurd) quest to slay Death. Then they find the gold — and the promises to each other, and the quest, all go out the window.[213] Their *trouthe* utterly fails.

And yet, the very fact that they all end up dead shows, again, that *trouthe* holds. Things go wrong the moment the drunkards abandon their proper relationship with each other. Each one pays with his life.

The tragedy of *Troilus and Criseyde* is one of *trouthe:* "gentle and lovely as she was, Criseyde could not stand fast in 'trouthe.'"[214] Troilus, whose *trouthe* was stronger, paid with pain. And who of us does not know that story? Still, we should keep in mind that one of the motivating factors is that Troilus *thought* he had a pledge....

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[209] Stevens, p. 89.
[210] Stevens, p. 58.
[211] ChaucerSpearing, p. 41.
[212] ChaucerSpearing, p. 32.
[213] Charles A. Owen, Jr, "The Crucial Passages in Five of the *Canterbury Tales:* A Study in Irony and Symbol," Wagenknecht, p. 262.
[214] James Lyndon Shanley, "The *Troilus* and Christian Love," Wagenknecht, p. 393.

It is often stressed that Chaucer derived much of his philosophy from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy,* which certainly supplied many of his ideas: "Chaucer was immensely influenced by it. He translated the whole of it into prose, and constantly made use of its ideas. The doctrine of *gentilesse,* the nature of chance, the problem of free will are all dealt with by Boethius and helped to form Chaucer's thought on these matters, and to guide him in some of the deepest passages of the *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde.*"[215] But simply because Chaucer found many of his ideas in Boethius does not imply that they all appealed to him in the same way. Chaucer clearly had intellectual ideas on the subject of free will, for instance, but he seems to have had an *emotional* attachment to *trouthe.*

Romances often have supernatural elements — King Arthur and his knights fight dragons; Orfeo goes to Faërie in *Sir Orfeo; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* involves a miraculous survival of the Beheading Game. Chaucer certainly uses some of these elements — but downplays them. *The Knight's Tale* involves the intervention of the Gods — but only to bring about things that could have happened anyway. *The Wife of Bath's Tale* involves a magical transformation, but none of the outside magic that transformed the Loathly Lady in the parallel tales — the Wife even laments that there is no longer any access to magic beings:

> Wommen may go saufly up and doun.
> In every bussh or under every tree
> There is noon oother incubus but he,[216]

meaning that women have to settle for friars, rather than incubi, if they want an illicit liaison. In *The Franklin's Tale,* the Clerk makes the rocks of Brittany *seem* to disappear, but it is only a seeming; they will be back. There are marvels in Chaucer, but no *gratuitous* marvels. The magic we see is almost rational; although Chaucer doesn't know what rules it operates under, he seems to believe there *are* rules: magic "was envisioned as a science employing not spirits but specialized knowledge of natural phenomena."[217] Wonders can have a tendency to take over a romance — as, indeed, they threatened to do with the *Squire's Tale* (could that be why Chaucer dropped it?). So can sequences of adventure after adventure. Chaucer wants none of that; he wants us to concentrate on the characters' virtues.[218]

In an earlier era, Chaucer might have used his tales to make his case for the Church and its doctrine, as (e.g.) Dante had done — Chaucer, after all, seems to have admired Dante. But Chaucer wrote in the era of the Great Schism, when there were two rival Popes,[219] as well as in the period when John Wycliffe was writing; it was a time when the Church was unusually hard to support. Chaucer gives every sign of being a proper Catholic — after all, his pilgrims are on

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[215] Bennett, pp. 27-28.

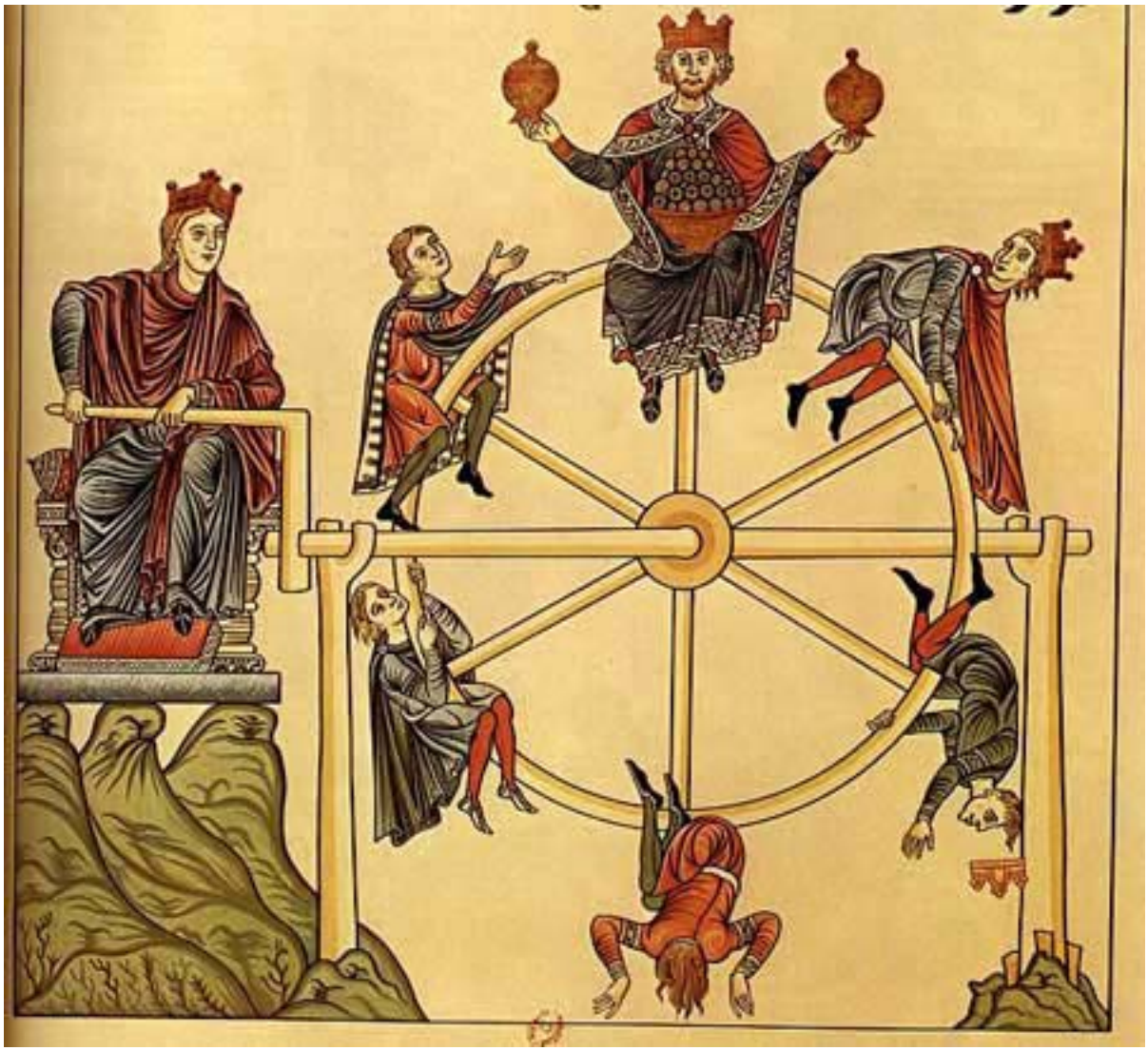
[216] "Women may travel safely up and down, In every bush or under every tree; There is no other incubus but he." Lines 878-880.

[217] ChaucerSpearing, p. 62.

[218] Stevens, pp. 100-102 classes "marvelous" items into three categories, the mysterious (and inexplicable), the magical (un-natural things controlled by humans), and the miraculous. Chaucer seems to omit the first entirely, and while the other two are found in his writings, they do not mix. His are not the most "natural" of all romances — the *Gest of Robyn Hode* and *Gamelyn,* e.g., have no supernatural elements at all — but they are relatively restrained.

[219] Bisson, pp. 55-57.

their way to the shrine of Thomas Becket, even if they don't seem to spend their time as proper pilgrims should[220] — but his treatment of Church issues is confined to generalities.[221] Chaucer's own pilgrimage is directed toward another end.



Manuscript illustration of the "Wheel of Fortune": The goddess Fortune turns the wheel which raises some up and causes others to fall to their doom. From the copy of Harrad of Landsberg's Hortus Deliciarum (Garden of Delights) *in the Paris National Library.*

[220] Bisson notes, e.g., that they spent too much time on horseback (p. 108; pilgrims should ideally travel barefoot) and drank and told dirty stories rather than praying (p. 110). Plus their agreement to end the trip at the Host's inn effectively makes Southwark, not Canterbury, the goal of their pilgrimage (p. 119).

[221] "[H]e is never a rebel or even a nonconformist; he is neither a Wycliffe nor a Roger Bacon although he may agree that the Church contains abuses and although he may show an unusual interest in the science of his times"; Anderson, p. 323.

It is famous that people in the Middle Ages believed in the inconstancy of fortune — in the Wheel of Fortune that lifted some and threw off others. Indeed, this was one of the key concepts of the philosophy of Boethius which Chaucer revered so deeply;[222] Chaucer refers to the Wheel of Fortune in *The Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde* and elsewhere.[223] But this is all the more reason for Chaucer to have embraced *trouthe:* it is something that cannot be taken away or limited by fortune. If you keep *trouthe,* you always have that to cling to.

Chaucer goes so far as to regard those who violate *trouthe* as traitors — e.g. when Aeneas betrays Dido, "he to hir a traytour was."[224] Treason, in the Middle Ages, was the most severe sentence imposed by the royal courts; the punishment was generally death by torture.

Of course, aspects of *trouthe* exist in other authors' writings. The whole plot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is about a pledged word kept, and then slightly violated, as Gawain first heads for the Green Chapel to face the fatal reverse stroke and then fails to exchange all his winnings with his host. *Sir Orfeo* is the tale of a man who never gives up his pledge to his wife. The lay of *Havelok the Dane,* and Malory's tale of Balin, show that "Worthiness… and good deeds are not in arrayment, but manhood and worship is hid within a man's person."[225] But the combination of these is found more fully in Chaucer than even in the *Green Knight.*

It might well be that Chaucer only slowly came to view *trouthe* as so important. In the *Book of the Duchess* we see *trouthe,* but it is rather limited in scope, restricted to the marriage of the Black Knight and Blanche. Although, even there, Chaucer gives the word a genuine richness — consider what happens when the Black Knight finally declares that "White" is dead:

> "'I have lost more than thow wenest.'
> Got wot, allas! Ryght that was she!"
> "Allas, sir, how? What may that be?"
> "She ys ded!" "Nay!" "Yis, be my trouthe!"[226]

Note that the Knight swears that it is true that the Duchess to whom he was betrothed is dead. Of course "By my truth" is a perfectly reasonable and standard oath — but here it means much more.

The situation in *Troilus and Criseyde* is much fuller and yet more ambiguous. "As we move toward the conclusion of the work, *trouthe* has become both truly admirable — almost what Arveragus calls it in the *Franklin's Tale,* 'the hyeste thyng that man may kepe' (1479) — and also something we covertly dislike and are ashamed of ourselves for disliking."[227] This comment of Lambert's suggests a certain practical experience with rejection of *trouthe* — and one which strikes me as very real; I know that people don't like *my trouthe!* This might explain why, even though Troilus is the noblest and truest of the characters in *Troilus and Criseyde,* "Criseyde, the heroine, and

[222] Bisson, pp. 12-13.

[223] Bisson, pp. 13-14.

[224] "he to her a traitor was." Richard Firth Green, "Chaucer's Victimized Women," ChaucerLynch, p. 338.

[225] LoomisRomances, p. 393.

[226] "'I have lost more than you realize. God knows, alas! Just so was she!' 'Alas, sir, how? What may the reason be?' 'She is dead!' 'No!' 'Yes, by my my *trouthe!*'" *The Book of the Duchess,* lines 1306-1309.

