

# A PERFECT MARRIAGE ON THE ROCKS: GEOFFREY AND PHILIPPA CHAUCER, AND THE *FRANKLIN'S TALE*

by *Craig R. Davis*

In the romance of the *Franklin's Tale* Chaucer imagines the marriage of a lower-born knight to a higher-born lady. This fictional union is not dissimilar, structurally, to the bourgeois poet's own advantageous marriage to Philippa Roet, the daughter of a Flemish knight. In both cases, a socially inferior husband marries up in the world: above his own *rank* in the case of the knight Arveragus, above his own *estate* or *class* in the case of Geoffrey Chaucer. Since the *Franklin's Tale* has long been received as the most idealized depiction of conjugal love in the *Canterbury Tales*,<sup>1</sup> its analogy to the poet's own marital situation might repay some closer scrutiny and social analysis.

## THE CHAUCERS<sup>2</sup>

Geoffrey Chaucer was from the wealthy, though *nouveau*, upper reaches of the third estate; his wife Philippa was the daughter of Sir Payne or Paon de Roet, a herald-at-arms in the service of Queen Philippa of Hainault. When Sir Payne returned to the service of the queen's sister Marguerite, empress of Germany, Queen Philippa took charge of her retainer's four children, among whom was her namesake. Philippa Roet may have first met Geoffrey Chaucer in the household of the queen's daughter-in-law Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster, where the future poet had been placed, presumably by his parents, as a page. In any case, a "Philippa Pan.," whose abbreviated name is variously explained, appears along with that of Geoffrey Chaucer in an expense account of 1357. If this Philippa is Sir Payne's daughter, she returned to the service of the queen some time after the Countess Elizabeth departed with her husband to Ireland in 1361.

In 1366 Philippa Chaucer was granted a lifetime annuity of 10 marks as *domicella* of the queen, perhaps on the occasion of her marriage to Geoffrey Chaucer.<sup>3</sup> The next year, King Edward gave an annuity of 20 marks to the poet himself, possibly at the birth of a child to his former ward and her new husband.<sup>4</sup> When the queen died later that year, Philippa went on to the service of Constance of Castile, John of Gaunt's second wife. Philippa's sister Katherine, married to Sir Hugh Swynford, was governess of Gaunt's children, becoming first his mistress, then eventually his third wife.

Further royal annuities followed. On the day after Chaucer was sworn in as Controller of Customs in 1374, John of Gaunt granted the couple another annuity, partly but explicitly in recognition of Philippa's former service to his mother, the old queen, and to the second Countess of Lancaster, Constance. Thomas Chaucer, the Chaucers' son, enjoyed unusual favor and generosity from Gaunt in later years, who paid out 100 pounds for his marriage to Maud, daughter of Sir John Burghersh of Ewelme. Thomas took his father's surname, of course, but kept his mother's Roet coat-of-arms, which we find quartering the Burghersh arms of Thomas's wife Maud on his tomb at Ewelme in 1534.<sup>5</sup> Donald Howard comments:

What must be remembered is that Chaucer *married well*, and the marriage brought him advantages of status, connections, and annuities . . . Precisely what advantages Philippa would have had from the contract must be a matter for earnest conjecture. (Howard's emphasis)<sup>6</sup>

Of course, it was probably the poet's promise and personal wealth that made him a potential match for Philippa Roet, whose father's real status in the royal household as a dependent "King of Arms" may not have been all that high.<sup>7</sup> But the marriage was still a step up for the poet, and the access of Geoffrey and Thomas to the exalted circles in which they moved was largely through Philippa's intimacy with the Lancastrian household. Philippa remained close to her fortunate sister Katherine, often living with her in Lincolnshire and apart from her husband in London.<sup>8</sup> And even though Gaunt had known Chaucer since they were young men,<sup>9</sup> the poet's continued association with him came primarily through Philippa: she was the socially significant partner in this couple. Geoffrey Chaucer had to work pretty hard, in fact, to maintain his usefulness in a milieu that his wife had entered at birth. And this fact meant that the couple's duties—hers as lady-in-waiting, his as Controller of Customs and royal agent—kept them often apart.

