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The *Canterbury Tales* I: romance

The term 'romance' is not an exact one. Applied to medieval writings it denotes a large area whose outer limits are by no means easy to define. Yet most readers of English literature have some notion of what a typical romance is like, a notion derived mainly from the tales of Arthur and the Round Table. The hero of such a romance will be a knight who engages in perilous adventures, riding out and frequently fighting, sometimes to win or defend a lady, sometimes to defeat enemies of the realm, and sometimes for no evident reason at all. It should be said straightaway that the reader who turns to Chaucer's great story-collection in search of such a typical romance will be disappointed; for the five Canterbury 'romances' to be discussed in this chapter are all, in one way or another, divergent from that stereotype. 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 his period, the knightly romance.[1]

The only poem of Chaucer's which has an Arthurian setting – indeed, the only poem in which he so much as mentions Arthur, apart from a passing reference derived from Guillaume de Lorris in the first fragment of the *Romaunt of the Rose* – is the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. The opening line of this tale, 'In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour', holds out the promise that here for once Chaucer is going to try his hand at the most traditional kind of knightly romance. Yet by the end of the poem's first paragraph this expectation is already shaken:

> In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour,
> Of which that Britons speken greet honour,
> Al was this land fulfild of fayerye.
> The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede.
> This was the olde opinion, as I rede;

I speke of manye hundred yeres ago.
But now kan no man se none elves mo,
For now the grete charitee and prayeres
Of lymytours and othere hooly freres,
That serchen every lond and every streem,
As thikke as motes in the sonne-beem,
Blessynge halles, chambres, kichenes, boures,
Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures,
Thropes, bernes, shipnes, dayeryes –
This maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.
For ther as wont to walken was an elf
Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself
In undermeles and in morwenynges,
And seyth his matyns and his hooly thynges
As he gooth in his lymytacioun.
Wommen may go saufly up and doun.
In every bussh or under every tree
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour. (857–81)

The ostensible purpose of these scintillating lines is the same as that of the opening of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: to set the ensuing story in Britain's great age of wonders, the reign of King Arthur. Yet, whereas the *Gawain*-poet's introduction is serious and single-minded, Chaucer's is comic and distracted. It may appear that the Wife of Bath (for the voice is distinctly hers) here turns a traditional comparison upside-down. Arthurian romancers commonly compare modern times unfavourably with the grand old days of Arthur; but the Wife at first speaks as if, for women at least, things are better nowadays. In Arthurian times women lived in continual fear of being raped by the 'elves' or fairy creatures with which the land was then filled; but now these incubi have been driven out by the pious activity of the friars: 'Wommen may go saufly up and doun'. This flattery of friars may remind us that the Wife of Bath belongs to that class of 'worthy wommen of the toun' with whom the Friar on the pilgrimage was especially 'wel biloved and famulier', according to the *General Prologue* (215–17). Such women were, in fact, notorious for their susceptibility to sweet-talking friars. Yet the Wife is a tough character, who can look after herself. Perhaps the Friar's laughing compliment at the end of her prologue irritated her ('This is a long preamble of a tale!' 83). At any rate, one may detect a note of sarcasm in her response to the Host's call for a tale:

'Al redy, sire,' quod she, 'right as yow lest,
If I have licence of this worthy Frere.' (III, 854–5)

The mock submissiveness of these words prepares the way for the deceptive sweetness of the tale's opening. For the Wife does not in reality treat modern friars as an improvement on their elvish predecessors. Her description of friars blessing everything in sight 'as thikke as motes in the sonne-beem' is not merely ridiculous; it also has something of that horror of the swarm so vividly evoked later by the Summoner's dreadful account of thousands of friars swarming out of the devil's arse like bees from a hive (III, 1692–6). Nor are women, she suggests, actually safe with friars from sexual attack. Their only comfort is that the friar has not inherited the elf's power of infallibly causing conception: 'he ne wol doon hem but dishonour'. Nothing but dishonour! By comparison, the olden days of King Arthur emerge as something like a golden age for women. We may notice, looking back, that the Wife first describes Arthurian fairies, not as lustful male incubi, but as a happy band of dancing ladies:

> The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,
> Daunced ful ofte in many a grene mede. (860–1)

This brief but memorable glimpse of the queen of the fairies and her company of ladies does much to establish the character of the Arthurian world as the Wife is to portray it in her tale. It is essentially a feminine world, dominated by women both human and fairy. The fairy element is not obvious, for the old hag who turns into the beautiful young wife is never explained as an elf-woman. But neither does she turn out to be, as in the three other surviving English versions of the story, a human girl bewitched by a wicked stepmother.[2] Indeed, she is not explained at all. Yet the circumstances in which the knight first encounters her clearly associate her with the 'joly compaignye' of the queen of the fairies. Under the forest eaves he comes upon a company of four and twenty ladies dancing; and it is after they have mysteriously vanished that he first sees the old hag sitting on the green. This is enough, in a land 'fulfild of fayerye', to establish her true identity.

The dominance of women in the fairy world evoked by the Wife of Bath is striking. The hero of the tale is a man, a 'lusty bachelor' of Arthur's court; but he is not named, like Florent in Gower's version of the story or Sir Gawain in the other two versions. Nor is he, like Gower's Florent, a 'knyght aventurous'. The masculine activities of adventure and feats of arms play no part in his story. Riding back from a day's hawking he commits, it is true, the ultimate act of male domination, when he rapes a passing girl; but, unlike an incubus or a friar, he does not go unpunished. His act of 'oppressioun' delivers him, in fact, into the hands of the women – Arthur's queen and her ladies, and also the elf-woman. His life is made to depend on his ability to determine what women most desire; and the answer to that question, when he discovers it, proves to affirm their claim to supremacy:

> 'Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
> As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
> And for to been in maistrie hym above.' (1038–40)

Chaucer's only 'Arthurian romance', then, turns out to be a fairy-tale, told by a woman and dominated by women. Perhaps this is how Chaucer thought of Arthurian stories – strange as that may seem to a reader of Malory. In his tale the Squire speaks of 'Fairye' as the country out of which Gawain might come again (96); and the Nun's Priest skittishly associates an Arthurian book with women readers:

> This storie is also trewe, I undertake,
> As is the book of Launcelot de Lake,
> That wommen holde in ful greet reverence. (VII, 3211–13)

Chaucer probably had in mind here the French *Lancelot*, which formed part of the great thirteenth-century Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian stories. This is the very book which, in a memorable episode in Dante's *Inferno*, the two young lovers Paolo and Francesca were reading together when they first kissed. Dante himself had certainly read the *Lancelot*, for he recalls a tiny episode from the book, to brilliant effect, in the *Paradiso* (XVI, 14–15); but it may be surmised that he, like Chaucer, regarded knightly romance as a form of agreeable light reading to which no serious fourteenth-century poet should devote more than passing attention.

If this was indeed Chaucer's attitude, it may seem strange that he should have assigned to himself, of all the Canterbury pilgrims, the tale which comes closer than any other of his works to being a story of knightly adventure; but his *Tale of Sir Thopas*, as nearly all readers have noticed, is an outright burlesque. Adventure, as it figured so largely in the romance of chivalry, seems never to have attracted Chaucer's interest. His account of how Jason and Hercules 'soughten the aventures of Colcos' occurs in a context that directs attention not to male heroism but to female suffering (as part of the legend of Hypsipyle and Medea in the *Legend of Good Women*): and the only other Chaucerian hero who sets off in search of adventure is Sir Thopas himself. Having fallen in love with an 'elf-queene' (790), Thopas rides out into the 'contree of Fairye' (802). There he encounters her monstrous guardian, a three-headed giant called Sir Olifaunt ('Elephant'), whereupon he hurries home again to fetch his armour. There follows an elaborately circumstantial arming scene, very much in the romance manner, after which the knight sets out again to meet the giant. Chaucer is careful to explain that Thopas conducts himself on this second sortie exactly as a 'knyght auntrous' or adventurous knight should – sleeping in the open with his helm as a pillow, and drinking nothing but spring water:

> Hymself drank water of the well,
> As dide the knyght sire Percyvell
> So worly under wede,
> Til on a day – (915–18)

At this point, however, the Host can stand no more, and he tells Chaucer to stop: 'Thou doost noght elles but despendest tyme' (931). Perhaps Harry Bailly here voices his creator's thought about those shapeless and interminable adventures which occupy so many medieval romances. Yet it may be noticed that even in this ridiculous context, just as in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the thought of the elf-queen inspires Chaucer (himself described as 'elvyssh' in the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*) to an imaginative response:

> 'Heere is the queene of Fayerye,
> With harpe and pipe and symphonye,
> Dwellynge in this place.' (814–16)

The strange potency of Chaucer's fairy queen, with her entourage of instrumental music and dancing ladies, impressed her on the mind of the next great English poet; for Spenser's Faerie Queene is her descendant. The episode where Spenser's Arthur falls in love with the 'elf-queene' seen in a vision as he sleeps in a forest glade (*Faerie Queene* 1, ix, 8–15) is directly modelled upon the episode in *Sir Thopas* where the hero falls in love in just the same fashion.

> 'Me dremed al this nyght, pardee,
> An elf-queene shal my lemman be
> And slepe under my goore.' (787–9)

Spenser, the devoted subject of Queen Elizabeth I, evidently found much that was congenial in the fairylands of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Thopas*, where knights and even three-headed giants submit themselves to mysterious female powers.

Yet Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*, whether or not Spenser realized the fact, is first and foremost a literary *jeu d'esprit* – a pointed burlesque, not of romance in general, but of the English romances of his day. Modern readers acquainted only with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will miss the immediate point of the joke, for Chaucer's target was a quite different kind of fourteenth-century poem, not much read today but popular in its time: older rhymes such as the romances of Bevis of Hampton and Guy of Warwick (both mentioned in *Sir Thopas*, 899), and newer works such as the two Arthurian pieces composed by Chaucer's contemporary Thomas Chester, *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Launfal*.[3] Chaucer signals his intention plainly enough in the first stanza:

> Listeth, lordes, in good entent,
> And I wol telle verrayment
> Of myrthe and of solas,
> Al of a knyght was fair and gent
> In bataille and in tourneyment;
> His name was sire Thopas. (712–17)

No contemporary reader, and few modern ones, could mistake this for Chaucer's own poetic voice. He nowhere else uses the tail-rhyme stanza which was such a favourite with hack poets of his day: there was evidently something ludicrous, to his more fastidious ear, in the effect of the two short 'tail' lines linked by a thumping rhyme. The appeal for attention to a listening audience, vulgarly addressed as 'lordes', strikes a popular note; and the epithets 'fair and gent' seem to owe their connection with battle and tournament helplessly to the exigences of rhyme. There are also other wrong notes in the stanza more difficult for a modern ear to detect. 'Entent', here coupled with the rhyme-tag 'verrayment' (which Chaucer does not use elsewhere), always has a final *-e* in Chaucer's serious writings: 'entente'. 'Thopas' is obviously a ridiculously fanciful name for the tale's Flemish hero; but it can also be shown, more surprisingly, that to preface a knight's name with the title 'Sir' was regarded by Chaucer, as by his French contemporaries, as a vulgarism. He employs the form only in *Sir Thopas*, where it is scattered so promiscuously that even a giant can be dubbed 'Sir Olifaunt'.[4]