[227] Mark Lambert, "Telling the story in *Troilus and Criseyde,*" Boitani/Mann, p. 59.

Pandarus, the friend and go-between, are… the two most comprehensible [characters] to the reader of today."[228]

"The *sens* of romance is... 'the claim of the ideal."[229] That is, a romance is supposed to reveal how things are supposed to work. And it appears that what Chaucer is trying to reveal is *trouthe.*

It is very hard for people to understand emotions that they don't share. It is often possible to understand the reasoning of people we don't agree with — I can understand both ends of the American political spectrum, even though I clearly stand at one end of it. But emotions are different. Think about how young children react to adult romantic feelings — "mushy stuff." As an autistic, I never understood why people cared about "human interest stories"; I still don't, but at least now I know that people are different and that to like them is normal.

So how would people respond to an emotion they don't have? They find it incomprehensible — as most of us find Griselda incomprehensible. Perhaps Chaucer was right: *trouthe* needs demonstration.

[228] Anderson, p. 242.
[229] Stevens, p. 171.

It's Only Fiction, Right?

The above arguments are, I think, enough reason to believe that people in the Middle Ages would have accepted the reality of *trouthe.* They would have believed in Dorigen's dilemma; they would have *wanted* to accept Griselda. But that still leaves a stumbling block. Is Griselda, in particular, even *possible?* The fact that the medieval mind admired her emotions does not make her real, or even realistic. Even fictional characters must be life-like. The Clerk himself (following Petrarch, Chaucer's source) said that, for most women, what Griselda did was impossible:

> This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
> Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
> For it were inportable, though they wolde....[230]

So why tell the tale? Could there be someone who actually showed Griselda's virtues, who would do what she did?

I think there could have been. Some whose loyalty was fixed, determined, un-renounceable. Someone, perhaps… autistic?

Chaucer no more expects everyone to display perfect *trouthe* than Petrarch expected every woman to be Griselda. But perhaps — one may hope — some can.

In terms of personality, Griselda is very reminiscent of an autistic person, who will give absolute, total, passionate, extreme loyalty. Everything in the horrid *Clerk's Tale* makes sense if we assume Griselda is an autistic. I have done this myself: made a promise of total devotion — and not even to a spouse, merely to a friend — and maintained it in the face of complete rejection. This is my *trouthe.* It is who I *am.*

Could Chaucer have known a Griselda? That is, someone with this autistic constancy? Could it even have been Chaucer himself?[231]

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[230] "This story is told, not in order that wives should Follow Griselda as in humility — For that would be intolerable, even if they wanted it." *The Clerk's Tale,* lines 1142-1144.

[231] Most of the rest of this document is devoted to the idea that Chaucer was autistic, but I emphasize that the evidence is not proof. All I have really shown is that Chaucer had sympathy for things associated with autism. And that hints that either he or someone he knew had those traits. This is not proof that Chaucer suffered from it. If he did not, I find myself wondering if that the someone was his wife, Philippa Chaucer. We know little about her except that she served in several noble households, perhaps married Chaucer in 1366 (Howard, p. 506), and died probably in 1387 (Howard, p. 509). But it is believed that Philippa Chaucer was the sister of Katherine Swynford, the third wife of John of Gaunt. This leads to interesting speculation, because Gaunt certainly married Swynford for love — she was his mistress for decades before they married, and he eventually had their children legitimized. There are signs of autism in the Plantagenet dynasty — Henry II at minimum had a case of obsessive-compulsive disorder, and his son John was more extreme, and John of Gaunt's grandfather Edward II had many classic traits of autism. Autism is genetic, and there are indications that autistics are often drawn to other autistics. Could autism-inclined John of Gaunt have been attracted to autism-inclined Katherine Swynford? That would make it quite likely that Philippa Chaucer was also autism-inclined. But this is, of course, all wild speculation, which is why I put it only in a footnote.

There are other hints of sympathy with an autistic viewpoint in Chaucer. In *The Book of the Duchess* we read of the Black Knight's initial rejection: "He... re-created the woe of her first 'Nay' (1243), which he experienced as a kind of death: 'I nam but ded' (1188, cf. 204). The joy that followed her acceptance... is by contrast a return to life."[232] I, an autistic, have known this feeling — in one extreme case, when a friend simply told me to ride a different bus home from work, it caused me to become severely depressed.

Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer's most important work other than the *Canterbury Tales,* features an interesting twist: "Unexpectedly, [Troilus's] reaction to the loss of Criseyde is not to call down upon her the thunderbolts of the gods, as did Boccaccio's Troilo, but to acknowledge that the unwaveringness of his love for Criseyde is indeed the very ground of his being:[233]

"Thorugh which I se that clene out of youre mynde
Ye han me cast — and I ne kan ne may...."[234]

This again is familiar: autistics tend to be extremely loyal, to friends as well as lovers, and they almost never release those feelings or, in my experience, turn vengeful. They just suffer. Of course, many other lovers suffer also, but the fact that Chaucer here changed Boccaccio would seem to be an indication that this is how he understands love.

Chaucer's use of character is interesting. One of the most beloved parts of the *Canterbury Tales* is the sketches of the travelers at the beginning — but these are *descriptions,* not psychological studies. Coleridge accused Chaucer of not showing the "interior nature of humanity."[235] Wayne Schumaker wrote that "nowhere in the *Canterbury Tales* does Chaucer commit himself utterly to the implications of personality."[236] In *The Merchant's Tale* "The events and characters are so close to type that they have little individuality."[237] We repeatedly see characters who are merely sketched out, as Palamon and Arcite were, or made almost a caricature of a particular trait, as Griselda is a caricature of obedience. Even *Troilus and Criseyde,* which is a deep study in personalities, has been seen as lacking in psychological depth: "as in the *Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer is here essentially the comic poet. He avoids the deeper aspects of the situation...."[238] "For him the surface of life provided so much of interest that he seldom attempted to plumb its depths. To some extent it seems that he did not consider the deeper aspects of human existence as fit matters for poetry."[239] Or is it that he didn't understand how others felt about them? This is just the sort of thing we would expect of an autistic with a rather superficial understanding of others' emotions.

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232 PearsallChaucer, p. 89.
233 PearsallChaucer, p. 176.
234 "Through which I see that clean out of your mind You have me cast — and I neither can nor may." *Troilus and Criseyde,* Book V, lines 1695-1696.
235 ChaucerCawley, p. xxi.
236 quoted in Stevens, p. 177.
237 ChaucerHussey, p. 7.
238 GarnettGosse, volume I, p. 161.
239 Bennett, p. 80.

An astounding feature of *Troilus and Criseyde* is an extension it makes on the idea of dying for love. In the poem, we see the possibility dying for "mere" friendship treated with great seriousness.[240] In a world where Shakespeare can say that men do not die for love, this probably sounds absurd — but as an autistic, I can only say that this sounds perfectly reasonable and, indeed, close to my own experience. The line between friendship and love, in *Troilus,* is very faint, almost unnoticeable[241] — again, close to my own experience. I gather that most people feel a great difference between friendship and love. For me, the great gap is between casual and close friendships, not between close friendship and love.

There are multiple hints of suicide in Chaucer. Pandarus threatens it before Criseyde, Troilus works at it, Dorigen contemplates it. It is mentioned especially often in the *Legend of Good Women;* many of the women, plus Antony and Pyramus, end their own lives.[242] In a Catholic world that held suicide a grave sin, this is very surprising — but less surprising for an autistic, since suicidal ideation is common for them and a significant fraction of them die by suicide.

The fourteenth century — an era that began with famines and storms, and continued with war and the Black Death — was an era of fatalism, but even in that context, there seems to be little sign of actual *happiness* in Chaucer. *Troilus and Criseyde* seems to show a narrator constantly struggling against his material, but forced to accept its depressing nature. *The Knight's Tale* combines ironic humor (very common in autistics) with depressive fatalism:

> "This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo,
> And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro.
> Deeth is an ende of every worldy soore."[243]

Chaucer has a strong tendency in his works to portray himself as a man inexperienced in love[244] — "indeed, from what he says about himself one would get the impression he was a bachelor."[245] This seems strange coming from a middle-aged man whose marriage lasted for at least twenty-one years.[246] But autistics have a *horrible* time finding love companions. It is true that there are a lot of sensuous descriptions of women in Chaucer's writings,[247] but there are plenty of men who know what women look like without having actually had any success with them. Could Chaucer have been married but lonely? It would fit his writings — observe, for instance, that he is not accompanied by a wife on his journey in the *Canterbury Tales*. (To be sure, his wife was dead by

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[240] Mark Lambert, "*Troilus,* Books I-III: a Crisdeyan Reading," Benson, p. 116.

[241] Mark Lambert, "*Troilus,* Books I-III: a Crisdeyan Reading," Benson, pp. 114-115, 118.

[242] Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "The Feminization of Men in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women,*" ChaucerLynch, pp. 357-358, argues in fact that Antony and Pyramus, the two "feminized" men who kill themselves, are the only "good" men in the book as it stands.

[243] "This world is only a thoroughfare full of woe, And we are pilgrims, passing to and fro. Death is an end of every worldly sore." *The Knight't Tale,* lines 2847-2849.

[244] Noted by many, many commentators, e.g. John M. Fyler, "The discordant concord of The Parliament of Fowls," Benson, p. 236; also Howard, p. 98.

[245] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1025.

[246] ChaucerRiverside, p. xxiii; Philippa Chaucer is last mentioned in the records on June 18, 1387.

[247] Bennett, pp. 76-77, gives a substantial catalog.

the 1390s when the *Tales* were written.) "There are indications that Chaucer's married life was not happy, that he was cynical about marriage, and that he was much in love with another woman."[248] And there is a wild speculation (although that is *all* that it is) that his son Thomas was actually John of Gaunt's illegitimate son,[249] as if Chaucer's marriage with his wife was not very solid.[250]

There is a curious and disturbing record from 1380, in which the family of Cecilia Chaumpaigne released Chaucer from a charge of *raptus* — which *might* mean rape, or possibly abduction or something else. We don't know what Chaucer was actually accused of doing,[251] or even if he was the primary defendant. Many have suggested that Chaucer's son Lewis, for whom *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* was written, was the offspring of this union.[252] There is, however, no supporting evidence of this — and if the dating of the *Treatise* is right, Lewis may not have been old enough to be Cecelia's child anyway. It doesn't matter; we must face the possibility that Chaucer was charged with something that might have been sexual violence. But was that his intent? At this time, defendants were not allowed to testify in their own behalf,[253] so if Chaucer said something that was misunderstood, and was charged as a result, he would have no chance to explain it. And it is infamous that autistics frequently have their sexual intentions misunderstood — and misunderstand the intentions of others. (If you think that the mere fact that Chaucer was a great writer means that his spoken intentions would not be misunderstood, all I can say is, there are plenty of autistics who can write wonderful descriptive prose who can still mess up when speaking on emotional subjects!) My wild guess — I grant that there is no supporting evidence

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[248] Kunitz/Haycraft, p. 99.

[249] PearsallChaucer, p. 279; also note 4 on p. 318; Howard, pp. 94-95, although he thinks it highly unlikely. The case is most fully set out by Gardner, pp. 153-162, who points out that Gaunt showed great favor to Chaucer, and even more to Thomas Chaucer, and that Thomas Chaucer used his mother's rather than his father's arms on his tomb. All this is easily explained, however, if we note that Gaunt came to be Chaucer's brother-in-law, and that Philippa Roët Chaucer had higher social status than Chaucer himself, so Thomas Chaucer might have preferred to recall her family. Also, as mentioned in note 231, it is believed that Philippa Chaucer was the sister of Katherine Roët Swynford, the mistress and later the third wife of John of Gaunt; would Gaunt have been involved with two sisters? For a Royal Duke who was also the richest man in England, Gaunt in fact seems to have had relatively few reported affairs: "The early Chaucerian Thynne reported in his *Animadversions* (no one knows on what grounds) that Gaunt 'had mayne paramours in his youthe and was not verye contynente in his age....' Who these paramours were, besides Katherine Swynford and Marie St. Hilary (mentioned by Froissart [who is an incredibly unreliable witness]), no one has discovered" (Gardner, p. 160).