## UNEQUAL MARRIAGE

In the *Franklin's Tale* Chaucer shows how such a strategic marriage might be experienced emotionally. In fact, the Franklin quietly makes the social inequality of husband and wife a tacit precondition of the idealized relationship he imagines for them:

In Armorik, that called is Britayne,  
 Ther was a knyght that loved and dide his payne  
 To serve a lady in his beste wise;  
 And many a labour, many a greet emprise,  
 He for his lady wroghte er she were wonne.  
 For she was oon the faireste under sonne,  
 And eek therto comen of so heigh kynrede  
 That wel unnethes dorste this knyght, for drede,  
 Telle hire his wo, his peyne, and his distresse.

(V 729–37)<sup>10</sup>

Arveragus has to win by laborious martial service the recognition of a lady who enjoys her superior status by birth, by her “heigh kynrede.”<sup>11</sup> The Franklin emphasizes the social awkwardness of the knight’s suit by a doubling of adverbs: “eek therto” in line 735; “wel unnethes” in line 736. “And furthermore, in addition [to her beauty as a woman],” Dorigen had “come from such a noble family that truly this knight scarcely dared, for fear, to reveal to her his suffering, his pain, and his distress” (735–37).

What is interesting about this passage is that even though the lady Dorigen clearly represents a social opportunity for Arveragus, one that is worth an investment of considerable effort on his part, that investment is depicted as spontaneous and interest-free, as motivated not by calculation of future benefit, but by true love. The knight’s genuine suffering in love validates his social ambition for the Franklin: it confirms the natural appropriateness of this alliance between humble worth and noble birth. Arveragus’s emotional commitment and capacity for service is constructed by the Franklin as a primary natural asset which he brings to the union. Service in love, both performed in the past and promised for the future, is a resource of substantial credit in the value system of the romance; in fact, it constitutes the knight’s primary contribution to the marriage settlement, one which is functionally equivalent to Dorigen’s beauty and superior social rank. Like patient Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, whose “dowry” is her “feith, and nakednesse, and maydenhede” (IV 866), Arveragus brings to his marriage a moral brideprice of proven loyalty, deep respect, and affective strength.

Dorigen herself is specified as making his emotional commitment and sensitivity one of the conditions upon which she bases her acceptance of Arveragus, although she first takes into account two other prior considerations:

But atte laste she, for his worthynesse,  
 And namely for his meke obeysaunce,  
 Hath swich a pitee caught of his penaunce  
 That pryvely she fil of his accord  
 To take hym for hir housbonde and hir lord.

(V 738–42)

First of all, Arveragus has had to upgrade his own public status by significant personal achievement in a secondary system of social value—knightly deeds of arms. His demonstrated effectiveness as a knight—his “worthynesse”—is the *sine qua non* of her acceptance of him.<sup>12</sup> With this public achievement, Arveragus has diminished the social distance between them and brought his own status to within a lower limit of tolerability. But he has not yet overcome serious informal barriers to their unequal marriage. Arveragus has also to make clear to Dorigen that, while *worthy* of consideration, he does not intend to challenge her own inborn superiority by assuming the husband’s dominant role in yet another competing system of value, that of Christian matrimony, where “the husband is the head of the wife” (Ephesians 5.23): “swich lordshipe as men han over hir wyves” (V 743). So Arveragus’s worthiness is specified further as “his meke obeysaunce,” his posture of inferiority, dependence, and desire to please his lady. Only when the public worth and personal submissiveness of her suitor are established in Dorigen’s mind does she further consider the affective condition of Arveragus, “his penaunce,” his suffering in love for her sake (V 740). Even so, she only consents to the marriage after some considerable time—“atte laste”—and does so “pryvely” (privately, secretly, possibly even clandestinely), sensitive to the public inappropriateness of the match. Strategic considerations are not absent from her mind, then, but Dorigen finally decides to follow her heart. She invests her primary interest in the quality of Arveragus’s love for her, and the Franklin is eager for us to approve of her choice:

Heere may men seen an humble, wys accord;  
 Thus hath she take her servant and her lord—  
 Servant in love, and lord in mariage.

(V 791–93)

## MUTUAL OBEDIENCE

At this point I suppose I should confess, though I do so somewhat sheepishly, that I really do still think that Kittredge was basically right when he said long ago that there is a special personal seriousness to Chaucer's depiction of marriage in the *Franklin's Tale*, that the poet has invented in this romance an idealized relationship that he intends the reader to receive with special sympathy and respect, particularly in that pilgrim's famous sermon on freedom and mutuality in love. I will not rehearse now the full force of the Franklin's words about not constraining love by mastery—

Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon  
Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!  
Love is a thyng as any spirit free.