The next two romances to be considered, those of the Squire and the Franklin, were intended by Chaucer to stand side by side in the completed Canterbury collection. Taken together they may be distinguished from the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Sir Thopas* in their treatment of that essential ingredient in romance, the marvellous. Arthurian Britain, according to the Wife of Bath, is a land full of fairy, and the Flanders of Sir Thopas, though comically mundane in itself, abuts upon the 'contree of Fairye'. Both tales accept the fairy as a potent source of marvels which require no further investigation or excuse. Things are different in the Tartary of the *Squire's Tale* and the Brittany of the *Franklin's Tale*. Here wonders have, or may have, natural causes. In the *Squire's Tale* an emissary from the King of Araby and Ind brings four gifts to the Tartar king Cambyuskan and his daughter Canacee, each possessing marvellous powers: a brass horse, an unsheathed sword, a mirror, and a ring. The people of Tartary, so far from accepting these wonders as the commonplaces of romance, look for explanations and precedents. The long passage describing their various speculations (189–262) shows Chaucer at his best. How can a brass horse fly? Some think it may be 'of Fairye'; others recall the flying horse Pegasus and the wooden horse of Troy; and one sceptic suggests that it may be nothing but 'an apparence ymaad by som magyk, / As jogelours pleyen at thise feestes grete' (218–19):

> Of sondry doutes thus they jangle and trete,
> As lewed peple demeth comunly
> Of thynges that been maad moore subtilly
> Than they kan in hir lewednesse comprehende;
> They demen gladly to the badder ende. (220–4)

Since the *Squire's Tale* is unfinished, the truth of the matter is never revealed; but we may notice that the most sceptical of the explanations canvassed by the Tartars serves in the *Franklin's Tale* to account for the great marvel of the disappearing rocks. Set the task of removing all the rocks from the coast of Brittany – apparently an 'inpossible', as he complains (1009) – the lovesick squire Aurelius first prays to Apollo for a miracle, but without result; and it is only when he consults a scholar of Orleans who has learned from his books of natural magic the science of producing 'apparences' that Aurelius is able to produce the desired effect: 'It semed that alle the rokkes were aweye.' But only 'semed'. In this tale the marvellous is an illusion, like the tricks played by conjurors at feasts (1139–51).

Although the tales of the Squire and the Franklin are coupled together and share a playful interest in the rationalization of marvels, they are otherwise very different. The *Squire's Tale* presents problems because it is unfinished. It has been suggested that the 'wordes of the Frankeleyn to the Squier', which follow the fragmentary tale in the manuscripts, are to be read as an interruption of the Squire's performance, similar to, though much more polite than, the Host's interruption of *Sir Thopas*. Certainly it is not easy to imagine how the elaborate plot projected by the Squire in lines 661–9 could have been contained within the Canterbury framework, for the story was to follow the branching adventures of Cambyuskan himself and each of his three children. Of these, we have only the beginnings of a story about Canacee and the lovesick falconess, and the promise 'of aventures and of batailles' remains tantalizingly unfulfilled, as in *Sir Thopas*. Yet the Franklin's flattering comments do not sound like an interruption ('In feith, Squier, thow hast thee wel yquit': 673), and it may be questioned whether Chaucer could have trusted either his readers or the scribes who copied the *Tales* to understand them as such. His two undoubted interruptions, when Harry Bailly stops Chaucer and when the Knight stops the Monk, are both clearly signalled by the phrase 'Namoore of this!' (VII, 919, 2767). It seems preferable, all things considered, to suppose either, with Edmund Spenser, that the rest of the *Squire's Tale* has been lost (*Faerie Queene* IV, ii, 33), or else, with John Milton, that the tale was simply 'left half-told' (*Il Penseroso*, 109). In any case, the admiration expressed by both Spenser and Milton for this 'work of noblest wit' makes one hesitate to accept the opinion of some modern critics that the *Squire's Tale*, like *Sir Thopas*, is unworthy of its author.[5]

The tale contains, in fact, some of the richest passages of poetic narrative to be found in Chaucer. The description of the arrival of the Arabian emissary at the Tartar feast is as vivid as the *Gawain*-poet's description of the Green Knight's arrival at Camelot, with which it is often compared. Even better is the account of how the great feast ends in the small hours, not long before daybreak:

> The norice of digestioun, the sleep,
> Gan on hem wynke and bad hem taken keep
> That muchel drynke and labour wolde han reste;
> And with a galpying mouth hem alle he keste,
> And seyde that it was tyme to lye adoun,
> For blood was in his domynacioun.
> 'Cherisseth blood, natures freend,' quod he.
> They thanken hym galpynge, by two, by thre,
> And every wight gan drawe hym to his reste,
> As sleep hem bad; they tooke it for the beste. (347–56)