[250] It should be noted that we have absolutely no evidence on this point: "Of their married life, or any personal details about Philippa [Chaucer], we know nothing" (Bennett, p. 32). Even Gardner, who goes on at incredible length about the idea that Thomas Chaucer was not Geoffrey's son, admits on pp. 161-163 that the only real evidence of marital discontent is that Chaucer doesn't say anything positive about his wife or his love life, and in *The House of Fame* he once prays to Saint Leonard, patron saint of henpecked husbands. But Leonard was also saint of, among other things, prisoners — and Chaucer had been a prisoner in France in 1360.

[251] ChaucerRiverside, p. xxi.

[252] Kunitz/Haycraft, p. 99.

[253] Howard, p. 319.

— is that he *thought* she had agreed to go with him, perhaps to marry someone Chaucer thought she should marry, but that she had not in fact agreed. So he hauled her off — not necessarily violently, because she may not have understood what he was proposing — and she accused him of abducting her.

In *The Book of the Duchess* Chaucer speaks of an illness — something that sounds like lovesickness — that has afflicted him for eight years.[254] This might simply be conventional, but eight years before the composition of *The Book of the Duchess* would be when Chaucer was in his late teens — a time when many people suffer their first real love affairs. Most people, of course, do not suffer lovesickness for eight years; after a few years, they get over it. It is very different for autistics. They may not have many close relationships, but the relationships they *do* have do not seem to end. They don't "get over" lost friendships or loves, or at least do so extremely slowly. So Chaucer, if he had had a failed relationship, might well still be suffering over it eight years later.

"[O]ne fault that Chaucer never overcame [was] a tendency to parade knowledge in the form of intrusive learned allusions."[255] Autistics often have this problem — they really want to talk about whatever it is that they know a lot about. Just witness all the silly footnotes in this document....

Scholars looking at Chaucer's administrative work have concluded "that he was not a very good administrator [and] that he was far from thrifty."[256] Chaucer "was in the habit of living comfortably and seems to have spent with abandon."[257] "It... appear[s] that Chaucer was irresponsible about money. He was an expert accountant, who had kept the books of the Customs for twelve years and handled the enormous accounts of some dozen major project when he was Clerk of the Works, but in his private finance he seems to have treated money as if it were not real."[258] A lack of administrative skills is quite normal for autistics (whose decision-making abilities are frequently affected by their condition), and poor money management skills can also arise from autism.

Chaucer's father John seems to have been a successful and fairly substantial businessman;[259] Geoffrey was primarily a courtier, clerk, government functionary, and ambassador. Chaucer's parents were vintners — wine importers and sellers.[260] The very name "Chaucer" derives from their occupation. Yet there is no sign that he ever had anything to do with that work — indeed, one of the relatively few records of his personal life is of him transferring family property to another vintner.[261] This is extremely unusual in a time when most children followed their parents' occupations. Admittedly being a courtier offered perhaps a greater chance of advancement, but it's still unusual to see a merchant's son farmed out this way. Could there have been something

[254] Howard, pp. 98-99.
[255] Anderson, p. 236.
[256] Kunitz/Haycraft, p.100.
[257] Howard, p. 386.
[258] Howard, p. 459.
[259] Howard, p. 7, lists him as owning a brewery, more than twenty shops, and land in three counties, although there is perhaps a possibility that a different John Chaucer owned some of these.
[260] Howard, p. 5.
[261] PearsallChaucer, p. 11.

unusual above Chaucer as a boy which caused his parent to seek another job for him? Autistics often lack the skills to manage their own businesses.

"Chaucer hates sham and pretense,"[262] and autistics almost universally loathe these as well.

In *The House of Fame,* there is a section where people are awarded fame or its lack by the goddess. The awards are announced by the wind-god Eolus by blowing the golden trumpet "Clear Laud" or the black trumpet "Slander." The sounds of these trumpets are not described as sounds but in terms of other senses: "The black trumpet is said to be uglier than the Devil himself, its sound bursting like a ball from a cannon with black and colored smoke billowing ever larger and stinking like the very pit of hell. The sound of the golden trumpet smells, by contrast, like pots of balm among baskets of roses!"[263] This sounds like a description by someone with synesthesia — and synesthesia is two to three times more common among autistics than among the general population; some estimates suggest that close to one in five autistics experience it.

Chaucer had a hard time finishing things — a very autistic trait. It is easier to list the books he finished (*The Book of the Duchess, The House of Fame,* and *Troilus and Criseyde*)[264] than to catalog those left undone. "In the context of Chaucer's work as a whole, *Troilus and Criseyde* stands out by reason of its scale and its essentially finished appearance. It is the one truly major work that he carried through to the end."[265] Chaucer's translation of the *Romance of the Rose* — if it is his — is fragmentary.[266] *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* is clearly incomplete, and there are hints that Chaucer started and stopped at least once[267] before abandoning it completely (because the child to whom it was addressed was uninterested?). *Anelida and Arcite* didn't reach a conclusion.[268] *The House of Fame* has a "non-ending."[269] *The Legend of Good Women* contains only about half the promised stories and does not appear to have been completed[270] — indeed, in the surviving copies, it seems to break off just a few lines before the end of a tale! *The Canterbury Tales,* although it has a beginning and an end, is unfinished. *The Cook's Tale* is a fragment;[271] the *Squire's Tale* is either unfinished or incompetently interrupted, and there are no tales for the Ploughman, the Knight's Yeoman, and the Five Guildsmen.[272] Enough links are missing that we do not know the

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262 Anderson, p. 248.

263 Howard, p. 246, discussing the section of more than 300 lines beginning at line 1520.

264 Anderson, p. 232.

265 ChaucerWarrington, p. v.

266 ChaucerRiverside, p. 1103.

267 ChaucerRiverside, pp. 1193-1194, etc.

268 PearsallChaucer, p. 120; ChaucerRiverside, p. 375.

269 PearsallChaucer, p. 118, although some have thought this deliberate rather than a case of Chaucer abandoning the book; ChaucerRiverside, p. 990. Other have suggested that the ending was lost due to scribal mischance; with only three copies, it is possible that all derived from a defective original; Howard, p. 235.

270 ChaucerRiverside, p. 587.

271 Bowers, p. 33.

272 Bowers, p. 23.

intended order of the tales, and some scribes took it upon themselves to create spurious links.[273] There is even one instance of a scribe creating a whole new ending, as well as inserting a tale to go with it.[274] Did Chaucer die before he could complete the work, or did he abandon it?[275]

No matter what the reason for the incomplete state of the book, the way Chaucer wrote the *Tales* is interesting. Ordinarily we would expect a major literary work to be planned as a whole but written primarily sequentially. If it is unfinished, it should simply peter out (as is the case with most of Chaucer's other incomplete works) Not the *Tales!* Even though a few of the pilgrims never get to tell their stories, most tales are present. What is lacking is the structural scaffolding to connect them; this is why the *Tales* are presented as a series of fragments. "[I]t is striking how — as the fragments of the *Canterbury Tales* stand — Chaucer seems to have been working out towards the continuity of the *Tales* as a whole from local unities...."[276] There are hints that *The House of Fame* was also assembled by this sort of accretion.[277] This is a typical autistic approach: Start with the details and work to the big picture. Indeed, it is one reason autistics have so much trouble accomplishing things: it's too hard to escape the details!

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[273] Bowers, p. 41, has samples. One, in which the *Franklin's Tale* is made to follow the *Clerk's* (Bowers, p. 47), is quite intriguing although clearly not Chaucer's plan.

[274] This is the *Tale of Beryn,* found in the Northumberland Manuscript which rearranges the *Tales* and includes an interlude set in Canterbury; Bowers, p. 55. The manuscript is incomplete, so we do not know exactly how it would have concluded the *Tales.* But it is a surprisingly early rewrite, having been made probably between 1450 and 1475 (Bowers, p. 57). In addition, the printer William Caxton patched an ending of sorts onto his edition of *The House of Fame,* although in this case his manuscript was even more incomplete than the texts we now have; Howard, p. 235.

[275] The latter is clearly the view of Larry D. Benson: "The Retraction leaves us in no doubt that, unfinished, unpolished, and incomplete as *The Canterbury Tales* may be, Chaucer is finished with it" (ChaucerRiverside, p. 22). Compare E. T. Donaldson, "The Ordering of the Canterbury Tales," MandelRosenberg, pp. 197-198, although he hints that this is because Chaucer did not regard himself as having enough time to finish it; he calls the order "'terminal' if not... 'definitive.'" Donaldson also suggests that the last words of the Host to the Parson before the Parson's tale "may have been the last lines of verse that Chaucer wrote" (ChaucerDonaldson, pp. 1113-1114). This truly does not seem to follow to me; it is perfectly reasonable, in such an episodic structure, that Chaucer would have written the beginning and the end before completing the middle. I know that something rather like that happened with this paper! The opposite view, that Chaucer as he approached the end of his life was actually planning to *expand* the Tales and so decided to shift from one tale per character to four, is argued by PearsallChaucer, p. 233, who seems to think that Chaucer intended to work on the *Tales* for the rest of his life. Others have argued that the ending is not even by Chaucer, since it seems to renounce most of his writing (GarnettGosse, vol. I, p. 151; Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Design of the Canterbury Tales," Rowland, p. 230), although this strikes me as even less likely, and Howard, p. 499, declares "there is no question of its authenticity" although he adds that "Its meaning is another matter." On the issue of whether the *Parson's Tale* and the Retraction are part of Chaucer's original design, it seems to me certain that the *Parson's Tale* is. The Retraction is a little more dubious — it might have been tidied up by a scribe. But my guess is that it is fundamentally Chaucerian.

[276] Barry Windeatt, "Literary Structures in Chaucer," Boitani/Mann, p. 207.

[277] Howard, p. 233.

Chaucer's questioning of the Black Knight in the *Book of the Duchess* is "as literal-minded as a computer."[278] "Chaucer shows little interest in allegorical interpretation or hidden meanings. He is a literalist, and for him the beast-fable tends to become a fictional exemplum...."[279] He shows this from very early on. *The Book of the Duchess,* his earliest substantial work, is a dream vision based on allegorical models, but in Chaucer's handling of the material, "Allegory disappears."[280] Similarly, *The Parliament of Fowls* has an artificial setting of birds gathered on St. Valentine's Day in a garden[281] — but most of the birds are interested only in following their natural impulse to mate.[282] Autistics are famous for being very literal. In fact, many cannot understand fiction very well — which makes it interesting that Chaucer, although capable of taking an existing tale and making it far richer, rarely *created* a plot.

Chaucer portrays himself several times in his writings — as a pilgrim in the *Canterbury Tales,* as a dreamer in the *House of Fame,* and so forth. In all these instances, he portrays himself as rather simple-minded. Even in the extremely early *Book of the Duchess*, "his narrative *persona* — untutored, self-deprecating, even foolish — is fully realized and consistent."[283] In *The House of Fame* he "caricatures himself as not just dim-witted by *magnificently* dim-witted."[284] There is one, and only one, record of what Chaucer's personal speaking style was like — a record, not verbatim but based on his actual words, at a trial in which he was a witness. "His little narrative displays the Chaucerian technique of putting words in others' mouths and himself playing the naif; his use of it on the witness stand suggests that it was a habit of mind, a part of his personal style."[285] This is a tremendous amount to read into what was after all a very short bit of testimony, so the interpretation should be taken with a grain of salt — but autistics often find it very hard to take compliments and are likely to be anything but complimentary about themselves.

Chaucer's sympathy with women was considered noteworthy in his time.[286] A modern author goes so far as to declare that "Chaucer was what may be called an androgynous personality,"[287] and believes "he was the first male writer since the ancient world who was successfully to see into

[278] Howard, p. 157.