(V 765–67)—

but you will remember Kittredge's famous judgment of them: "Chaucer means us to regard the Franklin as . . . summarizing the whole [marriage] debate and bringing it to a definitive conclusion which we are to accept as a perfect rule of faith and practice."<sup>13</sup> We can leave aside for a moment the crypto-patriarchal sentimentalism of which Kittredge may be suspected here, as well as the problematic authority of the Franklin, or any other Canterbury pilgrim, as having the very last word on love and marriage. We must also leave unanswered the question as to whether Chaucer's own marriage to Philippa Roet was a happy one or not, as well as that of the poet's real relations with Cecily Champain. I am not suggesting, nor was Kittredge, I believe, that the *Franklin's Tale* is a celebration of the poet's own happiness and fidelity in marriage. But it is worth noting, I think, that the *Franklin's Tale* constructs a romance analogue of Chaucer's own marital situation as one ideally suited to the achievement of true happiness and nobility in love.

This parallelism should make us wonder whether the formula of mutual obedience in marriage, far from being universally applicable, as the Franklin seems to suggest, is not really to be most persuasively imagined in a particular social nexus, that of a strategic marriage where the man is categorically inferior to the wife. As Andreas Capellanus reminds us, although we need to take the seriousness of some of his strictures with a bit of care: "masculus nobiliori vel ignobiliori vinctus uxori ordinem non mutat" (a man married to a woman of higher or lower birth than himself does not change his own rank).<sup>14</sup> It is this structural social inferiority of the husband that makes possible the balance between competing systems of dominance and subordination celebrated in the Franklin's

sermon, a chiastic tension between the roles of ruling lady and submissive lover, of the husband who is head of the wife. On this last point, Arveragus is allowed to keep the “name of soveraynetee” (the appearance of authority) “for shame of his degree,” to save face in his role as the man in the relationship (V 751–52). And in order not to confuse or complicate this power-sharing arrangement prematurely with the introduction of further social roles for his characters, the Franklin carefully keeps the couple childless.

However warmly the Franklin may idealize the delicate balance of power with which Arveragus and Dorigen undertake their marriage, the pilgrim is preparing to dramatize the weaknesses of such an arrangement. A similar mutuality had been proposed, after a crisis, in the Wife of Bath’s fifth marriage to Jankin (III 823–25), as well as in the ending of the Arthurian romance which she tells as part of the game forward (III 1255–56).<sup>15</sup> In both cases, the woman is shown to have gotten the upper hand over her husband before the reciprocal relationship could even be attempted. Here, the Franklin takes the Wife of Bath’s happily-ever-after ending of mutual obedience, finds another, more plausible social location for it, and then puts it to the test.<sup>16</sup> The relation of the two spouses to other people, to a whole implied social structure, is shown by the Franklin to be crucial in defining the private relationship of those spouses to each other. Dorigen and Arveragus must even manipulate the public perception of their relationship in order to make it conform to an expectation that the man should wear the pants in the family. But it is also obvious that the lady has married beneath her or she would not have felt it necessary to obscure from public scrutiny her original acceptance of Arveragus. A relationship that relies upon a contrived public image for its success is thus vulnerable on several fronts, one of which is a shift in the perception of the relative status of the partners through time, a widening of the social distance between them after the retirement of the subordinate husband from the knightly endeavors through which he first elevated his public worth and won his lady’s consideration.

Chrétien de Troyes had already developed this point in several romances. His Erec, for instance, is publicly blamed for neglecting his reputation as a knight once he marries Enide; her apparent internalization of that public censure provokes the crisis of the romance.<sup>17</sup> Chrétien’s Yvain, only a week after his marriage to Laudine, is upbraided by Gauvain:

Comant? Seroiz vos or de çaus,  
 .....  
 Qui por lor fames valent mains?  
 Honiz soit de sainte Marie,  
 Qui por anpirier se marie!

Amander doit de bele dame,  
 Qui l'a a amie ou a fame,  
 Ne n'est puis droiz, que ele l'aint,  
 Que ses pris et ses los remaint.  
 Certes, ancor seroiz iriez  
 De s'amor, se vos anpiriez;  
 Que fame a tost s'amor reprise,  
 Ne n'a pas tort, s'ele desprise  
 Celui, qui de neant anpire,  
 Quant il est del reume sire.