Later poets' personifications of Sleep use language more poetical ('O soft embalmer of the still midnight'), but none is more powerful than this. The goodnight kiss so strangely bestowed with a yawning mouth by Sleep is received by the revellers with an answering yawn. The repetition of 'galpyng', supported by the haunting repetition of 'blood' in the intervening lines, creates a powerful narcotic effect, anticipating the more famous infectious yawn which brings Pope's *Dunciad* to an end. Equally vivid is the ensuing account of how young Canacee (who has prudently gone to bed early) gets up at dawn the next day to walk in the park. It is just after six in the morning,

> And in a trench forth in the park gooth she.
> The vapour which that fro the erthe glood
> Made the sonne to seme rody and brood;
> But nathelees it was so fair a sighte
> That it made alle hire hertes for to lighte. (392–6)

The sun, discoloured and magnified by low-lying morning mists, casts a peculiar light over the ensuing scene, in which Canacee encounters the grieving falcon, perched in a tree 'for drye as whit as chalk' (409).

It seems that the *Squire's Tale* was planned as one of those complex, multi-track stories which inspired Dante (again no doubt recalling the French *Lancelot*) to speak of the 'exquisite intricacies of Arthur' – but with oriental rather than Arthurian materials. Yet the fragmentary condition of the poem leaves its precise character in doubt. The Franklin, by contrast, clearly announces his tale as belonging to that species of romance known as the Breton lay:

> Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
> Of diverse aventures maden layes,
> Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge,
> Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe
> Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce;
> And oon of hem have I in remembraunce,
> Which I shal seyn with good wyl as I kan. (709–15)

The Breton lay had its origin in the twelfth century, when minstrels from Brittany performed their 'lays' or songs in the households of France and England. Their lays were essentially musical performances, sung to the harp in the Celtic 'Briton tonge'; but since the emotions they expressed were commonly attributed to characters in stories (Tristan's Lament, as it might be), the performers made a point of explaining the narrative context of their songs in French. It was from these accompanying narratives that the French poetess, Marie de France, claimed to derive the matter for her collection of twelve romantic verse-narratives, written in England in the time of Henry II (1154–89). The 'diverse aventures' rhymed by Marie and her imitators are conveniently characterized in the English Breton lay *Sir Orfeo*,[6] which Chaucer probably knew:

> Sum bethe of wer and sum of wo,
> And sum of joie and mirthe also,
> And sum of trecherie and of gile,
> Of old aventours that fel while,
> And sum of bourdes and ribaudy,
> And mani ther beth of fairy;
> Of al thinges that men seth
> Mest o love forsothe thay beth. (5–12)

Among these varied subjects the English poet here gives pride of place to the fairy and especially to love – the two themes which together may be taken to characterize the Breton lay tradition which Marie established. In her poems, as in such English lays as *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Launfal*, it is not adventure or feats of arms that interest the poet, but the world of fairy and the joys and sorrows of love.

Chaucer may not have read Marie de France;[7] but it seems that the feminine type of romance which she played a part in establishing appealed to Chaucer more than the tales of derring-do which so delighted Sir Thomas Malory. In the *Franklin's Tale*, Arveragus is presented as an adventurous knight who wins Dorigen by 'many a labour, many a greet emprise' (732); but these exploits are no more than mentioned, and when after a year of marriage Arveragus sets off, as knights were supposed to do, to escape from uxorious idleness and keep honour bright by the exercise of arms, the narrative does not follow him. We are merely told that he

> Shoop hym to goon and dwelle a yeer or tweyne
> In Engelond, that cleped was eek Briteyne,
> To seke in armes worshipe and honour –
> For al his lust he sette in swich labour. (809–12)

It is startling to hear the chief business of so many romances – seeking honour in arms – thus dismissed in a single couplet. 'Swich labour'! The heart of the *Franklin's Tale* lies elsewhere. Although the Franklin does not share with the Wife and Marie their interest in the fairy, in his tale as in theirs woman plays the dominant role. The chief concern of the tale is with Dorigen and her feelings, and its most characteristic moments are when she piteously laments her absent husband (852–94) and her present dilemma (1352–1458). In these passages especially the poem comes very close to being another Legend of Good Women. Not for nothing did the Scots poet Gavin Douglas say of his master Chaucer that 'he was evir, God wait, all womanis frend'.