[279] A. C. Spearing, *The Canterbury Tales* IV: Exemplum and fable," Boitani/Mann, p. 159. Compare Lewis, p. 166, who declares that "Nowhere in Chaucer do we find what can be called a radically allegorical poem," i.e. one in which the *form* of the allegory — the nature of the symbolism — is as important as what is allegorized. Lewis makes this specific on p. 167: "In Chaucer we find the same subject-matter [as in the *Romance of the Rose],* that of chivalrous love; but the treatment is never truly allegorical."

[280] Bennett, p. 34.

[281] Burrow/Turville-Petre, p. 263.

[282] ChaucerBrewer, p. 12.

[283] ChaucerLynch, p. 3.

[284] Gardner, p. 82.

[285] Howard, p. 392.

[286] PearsallChaucer, p. 138; compare the comment of Gavin Douglas (died 1522?) on Chaucer's use of the *Aeneid*: Douglas charged Chaucer with distorting the text to "set on Vergile and Eneas this wyte [blame] / For he was ever, God wait [wat, i.e. knows], weminis friend" (Wittig, p. 80) — to "set on Virgil and Æneas this blame, For he was ever, God knows, women's friend."

[287] Howard, p. 97.

the mind of a women."[288] Autistics are noteworthy both for having traits of the opposite gender and of being sympathetic with the other gender — all of my close friends have all been of the other gender, and this apparently is rather common.

Chaucer is noteworthy for the ironic humor of his writings — indeed, it sometimes seems to me that this is one of the biggest reasons he is not held in even higher esteem; great writers are expected to be serious. But this humor is not in evidence in his early writings: "Little of the muted humor in *The Book of the Duchess* promises the extravagant comedy of his later years."[289] For autistics, humor is often something learned — I taught myself to have a sense of humor in my early twenties.

And Chaucer's humor sometimes has a taste of the logical humor of that greatest of nonsense writers, Lewis Carroll, who was almost certainly autistic. Consider Pandarus, who is the victim of an unrequited love. Medieval belief was that an unrequited love caused loss of appetite — so Pandarus, whose love is only half serious, says that he has no appetite on *half the days.*[290]

Chaucer tells several "bird tales": the *Nun's Priest's Tale* of Chauntecleer and Pertelote; the *Parliament of Fowls;* an eagle carried the poet around in *The House of Fame.* It has been suggested that he has something of a "thing" about birds — as many autistics have a thing about certain animals. This is probably overblown, but "[i]t all speaks less of Chaucer's affection for birds (which, like Swift's for horses, was probably restrained) than of his disaffection for human beings"[291] — and *that* is *extremely* typical of autistics.

Chaucer also shows a certain ability to think outside standard human viewpoints, "[a]s in the *Nun's Priest's Tale,* where a rooster's notion of beauty sometimes jars rather sharply with our own (VII.3161)."[292] It doesn't really matter if Chaucer is right about what one chicken would consider desirable in another; the point is, he sees things differently. Most autistics do — and some, indeed, owe their success to their ability to think this way. Temple Grandin is famous for her ability to design cattle enclosures that the animals are comfortable with — she *sees the enclosure as the animal does.* Chaucer too seems to think that way.[293]

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[288] Howard, p. 96.

[289] Howard, p. 164.

[290] Howard, p. 357.

[291] PearsallChaucer, p. 262.

[292] John M. Fyler, "The discordant concord of *The Parliament of Fowls,"* Benson, p. 237.

[293] This, incidentally, is another instance of Chaucer passing on a new idea to his successors. Robert Henryson was one of the Scottish "Chaucerians," and his delightful Æsopian fable *The Cok and the Jasp* tells of a cock which finds a valuable jasper in its dunghill. Henryson, in accordance with the thinking at the time, tells us that the cock should value the jewel, as if it has inherent value — but in fact it has no value *to the cock,* which cannot eat it. Henryson does not admit this point, but at least allows the bird to make its case that the jewel is valueless. Thus he follows Chaucer in seeing things through the actual eyes of an actual bird, rather than creating an allegorical fowl; Wittig, p. 40.

Chaucer wrote four poems about dreams (apart from Chauntecleer's dream in the *Nun's Priest's Tale)*, and makes multiple references to insomnia.[294] Conventional, yes — dream-visions were commonplace at this time[295] — but Chaucer sounds as if he has really experienced this:

> I have gret wonder, be this lyght,
> How that I lyve, for day ne nyght
> I may nat slepe wel nygh noght;
> I have so many an ydel thoght
> Purely for defaute of slep....[296]

The large majority of autistics have sleep problems — usually insomnia or sleep apnia.

That same introduction to the *Book of the Duchess* gives clear evidence of depression; it reveals "the feeling that nothing is dear or hateful to him; that 'al is ylyche good.'"[297] It is estimated that about eighty percent of autistics are depressive to some degree.

Chaucer several times confesses to a great love of books and reading[298] — in the "G" prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* he admits to owning sixty books.[299] At a time when all books were hand-copied onto parchment or very expensive paper (England at this time did not have a single

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[294] Piero Boitani, "Old books brought to life in dreams: the *Book of the Duchess,* the *House of Fame,* the *Parliament of Fowls,"* Boitani/Mann, pp. 44-45.

[295] Indeed, they were one of the most common forms of literary production in the reigns of Edward III and Richard II. In addition to the obvious example of *Piers Plowman,* we have *Wynnere and Wastoure,* a surprisingly modern debate on the merits of a "spending" or "saving" economy (Ginsberg, pp. 5-6) and *The Parlement of the Thre Ages,* which is more concerned with societal problems (Ginsberg, p. 6). GawainCawleyAnderson points out that the device is also used, e.g., in the *Romance of the Rose (*which Chaucer used and probably translated at least in part); in a poem that opens "My feerfull dreme nevyr forgete can I," in the Gawain-Poet's *Pearl,* and in Boccaccio's *Olympia.*

[296] "I have great wonder, by this light, How that I live, for neither day nor night, I may not sleep hardly at all, I have so many an idle thought, Purely for lack of sleep." *The Book of the Duchess,* lines 1-5. The point Chaucer is making, according to Lisa J. Kiser, "Sleep, dreams and poetry in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess,"* Benson, p. 194, is that insomnia interferes in particular with poetry — and we know now that insomnia severely damages creative ability.

[297] "all is alike/equally good"; *The Book of the Duchess,* line 9, cited by Corsa, p. 5, to discuss the depression the narrator feels at this time.

[298] Piero Boitani, "Old books brought to life in dreams: the *Book of the Duchess,* the *House of Fame,* the *Parliament of Fowls,"* Boitani/Mann, p. 40; PearsallChaucer, p. 194; Howard, p. 101, notes that the eagle in the *House of Fame* tells the poet that he studies books until he is dazed! (It has been suggested that this is an allusion to a remark of Saint Augustine's — Chaytor, p. 16 — but even if true, Chaucer still surely felt that love of reading.) *The Parliament of Fowls* opens with several references to Chaucer's close examination of books: "On bokes rede I ofte" (line 16: "On books I read often"); "To rede forth hit gan me so delite That al that day me thoughte but a lyte" (lines 27-28: "To read on it gave me such delight That all that day I thought but a moment"). Howard, p. 193, catalogs other Chaucerian references to his love of reading.

[299]"Yis, God wot, sixty bokes olde and newe Hast thow thyself" (lines 273-274: "Yes, God knows, sixty books old and new You have yourself"). For comparison, a century later, Edward IV's library became the foundation of the British Library — and it contained only about thirty volumes (Barker, p. 25), although they were large volumes. Chaucer's Clerk had twenty books, according to line 294 of the *General Prologue.*

paper mill; the first was founded by John Tate between 1490 and 1495[300]), this must have represented an investment of several *years'* income at least. A love for books that strong reminds me of an autistic's "special interest." And most high-functioning autistics love to study and read.[301]

Autistics are noteworthy for their nitpickiness. And Chaucer's complaint about his scribe Adam is extraordinarily harsh:

> But after my makyng thow wryte more true
> So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,
> It is to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,
> And al is thorugh thy negligence and rape.[302]

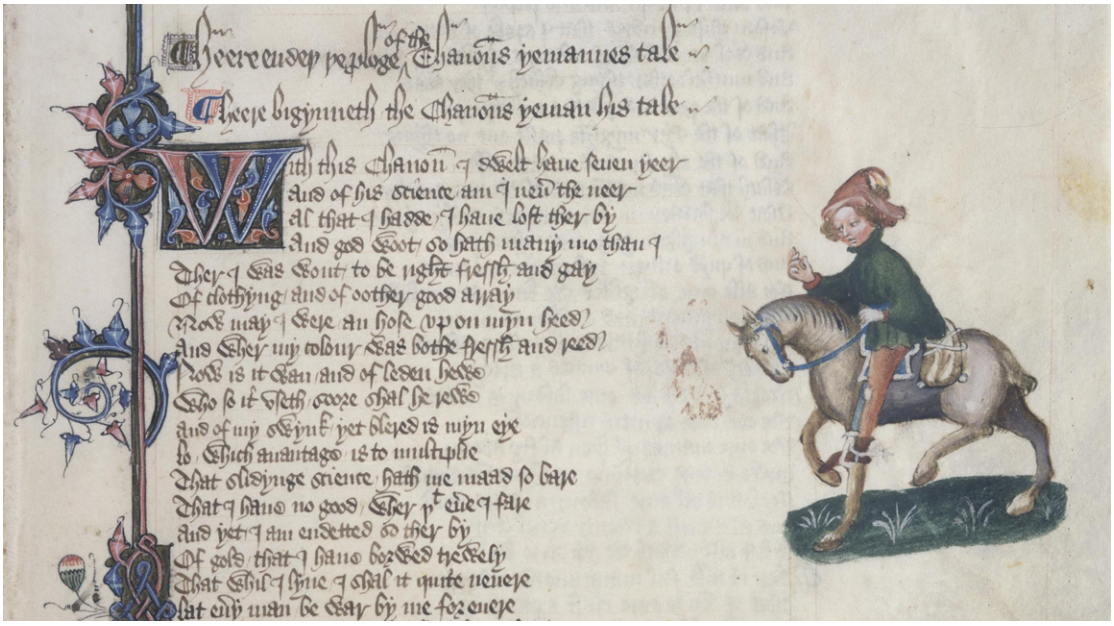

Image of the beginning of the Canon's Yeoman's Tale in the Ellesmere Manuscript,probably by Adam Pinkhurst, showing the correction to the to the prologue's subscription. The correction is the top line of the cropped and reduced image. The painting of the yeoman is also shown. Image from the Digital Scriptorium: San Marino, Huntington Library, Ellesmere 26 C 9. http://www.digital-scriptorium.org.

300 Binns, pp. 14-15.

301 To be sure, Chaucer *may* have been using his love of books as a way of pointing up the inexperience as a lover to which he pretended; he probably knew Theophrastus's comment "No one can serve both books and a wife at the same time"; ChaucerNorton, p. 327. But while *Chaucer* probably knew this comment, would his listeners? I think not. Far more likely that he was genuinely bookish — after all, he alludes to many, many different sources!

302 "But after my composition you [must] write more correctly! So many times I must your work renew, It is to correct and also to rub and scrape, And all is through your negligence and haste." "Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn," lines 4-7.

We of course don't know how good or bad a copyist Adam was.[303] Perhaps Chaucer's words were justified. But then why would Chaucer have hired him? More likely Adam was a perfectly competent copyist who — like all scribes — made occasional mistakes, and Chaucer the perfectionist blew up about it.

There is strong evidence that Chaucer was a bit on the heavy side,[304] and autistics often dislike exercise and physical activity; many are physically clumsy. (Which makes it at least mildly interesting to note that Chaucer, as a young soldier, was taken prisoner in the French campaign of 1359/1360,[305] and had to be ransomed for the substantial sum.[306] He ended up disliking war enough to write "ther is ful many a man that crieth 'Werre, werre!' that woot ful litel what werre amounteth."[307] Also, he was robbed three times in 1390, apparently in the space of four days,[308] of a total of about £40;[309] could physical ineptitude have contributed? We have no good evidence either way.)