What? Will you now be one of those, . . . who lose in merit because of their wives? Shame on him, by Saint Mary, who marries and degenerates as a result! Anyone who has a beautiful lady for mistress or wife should grow all the better for it; and it's not right for her to love him once his reputation and merit have lapsed. Indeed, you'd also find yourself regretting the loss of her love, should you degenerate; for a woman is quick to withdraw her affection, and rightly so, if she despises a man who, once he's lord of her realm, deteriorates in any respect.<sup>18</sup>

Yvain takes this advice only too well, of course: he errs on the side of ambition rather than *recréantise*. Both Erec and Yvain need to find the proper balance between respectful attention to their ladies and public maintenance of their reputations. Chrétien clearly establishes a categorical dilemma for chivalric lovers: that is, in order to keep his lady, the knight has to leave her—at least for a while. Conversely, in order to enjoy the service of a worthy lover, the lady must let him go. And after Chrétien, this motivation of a married knight's departure can be activated with minimal effort on the part of subsequent poets like Chaucer. It is conventional.<sup>19</sup>

### THE BLACK ROCKS, THE LOVE-GARDEN, AND THE BUSY STREET

Arveragus and Dorigen are very happy in their relationship of mutual obedience (V 802), but not forever after, not even for very long. Conventional responsibilities intrude upon their perfectly, but precariously, balanced relationship. After a year's honeymoon, Arveragus remembers his knightly calling and goes off to England to pursue, once again, honor in passages of arms: "For al his lust he sette in swich labour" (V 812). He seems to realize, even if his wife does not, that he cannot take his position for granted. He can never change the fact of his lower birth. Since

arms are his vocation, continued success therein comprises the core of his social identity. He must maintain the minimal achieved status that enabled her to accept him in the first place. If he does not, even she will eventually come to feel that she has married beneath herself.

At this stage of the story, of course, one would have expected the male knight-errant to become the primary focus of attention, the clear protagonist of the romance. Instead, it is his lady who is subjected to a test of her sincerity and fidelity in love. As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the most subtle and searching tests of character occur when they are least expected, when the real challenge seems to be situated elsewhere. Though Arveragus is gone for two years, we are not told a single word about his adventures except that he did well: he reconfirms his knightly worthiness as we expected him to (V 1087–89). Rather, it is the stay-at-home lady who stumbles. The Franklin leaves us in no doubt that Dorigen cares deeply for Arveragus—she “loveth hire housbonde as hire hertes lyf” (V 816)—but also troubles to make her expression of that love somewhat disturbing and excessive:

For his absence wepeth she and siketh,  
As doon thise noble wyves whan hem liketh.

(V 817–18)

“As do these noble women when it pleases them,” the Franklin rather dryly remarks. There is perhaps something somewhat spoiled or self-indulgent in her behavior:

She moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyneth;  
Desir of his presence hire so destreyneth  
That al this wyde world she sette at noght.

(V 819–21)

To be sure, Dorigen’s is just the kind of reaction normally cultivated in a Breton lay: “al [is] tendre herte” in this highly sentimentalized form of romance.<sup>20</sup> But even so, the Franklin seems deliberately to be exaggerating his Breton lady’s emotional difficulty, or at least to be treating it with less respect than it might conventionally be expected to enjoy. Dorigen’s friends bring her out for walks along the sea-cliffs to distract her, but she then begins to fixate morbidly upon the “grisly rokkes blake” which line the coast of Brittany (V 859; cf. 868). Indeed, she generalizes her particular anxiety to a more cosmic questioning of the wisdom and goodness of a God who could create such things as might prevent her husband’s return to her (V 865–94). In short, from her rather self-absorbed perspective, the rocks come to represent the chief threat to her



happiness, the means by which she could be permanently deprived of the adoration Arveragus offers her. What Dorigen reveals in this outburst, of course, is her own lack of thoughtfulness about the more pressing dangers which her husband must daily face as a fighting knight in a foreign land. She seems oblivious to the fact that it is a real social necessity, the need to maintain his public worth and self-respect, which has driven Arveragus from her side. He has to prove, to others and to her and to himself, that he is still worthy of her. After all, it was only after he had already achieved many a difficult labor, and many a dangerous enterprise, that she first condescended to consider him as her spouse.

The real significance of the rocks, then, is not the danger they pose to Arveragus's safe homecoming—when he finally does return to Brittany, there is no mention of the rocks posing any obstacle at all—but rather their revelation of a certain immaturity in the heroine. It is as if the Franklin deliberately weakens his lady's character, just as he has strengthened his knight's, in order to bring their disparate social identities into a more interesting and dramatic tension. The knight's own test will come later. In any case, Dorigen seems unwilling to face or grasp the practical exigencies of her unequal marriage to a lower-born fighting knight. So sensitive to possible criticism of her choice of husband before marriage, she now rejects the value system of the social world in which she lives: "al this wyde world she sette at noght" (V 821).

Her friends realize their mistake. They take her away from the open seashore to an enclosed garden that replicates the fantasy universe of her desire, one in which black rocks, and other unpleasant realities, are absent, or at least structurally occluded from sight. We can recognize the literary origins of this space: it is adapted from a fairly conventional garden of love and is only surpassed in beauty, we are told, by the "verray paradys" (V 912), the Garden of Eden, from which Adam and Eve were expelled into the fallen world in which we actually live. The garden is a place where the occupants neither fight, nor pray, nor work, the schematized occupations of the three estates of medieval society. Instead, it is a place for singing, dancing, and play, especially the courtly game of love. So Dorigen's garden is constructed by the Franklin as a charming but false reality, a factitiously beautiful world where his heroine finally feels she has enough control of her environment to "lete hir sorwe slyde" (V 924). Just as she had ignored both the social expectation that impelled her husband to England and the actual dangers of knightly combat that might prevent him from returning to her, so she now relaxes in a casual obtuseness in her relations with other men. She indulges in a polite, and seemingly harmless, flirtation with an extremely handsome young squire who presents himself in the place of Arveragus as her adoring lover. Aurelius offers Dorigen a flattering facsimile of the relationship she had

enjoyed with her absent husband and she responds “in pley” (V 988) that she will love him best of any man if he can remove all the black rocks so that not a single stone can be seen (V 989–97). She does phrase her condition rather carelessly, of course, and Aurelius responds to her teasing with a little willful obtuseness of his own. He should have realized that the condition about the rocks was intended as a gentle rebuff, as an indication that Dorigen still cared for her husband. But some such reproof was only to be expected from a *belle dame* like Dorigen. Man lives by hope: why would she bother to play with him at all if she were not at least somewhat interested? So Aurelius plays along himself, taking Dorigen at her literal word, strictly interpreting her joking promise as if it were a far more serious commitment. Maybe it is more serious than she realizes. How is he supposed to know? And eventually Aurelius does succeed, with professional help, in making the rocks seem to disappear for a while under the high spring tides, leaving them just as dangerous, we may imagine, as ever they were before.<sup>21</sup> But by then, the purpose of the condition—safe passage home for Arveragus—is obviated by the fact that he has long since returned.

When Dorigen reveals her plight to Arveragus, he conscientiously refuses to constrain her love by mastery or even to assert his legitimate counterclaim on her far more serious “trouthe” to be his “humble trewe wyf” (V 758–59). In fact, the “truthful” side of his own character tries to make his wife’s position easier by pretended nonchalance:

This housbonde, with glad chiere, in frendly wyse  
 Answerde and seyde as I shal yow devyse:  
 “Is ther ought elles, Dorigen, but this?”  
 .....  
 “It may be wel, paraventure, yet to day.  
 Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!  
 For God so wisly have mercy upon me,  
 I hadde wel levere ystiked for to be  
 For verray love which that I to yow have,  
 But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save.  
 Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe.”

(V 1467–69, 1473–79)

Yet, this reaction is so unnaturally scrupulous that it seems almost canting, phony, false. Arveragus seems perversely to ignore his own claims upon Dorigen’s love and loyalty. And indeed, the Franklin is quick to show the brittleness of the knight’s bland mask and easygoing manner here, the feelings of suspicion and shame which seethe just below his forced determination never to show his lady jealousy and always to accept her will in everything (cf. V 744–50):

But with that word he brast anon to wepe,  
 And seyde, "I yow forbede, up peyne of death,  
 That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,  
 To no wight telle thou of this aventure—  
 As I may best, I wol my wo endure—  
 Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,  
 That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse."