Just before Chaucer-the-narrator launches into *Sir Thopas,* the Host says to him:

> "And seyde thus, 'What man artow?' quod he;
> 'Thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,

[303] There is some very indirect evidence. Linne R. Mooney in 2004 identified one Adam Pinkhurst as the likely scribe of the two most important manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales, the Ellesmere and Hengwrt copies, making it likely that he was Chaucer's Adam (ChaucerLynch, p. 208). There is still much discussion about this point, which fortunately is not very relevant — but Internet searches reveal several other manuscripts copied by Pinkhurst, including a government document regarding Chaucer himself. The fact that Pinkhurst was such a busy scribe would seem to imply that he was a competent copyist — which in turn hints that Chaucer's complaints were exaggerated. On the other hand, he made one pretty blatant mistake in the Ellesmere manuscript, at the end of the Canon's Yeoman's Prologue. (This page can be seen in Schultz, p. 29, or above.) In the subscription the scribe wrote "Heere endeth the p(ro)loge Chanonis yemannes tale." So after the word "p(ro)loge" the words "of the" had to be added and a correction marked. Normally we expect scribes to be at their most alert when dealing with a section heading or footing — not here! Also, comparison of Ellesmere and Hengwrt seems to reveal that the quality of Pinkhurst's work could vary substantially (Schultz, p. 56)

[304] Albert C. Baugh, "Chaucer the Man," Rowland, pp. 9-10; also ChaucerLynch, p. 39. Note, e.g., that the eagle in *The House of Fame* grumbles that Chaucer is "a heavy burden, 'noyous for to carye!'" (Bisson, p. 11), and remarks sarcastically that "thyn abstynence ys lyte" (line 660), i.e. presumably that he doesn't stint at the table. Similarly, in "Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan," line 31, he appears to include himself among "alle hem that ben hoor and rounde of shap," "all those who are hoary [gray-haired] and round of shape."

[305] PearsallChaucer, pp. 40-42.

[306] Kunitz/Haycraft, p.99; Howard, pp. 4, 71, who notes that the King himself paid £16 of the ransom, which may not have been the whole amount.

[307] "There is full many a man who cries 'War, War! who doesn't know at all what war amounts to." *The Tale of Melibee* — Chaucer's own tale, note! — line 1038 or so; ChaucerRiverside, p. 219. Many autistics have a strong distaste for conflict.

[308] Bennett, p. 66.

[309] PearsallChaucer, p. 213.

For evere upon the ground I se thee stare."[310]

Chaucer-the-narrator is not Chaucer-the-author, but the narrator sounds as if he rarely looks people in the face — which is, of course, one of the classic signs of autism. It has also been noted that Chaucer, in the *General Prologue,* devotes much more attention to the pilgrims' noses and mouths and even foreheads than eyes.[311] This is perhaps the style of the time — but autistics, because they don't look people in the eyes, have a hard time describing eyes.

Most authors in this period had patrons, and dedicated books to them — it was how they made their livings. Chaucer didn't do this; "he drew the line at the obsequiousness that went with the acknowledgment of patronage."[312] *The Book of the Duchess* was obviously implicitly dedicated to John of Gaunt — but it doesn't actually *say* that. *Troilus and Criseyde* is dedicated to John Gower and Ralph Strode, who could not pay him for his work. There are no dedications at all to noble patrons. Admittedly the "Complaint to His Purse" is an appeal to Henry IV[313] — but it's an *appeal,* not a dedication. To be sure, Richard II (the king during Chaucer's most active period) seems to have been no patron of literature[314] — but surely Chaucer could have found *someone* had he tried. Clearly he didn't. Autistics often have a tendency toward democracy,[315] and they hate "sucking up."

It has been suggested that Chaucer was concerned with the philosophical question of how people communicate with each other; John Gardner thinks that the first three *Canterbury Tales, The Knight's Tale, The Miller's Tale,* and *The Reeve's Tale,* offer three views of how the world works, which cannot all be correct. "Who is right, the Knight, the Miller, or the Reeve? And if an answer is possible, how do we convince the drunken Miller or the irascible old Reeve?"[316] I'm not sure I believe this, but if ever there was someone who would believe that human beings cannot really communicate with each other, it will surely be an autistic!

Chaucer has a curious tendency to increase the element of chance or fate or luck in his stories.[317] For example, in his source, Pandarus arranges for Troilus to display himself before Criseyde; in Chaucer, this happen only *after* he has caught Criseyde's eye quite by accident.[318] This is a very

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[310] "And said thus, "What [sort of] man are you? You look as if you would find an hare, For ever toward the ground I see you stare." *Prologue to Sir Thopas,* lines 695-697.

[311] Howard, p. 423.

[312] PearsallChaucer, p. 189.

[313] Newcomer, p. 50.

[314] Saul, pp. 361-362, although Harvey, p. 153, claims we "know of [Richard's] personal encouragement of Chaucer and of Gower."

[315] Lewis, p. 158, claims that Chaucer "reverences knighthood," but there is no sign that he ever sought it, even though his income in his better years was close to the £40 pound level at which one was *required* to be come a knight by Edward I and Edward II. It is worth noting that Chaucer's son Thomas, who had many times the income required for knighthood, and who had the political importance to be chosen speaker of several parliaments, apparently *refused* knighthood; PearsallChaucer, p. 277.

[316] Gardner, p. 292.

[317] Jill Mann, "Chance and destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale,"* Boitani/Mann, pp. 76, 87-88.

[318] Jill Mann, "Chance and destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale,"* Boitani/Mann, pp. 75-77.

subtle point, but it seems to me that chance plays a much greater role in the lives of autistics. If they make a good friend early in life, they are more socially able; if they are exposed to the right stimuli, they may find a good career; if given the right opportunity, they may become brilliant in a field. But if the chance *doesn't* arise, they may fail utterly. Success and failure balance by a hair. This seems to be Chaucer's philosophy also.

In addition, in all these things, he seems to seek an orderly explanation for what happens — even if the explanation is only the actions of the planets.[319] The tendency to seek mechanical explanations even for human behavior — for seeking to understand behavior as resulting from measurable causes — is characteristic of autism.

Chaucer's interest in science is notable;[320] "the poet was well acquainted with the minute details of the medieval cosmological scheme."[321] *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* not only discusses that instrument but also the use of Arabic numerals,[322] which were still new in England at the time; Chaucer's use of them is an indication of his advanced thinking. *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is rich in alchemical lore. Chaucer also shows substantial understanding of contemporary medicine.[323] The descriptions of the birds in *The Parliament of Fowls* is based primarily on written account, but "there are more observed characteristics in his list of birds than is usual."[324] The picture we see is of a man with a serious desire to learn about "natural philosophy" — "Chaucer is the well-read, interested layman; he lacks the full knowledge of the professional… but he is too serious to be the dilettante."[325] Autistics have a strong tendency to be fascinated by how things work.

"For all his humor, for all his faith, Chaucer was something of a worrier. Worry is one of the regular features of his comic self-portraits. He worries himself sleepless in the *Book of the Duchess,* worries frantically, in the *House of Fame,* that the eagle carrying him to visions may drop him; he wrings his hands in anguish, worrying about his characters in *Troilus and Criseyde,* and worries, as a pilgrim in the *Canterbury Tales,* that Our Host, Harry Bailey, may again interrupt him. Jokes, certainly, but like his jokes about his stoutness, they probably have some basis in fact."[326] Autistics are extremely prone to anxiety and worry; it is not rare for it to be a crippling defect.

It has been suggested that Chaucer "show[s] an impatience with needless talk."[327] As a bureaucrat, Chaucer may have had to deal with long-winded paperwork; "It may have been as a reaction against this feature of his official life that he came in his later works so often to praise

[319] Jill Mann, "Chance and destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale,*" Boitani/Mann, pp. 89-91.

[320] Piero Boitani, "Chaucer's labyrinth: fourteenth-century literature and language," Benson, p. 215. This certainly wasn't something expected of a poet; the Gawain-Poet "entirely lacked, for instance, Chaucer's deep interest in astrology and its associated sciences, and he had nothing to say about the great Boethian problems of foreknowledge and free will"; GawainTolkienGordonDavis, p. xxv.

[321] Bisson, p. 10.

[322] "noumbres of augrym," *Treatise* I.7, ChaucerRiverside, p. 664.

[323] Hoy/Stevens, pp. 165-166.

[324] ChaucerBrewer, pp. 35-36.

[325] ChaucerRiverside, p. 661.

[326] Gardner, p. 11.

[327] Howard, p. 195.

silence; to ridicule long-winded bores, glib manipulators, and rhetorical flourish, and to develop, in the General Prologue, a literary style in which he says exactly what he means, no more and no less — an abstemious concision, which we read as irony."[328] In the *Canterbury Tales,* the Host declares that Chaucer-the-narrator doesn't even talk to his fellow pilgrims very much.[329] Autistics almost all hate small talk; many will not engage in it at all.

One of the most perceptive critics of the twentieth century declared that Chaucer the pilgrim, at least, was "gregarious — if shy."[330] Autistics, probably because of all the rejection they suffer, are often very shy.

Other critics argue, on the basis of items such as the *Merchant's Tale,* that Chaucer was "bitter.... disillusioned about marriage and contemptuous of old age."[331] This hardly seems like the genial Chaucer we all know, but the writings which inspired the comments do perhaps hint at a lack of empathy — one of the great problems most autistics have.

It is interesting that Chaucer concludes *Troilus and Criseyde,* his last and longest completed work, with a request: "His last and most fervent prayer… was that his poem be understood."[332] He seems mostly to have been talking about dialect. But if there is one thing that autistics are always begging, pleading, hoping, appealing for, it is for someone to *understand them.*

Chaucer knew at least four (arguably five) languages: Middle English (of the London variety, but he could also at least imitate some other dialects[333]), Italian,[334] Latin (perhaps not as well as the others),[335] and two varieties of French, Parisian and Anglo-Norman (which he gently spoofs as the Prioress's "Frenssh… After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe, For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowne").[336] Not all autistics are skilled at language, but it is not a rare special interest; those who are good at languages are often very good indeed.

"In most of his work Chaucer makes himself unreachable — he is role playing with a mask of his own invention, making the reader guess what is behind the mask."[337]All of us wear masks, of

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328 Howard, p. 213.

329 Howard, p. 437.

330 E. Talbot Donaldson, in ChaucerNorton, p. 488.

331 Anderson, p. 248.

332 Howard, p. 372.

333 Howard, p. 44, suggests that Chaucer used, or imitated, the East Anglian, and Northern versions of English, and indeed points out that "Chaucer for the first time in English literature, perhaps in any literature, used dialect." It's not the first time in any literature — the Bible has the famous "Shibboleth" test — but it is certainly one of the first substantial uses.

334 PearsallChaucer, p. 18; Howard, p. 171.

335 It is believed he preferred to have French cribs for Latin works; PearsallChaucer, p. 33; Howard, pp. 42-43.

336 "French... After the school of Stratford-at-Bow, for French of Paris was to her unknown." *The General Prologue,* lines 124-126; for Chaucer's French, see also PearsallChaucer, p. 63-64; Howard, p. 22.

337 Howard, p. 498. It is fascinating to note that Howard just two paragraphs before had been comparing Chaucer's experience of the world with that of autistics. Knowledge of autism was primitive when Howard wrote, but his description of autism proved surprisingly accurate.

course — but autistics, as a result of their social difficulties, wear a more complex mask more of the time. This description could be transferred verbatim to an autism textbook.

"Chaucer always took a peculiar pleasure in rendering catalogues in rhymed verse"[338] — he cataloged tragedies in *The Monk's Tale,* and women who suffered for love in *The Legend of Good Women.*[339] Even his arrangement of the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales* has been seen as a specially ordered catalog; he seems to arrange them by classes and by degree of virtue within the class.[340] If this was truly Chaucer's inclination, and not merely the habit of the time, it is an extremely autistic trait, often used as a key element in diagnosis (children will insist on lining up their toys in a particular way, e.g.). On the other hand, the *Legend* was never finished, and the *Monk's Tale* is cut off, so it is by no means clear that Chaucer was actually fascinated by these sorts of catalogs.