(V 1480–86)

This is not our loyal knight's most attractive moment and may be taken by some readers as tellingly brutal, as revelatory of the real power relations which obtain between men and women even in this most idealized of relationships.<sup>22</sup> Dorigen can keep her promise to Aurelius, but Arveragus will *kill* her if she ever lets anyone find out that he has lost sexual control of her. Masculine pride in his public ownership of Dorigen is revealed here as the real bottom line of Arveragus's self-image, known cuckoldry the one outcome he cannot tolerate under any circumstances. Even earlier, we remember, he had insisted on the "name of soverayne-tee" in the marriage (V 751).

But I am not sure that this reading is not a bit anachronistic, a projection of our own gender sensitivities upon the already complex mix of social values being pitched against each other in this fourteenth-century poem. Arveragus's tearful threat might be compared with Dorigen's unenacted contemplation of suicide on the model of all those antique heroines before she reveals her situation to her husband. Both reactions are rhetorically extreme, to be sure, but both also serve to reassure the reader of the depth of feeling these noble characters have for each other, their real distress at their predicament. Neither one is a plaster saint of "trouthe," but I believe the Franklin intends their emotional outbursts to be forgiven by us because they indeed love so much. Dorigen feels she would rather die than be forced to betray her husband. Arveragus feels himself capable of real violence should she publicly reveal his humiliation. These extreme impulses, whether suicidal or murderous, are prompted by the fact that the characters feel trapped between opposing passions and ego ideals. And Arveragus's anger has some justification, for we remember that he had trusted her implicitly:

No thyng list hym to been ymaginatyf,  
 If any wight hadde spoke, whil he was oute,  
 To hire of love; he hadde of it no doubte.  
 He noght entendeth to no swich mateere.

(V 1094–97)

Now, despite Dorigen's current tears, Arveragus does not know for sure what feelings might have prompted her dalliance with the squire while he was gone, nor even exactly what her real feelings for this handsome young man may be now. But Arveragus is smart enough to realize that he is in no position to constrain his high-born wife's love by mastery in any case, especially if she has chosen to offer it to another:

Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon  
Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!

(V 765–66)

Whether he lets her go or makes her stay—either way—he loses.

So Arveragus sticks to his vow to Dorigen very unhappily, even perhaps with some degree of resentment or passive aggression hidden in his insistence that she strictly keep her word to the squire, certainly with a far worse grace than he had intended or once promised. Far from following her will in all things (V 749), Arveragus now does not even seem to want to know what her real will is. He simply wants to get it over with. He commands two servants to take her to the garden at once. This haste seems even more desperate and self-destructive than Dorigen's two days of suicidal fantasies. Aurelius himself comes to believe that the knight would surely have died of grief—"in sorwe and in distresse"—even if his wife's infidelity never became public knowledge at all (V 1596–97).

The Franklin reveals some defensiveness for his characters' course of action here, in a direct address to his tale's audience:

Paraventure an heep of yow, ywis,  
Wol holden hym a lewed man in this  
That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie.  
Herkneth the tale er ye upon hire crie.

(V 1493–96)

Many will find Arveragus craven or mean or just plain stupid to make his wife go through with this plan, just as they may be inclined to judge Dorigen harshly for even thinking of complying. And indeed, many of my students over the years—women all—have expressed not admiration for the liberated values of this man nor respect for the integrity of his wife, but rather a severe exasperation with both of them, even scorn. What kind of a knight is Arveragus anyway? He should have dealt with this slick pretty-boy the old-fashioned way—with a fisted glove. And Dorigen should have stood by her man, whatever he or anyone else told her to do. She is the fancy dame in this romance after all: these men are supposed to obey *her*.

Whatever we make of the balance of power between the spouses at this crucial juncture—has Arveragus put himself in a stronger or a weaker position compared with that of Dorigen by insisting that she keep her word to Aurelius?—they are both in a bad way. But the knight's categorical sacrifice of his husbandly prerogatives, as well as the lady's obvious distress, provokes some enlightenment and self-awareness on the part of the squire. Their suffering, if we recall the Franklin's earlier remarks (V 775), has indeed achieved something that rigor might never have attained. They are like those old martyrs in the saints' lives who inspire the repentance of their persecutors. Aurelius has indulged himself in a forced interpretation of Dorigen's promise to him, in an impressive but still fairly raw trick in that game of love they were once playing in the garden. His attempt to constrain her love by mastery reveals to him his own love as less than pure, as a "lust" from which he now sees it were more honorable for him to desist (V 1522). The location of his realization is not insignificant, after the false threat of the black rocks along the shore and the false security of the garden of love. The Franklin makes Aurelius meet Dorigen "[a]mydde the toun, right in the quykkest strete," downtown, right in the busiest street (V 1502). In the broad light of day, in the ordinary space of an everyday social world, the quality of Aurelius' claim upon Dorigen seems, even to him, somewhat thin and sordid: "a cherlyssh wrecchednesse / Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse" (V 1523–24).<sup>23</sup> In fact, there seems to be an unseen providence of "trouthe" operating in the plot of the Franklin's romance. Arveragus has already tried to put his faith in it when he tells Dorigen:

It may be wel, paraventure, yet to day.  
Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!

(V 1473–74)

The Franklin, too, asks us to trust in "trouthe"—the trueness of the love between these two spouses—and to wait until the end of the tale before we judge the couple as foolishly or irresponsibly scrupulous (V 1493–98). He wants us to believe in the implicit grace of a romance world where all things work together for good to them that love truly and keep their promises (cf. Romans 8.28), however such lovers may misstep in word or deed on their way to their happy ending.

The Franklin's romance ends with a true reconciliation of husband and wife after this very serious upset in their relationship: "Nevere eft ne was ther angre hem bitwene" (V 1553). Their original mutuality is restored, but this time on a more mature and self-aware footing. The knight has demonstrated not only his martial, but his moral worthiness of his noble lady: he really meant what he said when he pledged to love,

honor, and obey her. His commitment to that ideal is no longer pristine and smoothly formulaic, a virtue cloistered in the first “happy ending” with which this romance began. The knight has been tested by a hard and emotionally confusing choice. The lady similarly has undergone the kind of sentimental education so often reserved for the male protagonist of a romance. Like a young Arthurian knight, she grows into the nobility of her birth during the course of her adventure. At the end of it, her husband is, once again, her servant in love, her lord in marriage (V 793); she is his lady and his love and his wife also (V 796–97). He cherishes her as though she were a queen (V 1554), and she has learned not to put their unusual relationship at further risk (V 1555).

## CONCLUSION

Whether or not we find this resolution satisfying, Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* shows us that perfect marriages can be just as fraught emotionally as any other kind, even when they are contracted with deliberate consideration of advantage and liability in social status, wealth, or political alliance. In romance, complex interests of various sorts are affectively constructed; these interests are naturalized and ennobled by the emotional values promoted in the genre. Romance thus construes social interest affectively and makes the quality of love itself a key strategic resource in the calculation of interest. Chaucer’s theme in the *Franklin’s Tale* is not only that loving mutual obedience between spouses is a good idea, but also that it cannot be found or maintained without serious consideration of the public status of those spouses as it develops in a quotidian social world, the busy street. And even then, happiness in marriage is achieved only through unhappiness and difficulty, amid the confusion of cost-benefit compromises, continuing public responsibilities, unexpected emotional needs, new erotic attractions, competing formal commitments, and complexly developing social identities, as well as through the laborious cultivation of some old-fashioned romance virtues. Happiness in love requires not only the commitment to mutuality, but also some considerable forbearance for the various kinds of human weakness that inevitably cause one to fall short of the ideal, “to doon amys or speken” (V 783), as both the Franklin’s characters are shown to have done in his tale. Perhaps it is this hard-eyed hopefulness that is the reason Chaucer chose for the Franklin a genre that undertakes positively to dramatize the growing pains of lovers’ relationships through time. As David Raybin concludes, “The *Franklin’s Tale* is supremely optimistic in the vision it offers of human fulfillment” in marriage, but that optimism is based upon an experience

of life “gained through direct confrontation with the joys and menaces of the world.”<sup>24</sup> Some of these joys and menaces our poet and his wife must surely have known themselves during the decades of their lives together and their many times apart. The structural homology I have adduced between the marriage of Geoffrey and Philippa Chaucer and that of the imaginary spouses in the *Franklin's Tale* is not, once again, intended naively to idealize our poet's own life and character through the idealism his pilgrim expresses in this romance. But it does suggest how our famously modest poet knew whereof he spake in the *Franklin's Tale* and could use his art, like many another teller of tales, to transform his own social experience into an especially compelling and self-affirming fiction.