And, of course, Chaucer was a genius. Of course, you wouldn't be reading this if he weren't a genius; there are plenty of works of non-genius Middle English poetry, but they don't get quoted and studied endlessly! But Chaucer was *truly* brilliant — in terms of originality, probably the greatest mind in the history of English literature. He brought into English the decasyllabic line — which later gave rise to Marlowe's and Shakespeare's blank verse.[341]

Chaucer also helped originate the concept, if not the form, of the novel: "The drama apart, the only works in English before Bunyan that have the quality of novels as we know them today, though they do not have their form, are some things in Chaucer, the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales,* perhaps, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*...."[342] "Criseyde is in many ways the first real character in English fiction."[343] And autistics, for all their many, many problems, are responsible for a tremendous fraction of creative work in literature, science, mathematics, music, and probably other fields.

As I put together this list, I found myself wanting to believe that Chaucer was autistic. After all, I would like to claim him as "one of mine." But I am forced to concede that almost every hint we have of autism comes from his writings. And many of them are vague speculations — e.g. some have seen a personal crisis in Chaucer at the time he was making up *The House of Fame.*[344] Autistics often have a hard time finding their way in the world. If all the speculations are right, then Chaucer shows strong autistic tendencies — but they're all *speculations.* To diagnose autism really requires a detailed knowledge of the person, not merely of his work — and we simply don't have that knowledge of Chaucer. We know a great deal about his life, but not of his personality.

[338] ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1110.
[339] ChaucerNorton, p. 520.
[340] Howard, p. 410.
[341] Howard, pp. 263-265, who notes that this was more than just a form imported from French or Italian, where syllables are what counts; Chaucer had to deal with English, where stresses count more than syllables. Thus Chaucer's real triumph is not going from eight-syllable lines to ten-syllable lines, it is in going from four-stress to five-stress lines. *This* is what made iambic pentameter possible.
[342] Allen, p. 22.
[343] Myers, p. 101.
[344] Howard, p. 252.

(Indeed, the extant records don't even mention that he was a poet![345]) And the little we do know of his outside life shows few hints of autistic traits.

But having autism isn't like having, say, chicken pox, where you either have it or you don't. Autism is a spectrum, with some people having a lot of autistic traits and others having few. No two autistics are entirely alike, and many people who aren't autistic still show some traits of autism. And geniuses often have at least a few of the symptoms. Maybe Chaucer's genius was influenced by autism — and maybe it helped him to understand autistics, and their *trouthe.* I can't prove (and don't really believe) that Chaucer was autistic. He was too successful socially; you don't appoint someone who has problems with human relationships to be an ambassador to a foreign nation, no matter how good his Italian! But I think he tended that way — and it influenced his thinking and his emotions. He probably wasn't autistic, but he understood some autistic habits more deeply than most people do.

No matter what Chaucer actually felt, he expressed a viewpoint which an autistic could understand. And it is noteworthy that the leading romances of today have followed his lead, for they are romances of *trouthe,* not of love. Indeed, they are romances of *trouthe* on an even broader scale than Chaucer's, because most of them involve the fate of the entire world. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings,* written in large part to revive the romance genre, has almost no hint of romantic love.[346] It is a tale of *trouthe* and mercy. Without the *trouthe* of Sam Gamgee to Frodo Baggins, the quest for Mount Doom would have failed; without the *trouthe* of Merry Brandybuck toward Théoden and Éowyn, the Lord of the Nâzgul would likely have destroyed Minas Tirith. Without Frodo's mercy to Gollum, Frodo — when he failed at Mount Doom — would not have received mercy himself, and all would have failed. And yet, is not mercy for mercy another form of *trouthe*?

The ending of Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain* could almost have come out of a Loathly Lady legend. Taran of Caer Dallben has been freely offered immortality and the love of his life — but instead chooses to keep *trouthe* with the people of Prydain, and ends up as king of the land and still getting his love (although not the immortality).

J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" books have an ending that is closer to the story of Christianity than anything else, but it is largely expressed as *trouthe:* Harry, out of loyalty to Hermione, and

[345] LindahlEtAl, p. 72.

[346] It might be worth mentioning Tolkien's metrical romance, *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun,* here. It is offered as a Breton Lay, and is almost an inverse of the *Franklin's Tale*, for similar mistakes lead to a crisis of morality. A lord, in despair because his wife is childless, hires a witch to make a potion to give them a child — a mortal sin. The witch will not reveal her price until the baby is born. His lady bears twins. Days later, he goes out hunting a white deer — and is met by the witch, now turned beautiful, who demands his love as her price. Faithful to his wife, he refuses. The witch cannot take his soul, but takes his life three days later. His wife dies of grief; the children live but their home is abandoned; Kocher, pp. 169-178; Shippey, p. 280. It is a classic example of a Thing Bought at Too High a Cost (the archetype of which is probably the eating of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden: Adam and Eve gained knowledge, but at the price of disobedience — and hence immortality). It is probably the best Breton Lay in English after *The Franklin's Tale* and *Sir Orfeo;* it deserves more attention. It also has a lesson about the genre: it is a Lay in which the need for virtue and faith are felt but the *action* of virtue and faith are lacking.

Ron, and Ginny, and Dumbledore, makes the dreadful choice to give himself up to death — and, because he kept *trouthe,* does not in fact die. For him, as for Dorigen and Griselda, *trouthe* triumphed in the end. It was a Chaucerian ending.[347]

At the very end of the Canterbury Tales, in the Retraction, Chaucer apologizes for his "worldly vanitees,"[348] — but also declares, "For oure book seith, 'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente."[349] He says something similar in the *Nun's Priest's Tale,* although the Nun's Priest is the one "speaking" there.[350] But it is almost certainly Chaucer's own voice: "Chaucer the pilgrim is not necessarily Chaucer the writer *except in the Retraction.*"[351] Clearly he isn't just writing to amuse; he is writing to teach. He hardly had need to teach church doctrine; unless one counts the Wife of Bath's "heresy," there is no really original theology in Chaucer. What there is is virtue. And so it was that Chaucer could say,

> *And trouthe thee*[352] *shal delivere, it is no drede.*[353]

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[347] An analysis of this topic will be in my forthcoming book *On Myth and Magic: Harry Potter and the World of Folktales,* but it does not emphasize *trouthe,* which can be considered the motivation of the whole Potter saga.

[348] line 1084.

[349] "'For all that is written is written for our instruction,' and that is my intent"; line 1083. The quotation is from Romans 15:4, with some similarity to 2 Timothy 3:16.

[350] ChaucerMackHawkins, p. 80. The reference is to lines 3441-3442.

[351] Moorman, p. 85.

[352] I have avoided textual criticism, but there is an issue that must be resolved here, because the manuscripts don't agree on the reading of this line. The poem survives in 22 or 23 manuscript copies, making it Chaucer's best-known short poem; ChaucerRiverside, pp. 1084, 1189. The last stanza is missing in most copies, or else lines 22-28 are an addition in a single one (BL Add. 10340). More important for our purposes, several manuscripts (including the Huntington text shown below) read, in one version of the line or another, *trouthe shal the delivere;* others omit *the(e)* to read simply *trouthe shal delivere.* The latter reading is adopted by ChaucerDonaldson, pp. 708-709, and ChaucerLynch, p. 219, following Skeat's edition. The case for omitting *the(e)* is strong, since it is lacking from manuscripts of two of the three manuscript groups, including the famous Ellesmere and Cambridge copies. (The poem is, however, a later addition in Ellesmere.) The question is whether the word was omitted by accident from Ellesmere, etc. or whether it was added in the others, perhaps to conform to John 8:32, or whether it was added or deleted for metrical reasons (the line has probably eleven syllables without it, twelve with). Although the evidence for omission is very strong, short words are easily lost by copyists; I agree, very hesitantly, with ChaucerRiverside's decision to include it. I am less sure about its placement in the line. The best explanation may be that Chaucer issued two versions; one, addressed to Vache, included the last seven lines and, since it was personal, said that truth would deliver *him.* The "general" version of the poem omits the last stanza and the word "the(e)."

[353] "And *trouthe* shall deliver you; it is no dread." From "Truth," or "Balade de Bon Conseyl," ChaucerRiverside, p. 653. The tag is a refrain, used in lines 7, 14, 21, (28) of the poem. It is regarded as a quotation of John 8:32, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free," but the emphasis is slightly different. (The word the Latin text uses for "deliver" or "set free" is "liberabit": "et veritas liberabit vos"; Vulgate, p. 1674).
There is a sort of tradition that Chaucer wrote the poem on his deathbed (ChaucerDonaldson, p. 1127, based on a statement by the early scribe John Shirley), but the fact that there seem to be two versions of the poem (with and without lines 22-28; see the preceding note) is a strong argument against this.

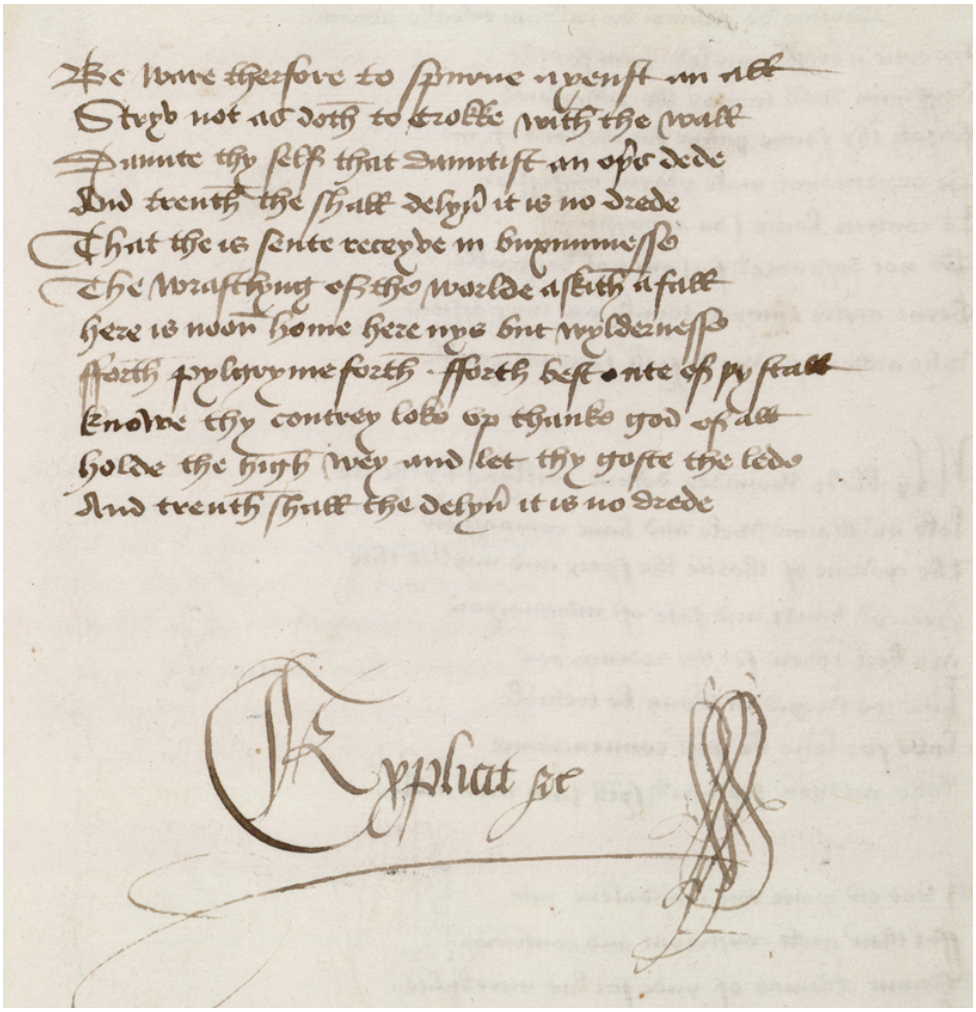

Image of the final lines of "Truth" or "Balade de Bon Conseyl," from San Marino, California, MS. Huntington HM 140, folio 84 (formerly Phillipps 8299, called "Ph" in ChaucerRiverside). Believed to be from the second half of the fifteenth century. The image shows lines 11–21 (lines 22–28 are not present in this manuscript or most other copies). Image from the Digital Scriptorium: San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 00140. http://www.digital-scriptorium.org. The text, with spelling and orthography conformed to ChaucerRiverside (note that the order of the last line is different!), reads:

Be ware therefore to sporne ayenst an al,
Stryve not, as doth to crokke with the wal.
Daunte thy self, that dauntest an other dede,
And trouthe the shal delivere, it is no drede.
That thee is sent, receyve in buxumnesse;
The wrestling of this world axeth a fal.
Her is noon home, here nis but wildernesse
Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stal!
Know thy contree, look up, than God of al;
Hold the heye wey and lat thy gost thee lede,
And truth shal thee delivere it is no drede.

Dramatis Personae

The list below includes the major fictional characters referred to on multiple occasions in this work. The intent is to remind readers of the key aspects of the characters' stories. Chaucerian characters mentioned only once are not included, since all I have to say about them will be found in that particular spot. There is nothing in this section or the next not well-known to Chaucer experts, who are free to skip it.

Alisoun, the Wife of Bath — Character in the *Canterbury Tales.* Very beautiful in her youth, she has had five husbands. The first three, older and wealthy, left her well-to-do; now middle-aged, she is seeking a sixth husband — and is likely to have to offer up some of her own wealth. She tells the tale of the Loathly Lady; her theme is that women should have sovereignty in marriage.

Arcite — Character in *The Knight's Tale.* He and his cousin Palamon become suitors for the hand of Emelye. Theseus arranges a tournament between the two to determine who will wed the girl. Before their final conflict, Arcite prays to Mars to have victory in the contest. He wins the battle, but is mortally injured in a freak accident after that, leaving Emelye to Palamon.

King **Arthur** — In the context of this writing, simply a character in the tale of *Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnall.* Arthur, unable to face Sir Gromer Somer Joure, is forced to find out what it is that women want — and, to learn, is compelled to ask his nephew Sir Gawain to marry the Loathly Lady, Dame Ragnall.

Arveragus — Character in *The Franklin's Tale.* He courts and marries Dorigen, a woman socially above him, promising not to exercise sovereignty over her, then leaves Brittany to make his reputation. In his absence, Dorigen makes a rash promise to Aurelius, saying she will sleep with him if he can perform an impossible task — which he does. Arveragus, on his return, tells her to keep her *trouthe,* so she prepares to fulfill her promise to Aurelius. The ending is happy because Aurelius respects her *trouthe* and releases her.

Aurelius — Character in *The Franklin's Tale.* Enamored of Dorigen, he induces her to make the rash promise to accept his love if he can make the rocks off Brittany vanish. With the help of the Clerk of Orleans, he accomplishes the feat. But, when Dorigen reluctantly comes to fulfill her *trouthe,* he is so impressed that he releases her from her promise.

Black Knight — Character in *The Book of the Duchess.* The husband of White/Blanche, who laments her death. This makes him an avatar of John of Gaunt.

Geoffrey Chaucer — Character/Narrator in several of his own tales. In most of these tales, we see him as bookish but naïve, rather shy, insomniac, and ignorant about love.

Chauntecleer — Character in *The Nun's Priest's Tale.* A chicken — the cock of a small flock. One night he dreams of a creature — a fox. He and his favorite hen Pertelote discuss the matter with high rhetoric but little learning; they do nothing — until an actual fox arrives and seizes Chauntecleer. He fortunately escapes by inducing the fox to open its jaws so he can fly away.

Criseyde — Character in *Troilus and Criseyde.* Daughter of the Trojan priest and prophet Calchas. At the time the story opens, she is a widow. She becomes involved with the Trojan prince Troilus — but, when she is exchanged to the Greeks for Antenor (who later betrays Troy), she quickly abandons her promises to Troilus and becomes involved with the Greek Diomedes. She ends up sending Troilus a "Dear John" letter. In later writings, she is treated as nothing but a strumpet, but Chaucer's treatment is much more nuanced; he does not condemn her although he does not approve of her as much as Troilus.

Diomedes — Character in *Troilus and Criseyde.* Greek leader, one of their greatest fighters, who induces Criseyde to abandon her promises to Troilus and become involved with him.

Dorigen — Character in *The Franklin's Tale.* Married to Arveragus, who has promised not to exercise sovereignty over her. While her husband is absent from Brittany, she is courted by Aurelius. She promises to sleep with Aurelius if he can remove the rocks off the coast of Brittany. When he does so, she goes to her husband to ask what to do. He tells her to fulfill her pledge. When Aurelius sees her *trouthe*, he releases her from her promise.

Emelye — Character in *The Knight's Tale.* The sister-in-law of Theseus, both Palamon and Arcite desire her — and fight over her. Having herself no desire to wed, she prays that she at least end up the bride of the man who loves her most. After Arcite dies in a freak accident despite defeating Palamon, she becomes the wife of Palamon, and they are said to be very happy.

The **Franklin** — Character in the *Canterbury Tales.* A member of the gentry, well-to-do and seemingly kindly, a former member of parliament (like Chaucer himself), he tells the *Franklin's Tale* of the eternal triangle of Dorigen, Arveragus, and Aurelius, which gives us the theme that *trouthe is the highest thing that man may keep* and seems to show that respect within marriage is the ideal state.

Sir **Gawain** — Not a Chaucerian character, but one well-known from other romances of the time; he is the epitome of Arthurian courtesy, and was also perhaps Arthur's greatest knight until French versions of the Arthurian legend gave us Sir Lancelot. Gawain is the leading character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* where his courtesy allows him to survive the Beheading Game almost intact; he is also (more significantly for us) the hero of *Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnall,* the parallel to *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in which Gawain undertakes to marry the Loathly Lady for King Arthur's sake.

Griselda — Character in *The Clerk's Tale.* A woman of humble origins, the Marquis Walter marries her in return for a vow never to disobey him. She pledges never to disobey or even question him. He then abuses her endlessly, steals away their children, says he has killed them, degrades her, calls on her to wait on a woman he says will be his new wife — and she puts up with it until he finally relents and restores her to her place as his wife.

Harry Bailly, the **Host** — Promoter of the Canterbury tale-telling scheme; he induces the pilgrims to each tell tales, with the winner being served a dinner at his inn in Southwark. He controls the proceedings most of the time, but does not tell a tale himself.

The **Knight** — Character in the *Canterbury Tales.* An old soldier (the Squire is his adult son), which experience in many battles, often on campaigns that are labelled crusades. The highest-ranked person on the Pilgrimage, he also seems to be genuinely respected by the others for his history, piety, and humility. He tells the first of the tales, the story of Palamon and Arcite fighting over which one of them will marry Emelye.

Loathly Lady — Character in *The Wife of Bath's Tale.* Her type — of a woman of hideous appearance and poor manners — is common in folklore. In the Wife's tale, she alone can tell the rapist-hero what women want, and in return for the answer, demands that he marry her. He consents, unhappily, but does not wish to have anything to do with her. She then turns beautiful, part of the time, and asks whether he would have her fair and faithless or foul and faithful. When he throws up his hands and leaves the choice to her, she becomes beautiful (and, we assume, faithful) all the time.

The **Merchant** — Character in *The Canterbury Tales.* A man who seems to have had financial but little marital success, his tale is a bitter one of old January, who purchases a young wife, May, goes blind, recovers his sight to see her making out with a younger man, but is induced to accept her explanation.

The **Miller** — Character in *The Canterbury Tales.* A stereotype of the typical folkloric miller, he is crude and bawdy and plays the bagpipe. After the Knight finishes his tale, the Miller breaks in and tells a bawdy *fabliau* of a local contest to sleep with a pretty girl, Alisoun, who is married to an old carpenter (a tale which offends the Reeve, a former carpenter himself, who responds with a tale directed at millers).

Orfeo — Character in *Sir Orfeo,* the best of the "Breton Lays" other than *The Franklin's Tale.* He is the Orpheus of Greek mythology, but transformed: whereas in the classical legend Orpheus won Euridice back from the dead, only to lose her when he looks back at the last moment, Orfeo finds his wife Heurodis in Faërie and is able to bring her back to the mortal world.

Palamon — Character in *The Knight's Tale.* He and his cousin Arcite, imprisoned after the destruction of Thebes, become suitors for the hand of Emelye. Before their final conflict, Palamon prays to win Emelye's hand. He loses the battle, but Arcite is mortally injured in a freak accident after that, leaving Emilye to Palamon.

Pandarus — Character in *Troilus and Criseyde.* Unlike Shakespeare's character, he is not really a master manipulator; he is simply Criseyde's uncle and Troilus's friend, a failed lover himself who hopes to bring his two companions happiness. He of course succeeds in the short run but ultimately fails — and, when he fails, he has little to suggest to Troilus in the way of consolation.

Theseus — Character in *The Knight's Tale.* The mastermind of the action; the tale opens with him conquering Thebes and taking Palamon and Arcite prisoner. When he finds them fighting over Emelye, it is he who sets up the tournament in which the two will fight over her. And, when Arcite dies, he uses the marriage of Palamon and Emilye to bring peace in his country.

Troilus — Character in *Troilus and Criseyde.* Son of King Priam. Other than Hector, perhaps the greatest warrior on the Trojan side. Initially, he disdains love — until he sees the beautiful widow

Criseyde. He idolizes her and, with the aid of Pandarus, wins her — only to have her exchanged to the Greeks. He remains true even though she is false, is eventually killed by Achilles, and is taken to a sort of heaven, where he is given a philosophical insight into how the world works.

Walter — Character in *The Clerk's Tale.* A nobleman, his courtiers urge him to marry. He decides to marry the commoner Griselda, from whom he extracts an oath of absolute obedience. He proceeds to test her mercilessly to see if she will keep her *trouthe.* When she withstands far more than any reasonable person would put up with, he relents and reaffirms her status as his wife.

Wife of Bath, The — see *Alisoun, the Wife of Bath*

Catalog of Chaucer's Works

The list below shows the works of Geoffrey Chaucer cited in this document, including all his major writings, with a brief indication of the contents and significance. Titles of longer works are shown in *italics,* shorter in "quotes."

"Adam Scriven": See: "Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn"

The Book of the Duchess. Chaucer's earliest datable work, and very possibly his earliest surviving writing (unless the French poems attributed to "Ch" are by him). It was written as an elegy to Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, wife of John of Gaunt. She was, by all accounts, beautiful and virtuous, and died in 1368 or 1369 while still in her early twenties. Gaunt seems to have genuinely loved her, and Chaucer wrote to console him. The book is a dream-vision in which Chaucer meets first the grieving Alcyone (of Greek mythology) and then encounters Gaunt in the guise of the Black Knight and hears his sad story.

"Balade de Bon Conseyl." Also known as "Truth." The most popular of Chaucer's shorter works, preserved in no fewer than 23 manuscript copies. It opens by advising the reader to flee the crowd (at court?) and "dwell with sothfastnesse." It consistently advises seeking a better life, and concludes with the tremendous line "And trouthe [thee] shal delivere, it is no drede."