*Smith College*

Versions of this paper were presented at Harvard University in 1993 and at the 34th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, MI, in 1999, in a session devoted to Anthropological Approaches to Medieval Literature: Strategic Marriage in Medieval History, Romance, and Saga. I would like to thank Nancy Bradbury, Phil Cardew, Chick Chickering, Carolyn Collette, Vincent DiMarco, Arlyn Diamond, Daniel Donoghue, Hoyt Duggan, Steve Glosecki, John Hill, Marijane Osborn, Richard Parmentier, Derek Pearsall, and anonymous readers for the *Chaucer Review* for responding to various parts of its argument.

1. G. L. Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), 209–10; cf. John M. Fyler, “Love and Degree in the *Franklin's Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 21 (1986–87): 321–37, 322.

2. The biographical points which follow depend primarily upon three works: *Chaucer Life-Records*, ed. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (Oxford, 1966), 67–75; Donald R. Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York, 1987), 91–98; and Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1992), 49–51.

3. *Chaucer Life-Records*, 67–75; Howard, *Chaucer*, 91; Pearsall, *Life*, 50.

4. *Chaucer Life-Records*, 123–27; Howard, *Chaucer*, 91.

5. E. A. Greening-Lamborn, “The Arms on the Chaucer Tomb at Ewelme,” *Oxoniensia* 5 (1940): 78–93; cf. Pearsall, *Life*, 279–80.

6. Howard, *Chaucer*, 95.

7. Pearsall, *Life*, 50.

8. Pearsall, *Life*, 341–44.

9. Sydney Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt* (New York, 1964), 10.

10. Cf. Susan Crane, “The Franklin as Dorigen,” *Chaucer Review* 24 (1990): 236–52. All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987).

11. Fyler, “Love and Degree,” 323, following A. Kent Hieatt, *Chaucer; Spenser, Milton* (Montreal, 1975), 63.

12. This primary martial sense of Arveragus's worthiness is adumbrated in the *General Prologue* where the narrator remarks of the pilgrim Knight, after listing his many military successes: “And though that he were worthy, he was wys, / And of his port as meeke as is a mayde” (I 68–69).

13. Cf. note 1, above.

14. *De Amore*, ed. E. Trojel, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1892), 19.

15. Jill Mann, “Chaucerian Themes and Style in the *Franklin's Tale*,” in *Medieval Literature: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition, Vol. 1*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, 1982), 133–53, 148.

16. Mann, “Chaucerian Themes,” 140.

17. *Erec et Enide*, ed. and trans. Carleton W. Carroll (New York, 1987), especially lines 2396–2550.

18. *Yvain (Le Chevalier au Lion)*, ed. Wendelin Foerster, with introduction, notes, and glossary by T. B. W. Reid (Manchester, 1942), lines 2484, 2486–98. Trans. D. D. R. Owen in Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances* (London, 1987), 314–15.

19. Cf. D. S. Brewer, "Chaucer and Chrétien and Arthurian Romance," in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of R. H. Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London, 1974), 255–59; Mary Hamel, "The *Franklin's Tale* and Chrétien de Troyes," *Chaucer Review* 17 (1982–83): 316–31; Linda Charnes, "'This Work Unreasonable': Narrative Frustration and Generic Redistribution in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 23 (1988–89): 300–15.

20. Cf. *General Prologue* I 150, and Kathryn Hume, "Why Chaucer Calls the *Franklin's Tale* a Breton Lay," *Philological Quarterly* 51 (1972): 365–79, 367.

21. David Raybin, "'Wommen, of Kynde, Desiren Liberte': Rereading Dorigen, Rereading Marriage," *Chaucer Review* 27 (1992): 65–96, 72.

22. Cf. Mary R. Bowman, "'Half as She Were Mad': Dorigen in the Male World of the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 27 (1993): 239–51, and Nina Manasan Greenberg, "Dorigen as Enigma: The Production of Meaning in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 33 (1999): 329–49.

23. Raybin, "Wommen, of Kynde," 77.

24. Raybin, "Wommen, of Kynde," 82.