The Canterbury Tales. Now considered Chaucer's master work, in which some thirty pilgrims preparing to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury meet at the Tabard Inn and are convinced by the Host, Harry Bailly, to journey together and tell tales on the way. The teller of the best tale, as judged by the Host, will receive a dinner at the Inn paid for by the other travelers. The book is prized because it contains not only the travelers' tales but also an introduction describing the travelers themselves and links between the tales in which they argue, discuss, and offer opinions; it includes both the story of the journey and the tales told on the journey. The book was never finished; it was probably Chaucer's last work, and he either died or gave it up before completing all the tales. As a result, we have only about two dozen tales, plus links for some but not all of them. The manuscripts do not agree on the order of the tales; there are ten different fragments which have been placed in many different arrangements. What is clear is that, after the *General Prologue,* the first tale was the Knight's, followed by the Miller's and Reeve's, with the Parson's Tale last, followed by Chaucer's Retraction. The catalog below gives micro-summaries of the tales in the order most widely accepted by editors. Those dealt with extensively in this document are shown in **bold.**

- ***The Knight's Tale.*** Palamon and Arcite fight over the hand of Emelye, with the gods seeing to it that Arcite wins the tournament, but dies afterward, leaving Emelye to Palamon.
- *The Miller's Tale.* A fabliau, in which Nicholas and Absolon try to make love to Alisoun, the pretty wife of a foolish old carpenter. Most of the characters end up in an uncomfortable situation.
- *The Reeve's Tale.* Another fabliau, intended to take revenge on the Miller; two clerks manage to sneak in and sleep with a miller's wife and closely-watched daughter.

- *The Cook's Tale.* A short fragment of what sounds like another dirty story, but Chaucer dropped it after only a few lines.
- *The Man of Law's Tale.* The story of a young woman, Custace or Constance, whose faith repeatedly places her in danger but also saves her; she is twice set adrift but finally manages to come home safely to her true family.
- ***The Wife of Bath's Tale.*** Another romance examined in this writing. An unnamed knight rapes a woman, is required to find out what women want, is forced to marry a hag to learn the answer, and when he gives her control over her destiny, is rewarded by her turning beautiful.
- *The Friar's Tale.* An exemplum or lesson, but also an attack on the Summoner: A summoner meets a yeoman who is actually a devil. They travel together. The devil encounters various souls whom he cannot take — but at the end takes the evil summoner to hell.
- *The Summoner's Tale.* The Summoner, angered by the Friar's attack on his occupation, tells a tale of a Friar engaged in what amounts to extortion in the name of religion, mostly of one Thomas and his wife, with Thomas eventually "paying" the Friar by breaking wind.
- ***The Clerk's Tale.*** Marquis Walter finds a low-born wife, Griselda, demands absolute obedience of her, subjects her to extreme testing, taking away her children and degrading her, and when she passes all his tests, finally accepts her again as his wife.
- *The Merchant's Tale*. A lustful old man, January, uses his money to acquire a young wife, May. Unhappy with him, when he loses his sight, she takes Damian as a lover. He regains his sight even as May and Damian are making love, but May talks her way out of it.
- *The Squire's Tale.* It appears that this was intended to be a fabulous — and extremely long — romance about the times of Cambyuscan (Genghis Khan). But after recounting many wonders and very little plot, the tale is halted. It is not clear if Chaucer abandoned it or if he intended the Franklin to interrupt it.
- ***The Franklin's Tale.*** A Breton Lay of *trouthe.* Arveragus and Dorigen marry; Arveragus leaves Brittany. Aurelius courts Dorigen, who promises to accept him if he can clear the rocks from the shores of Brittany. Helped by a Clerk, he does. Arveragus tells Dorigen to keep her promise; Aurelius frees her of it; the Clerk frees Aurelius of his promise.
- *The Physician's Tale.* Virginia, a beautiful Roman girl, finds an unjust judge trying to take advantage of her. Rather than lose her virtue, she has her father kill her.
- *The Pardoner's Tale.* One of Chaucer's greatest stories, even if its teller is utterly dishonest and greedy. Three drunks, seeing another man on his way to be buried, set out to kill Death. They meet an old man, who tells them where to find Death. His directions lead them to a treasure of gold, and the three kill each other. Find death they did indeed.

- *The Shipman's Tale.* Probably an unrevised tale originally assigned to another teller, since the narrator seems to be a woman. A complex tale of a woman who does not love her husband and lures a monk into paying her for sex. The monk borrows the money from her husband; in a complicated way, everyone is paid back.
- *The Prioress's Tale.* A "miracle of the Virgin"; a little boy sings constantly of the Virgin Mary. Murdered by Jews, he sings even after death, allowing his body to be found. The people take revenge on the Jews.
- *Sir Thopas.* Presented as Chaucer's own first attempt at a tale, it is a spoof of the romance genre — a monotonous tale about a very ordinary knight who does nothing much. The tale is quickly interrupted by the Host, leaving Chaucer to instead tell…
- *The Tale of Melibee.* A prose tale; Melibee's house is invaded, and he wishes his revenge, but his wife Prudence manages to talk him out of doing anything rash and guides him to understand forgiveness.
- *The Monk's Tale.* Not, properly, a tale, but a series of very short examples of people raised and then cast down by fortune. It probably was in existence before the *Canterbury Tales.* It is sufficiently depressing and monotonous that the Knight finally asks the Monk to stop.
- *The Nun's Priest's Tale.* One of the most beloved tales, of the dream of the rooster Chauntecleer, who dreams of a fox without knowing what it is, argues with his hen Pertelote about it — then is seized by the fox and barely escapes with his life.
- *The Second Nun's Tale.* A life of Saint Cecilia, in which she acts like a very pious busybody and ends up being martyred.
- *The Canon's Yeoman's Tale.* The Canon and his Yeoman join the party late; it appears they may be trying to cheat the pilgrims. The Canon soon retreats; the Yeoman goes on to talk about all the tricks and techniques of alchemy.
- *The Manciple's Tale.* Phebus jealously kills his wife, then wishes he could bring her back to life, and takes away his white crow's power of speech for trying to tell him the truth.
- *The Parson's Tale.* Labelled as the final tale of the set, and linked directly with Chaucer's final retraction, this is not a true tale but a prose exhortation. It is mostly about penance, and is not considered particularly interesting today.

"Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn." Poem in which Chaucer complains about the poor quality of Adam's copying. The date of the poem is uncertain; it exists in only two copies.

"Complaint to His Purse." A short poem probably written, or at least rewritten, in 1400, after Henry IV usurped the throne of Richard II. It is a poem in rime royal appealing to the new king for the return of his income. (And Chaucer did eventually regain his pensions, but died soon after.)

"Complaint Unto Pity." A complex poem of uncertain date, using intricate forms and legal language; it is a sad poem, with a complaint that pity is dead.

The House of Fame. Unfinished work. The date is uncertain; the best guess is that it is from around 1380. It uses octosyllabic couplets, a form which Chaucer later abandoned. It is a dream vision; the poet falls asleep, is caught up in a book (Virgil), then is carried into the heavens by a knowledgeable, talkative, boring eagle. He then sees goddess Fortune deciding whether to grant fame, and observes the House of Fame and the House of Rumour. At this point the poem breaks off.

"Lak of Stedfastnesse." A short poem, of uncertain date, expressing wonder and sorrow at the fact that the world is "variable." It has an envoy (to King Richard II, according to one major manuscript) appealing to him to lead the people back to steadfastness.

The Legend of Good Women. Other than the *Canterbury Tales,* probably Chaucer's last major work, produced probably in the 1390s. It has been conjectured that Anne of Bohemia, Richard II's first queen, requested that Chaucer write something to defend women who were constant in love. He never finished the work, writing only about half the number of tales he promised (those he completed are the legends of Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Hypsipyle and Medea, Lucrece, Ariadne, Philomela, and Phyllis; the Legend of Hypermnestra breaks off probably just a few lines before its proper end). It does treat of women who were constant in love, but the telling is a little monotonous; Chaucer may have been relieved when Anne's death in 1394 meant that he could give up the project. But the *Legend* is unusual in that Chaucer seems to have rewritten the prologue; there are two versions of it, known as "F" and "G," perhaps from before and after Anne's death.

"Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan." A letter in verse, presumed to be to Henry Scogan, a fellow courtier and poet. In it, Chaucer light-heartedly accuses Scogan of being responsible for catastrophes and warns him of consequences; he also seems to ask for favors. A clever little piece which is perhaps most important for the insight it gives into Chaucer's thinking.

"Merciles Beaute." A short poem, known in only one copy, and that copy not attributed to Chaucer; the only reason to think it is his is the style. Chaucer claims to have escaped love, that merciless thing, and hopes not to go back.

The Parliament of Fowls. One of the few major works Chaucer actually completed. The poem is another of Chaucer's dream visions. He is reading the *Dream of Scipio,* falls asleep, and finds himself being guided through the text — and then to Venus's Temple, and then finally to a vision of the birds choosing mates on Valentine's Day. This operates on many levels, with some birds much more "earthy" than others, but the main event is a contest of three male eagles to try to win the love of a female. This ends up being a formal debate which is not concluded; the decision is held off for a year while all the lesser birds go out and have fun breeding. As with much of Chaucer's writing, the tone is light and the narrator is generally treated as something of a fool. The form is the rime royal, with which Chaucer had become very comfortable by this time (perhaps around 1380, although the dating is very uncertain).

Troilus and Criseyde. Chaucer's longest completed work, his longest romance, and probably his last completed substantial project. It is thought to have been finished around 1386, shortly before he began the *Canterbury Tales*. The form is the seven-line rime royal stanza. It is the first major telling of the Troilus story in English, and the basic plot is familiar: Troilus, who had scorned love, is smitten when he sees Criseyde. Helped by his friend Pandarus, he and Criseyde form a liaison. But then she is traded to the Greeks for Antenor, and begins to pay attention to Diomedes, finally sending Troilus (who has been and will remain utterly faithful) a farewell by letter. He hopes to kill Diomedes, but is instead killed by Achilles. Because he has shown great *trouthe,* he is taken to a sort of pagan heaven. The story is the ultimate source for the tales of Shakespeare and others, but Chaucer's stress is different; he does not condemn Criseyde although he admits that she will be condemned. Much of the tale is the result of the turning of fortune's wheel. A tragic romance, many scholars regard it as Chaucer's best work.

"Truth." See "Balade de Bon Conseyl"

Approximate Chronology of Chaucer's Major Works

Note: Most of the attributions below give approximate dates or date ranges; I have simplified to the central date in each source. If the date is a range, it should be taken to mean that Chaucer worked on the poem during all those years; if there is a single date, it is the date of completion. My personal summing up of the evidence of the date of *completion* is included in the left column; the sources for this opinion, in the right column.

Work	**Suggested Dates**
The Book of the Duchess, 1369	1370 (ChaucerRiverside, p. xxix); 1369 (PearsallChaucer, p. 308); 1368-1370 (Howard, pp. 147-148); 1369 (ChaucerMills, p. x)
The House of Fame, 1379	1379 (ChaucerRiverside, p. xxix); 1378 (PearsallChaucer, p. 310); 1374-1379 (Howard, pp. 507-508); 1380 (ChaucerMills, p. xii)
The Parliament of Fowls, 1382	1381 (ChaucerRiverside, p. xxix); 1380 (PearsallChaucer, p. 310); 1380 (Howard, p. 508); 1380 (ChaucerMills, p. xii); 1382-1383 (ChaucerBrewer, p. 3)
Troilus and Criseyde, 1386	1386 (ChaucerRiverside, p. xxix); 1381-1386 (PearsallChaucer, p. 311); 1381-1386 (Howard, p. 508); 1382-1386 (ChaucerMills, p. xii)
A Treatise on the Astrolabe, 1392	1393 (ChaucerRiverside, p. xxviii); 1391 (PearsallChaucer, p. 312); 1392 (Howard, p. 510); 1391 (ChaucerMills, p. xiv)
The Legend of Good Women, 1394	1386-1394? (ChaucerRiverside, pp. 1059-1060); 1394-1395 [revision] (PearsallChaucer, p. 313); 1386-1394 (Howard, pp. 509-510); 1382-1386+1394 [revision] (ChaucerMills, pp. xii, xiv)
The Canterbury Tales, 1400	1388-1400 (ChaucerRiverside, p. xxix); 1387-1400 (PearsallChaucer, pp. 312-313); 1386-1399 (Howard, pp. 509-510); 1387-1400 (ChaucerMills, p. xiii)

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