Like the Breton lays described in *Sir Orfeo*, the *Franklin's Tale* deals above all with love: the married love between Dorigen and Arveragus, and the passion of Aurelius for Dorigen. In one of Marie de France's poems a lady expresses the opinion that no gentleman would seek to win love by virtue of his lordly power ('par seignurie') because love can be worthy and honourable only between equals: 'Amur n'est pruz se n'est egals' (*Equitan*, 137). The same essentially courtly thought is expressed by the Franklin:

> Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye.
> Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon
> Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!
> Love is a thyng as any spirit free. (764–7)

Already in the twelfth century writers saw that this doctrine created difficulties, on the one hand because the courtly lover was supposed to be his mistress's servant, and on the other because the husband was supposed to be his wife's master. Chrétien de Troyes solved this problem by affirming that, in an ideal romantic marriage, the man is at one and the same time superior (lord), equal (friend), and inferior (servant); and it is this mysterious paradox that the Franklin invokes in his account of the relationship between Dorigen and Arveragus (791–8). Dorigen is at once lady (superior), wife (inferior), and love (equal) to Averagus.[8] Such is the Franklin's solution to the problem of sovereignty in marriage. But his tale is not, as discussions of the so-called Marriage Group (the tales of the Wife of Bath, Clerk, Merchant, and Franklin) suggest, concerned solely with love in marriage. The same noble principle, that 'love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye', triumphs also in the case of the squire Aurelius. By engineering the disappearance of the rocks and holding Dorigen to her rash promise, Aurelius does indeed attempt to 'constrain' her love; but in the event he cannot bring himself to 'doon so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse / Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse' (1523–4) as to force her against her will. He releases her from her promise.

The behaviour of Aurelius places the refusal of mastery in love in its relation to more general doctrines of 'gentillesse'. Commonly in medieval romance one character finds himself or herself subjected to the will of another by virtue of a vow or promise, and stands to suffer in consequence. Since nobility of soul obliges any romance hero to keep his pledged word, the story will seem all set for a painful conclusion; but this is averted by an answering nobility in the adversary, who waives his rights and releases the hero from his obligations. This pattern of reciprocal nobility or 'gentillesse' – submission on the one hand, release on the other – can be traced in the happy endings of many romances, most obviously in the scene at the Green Chapel in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the old hag's attempt to 'constrain love by mastery' seems to be leading to an unhappy conclusion when she demands, not only that the young knight should honour his promise to marry her, as he is prepared to do, but also that he should accept her as his love: '"My love?" quod he, "nay, my dampnacioun!"' (1067). The impasse is comically prolonged by the hag's ensuing lecture on 'gentillesse' and the virtues of poverty and old age, as if the happy ending were to depend on the knight's readiness to abandon his prejudices against ugly old working-class women. And so, up to a point, it does; for in response the chastened hero goes so far as to employ a triple form of address which implies exactly the romantic married relationship described by the Franklin:

> 'My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
> I put me in youre wise governance.' (1230–1)

This improved act of submission finally triggers the moment of release. Not only does the old hag turn into a beautiful woman, but she also appears to have waived her claim to one-sided 'maistrye':

> A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse,
> And she obeyed hym in every thyng
> That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng. (1254–6)

In the case of the *Franklin's Tale*, the happy ending depends upon two such moments of 'release' (the word is used at lines 1533 and 1613), both of which manifest 'franchise and gentillesse' in the characters involved. Impressed by the resolve of both Dorigen and her husband that she should honour her promise, and moved to pity by the woman's distress, Aurelius releases her from her obligation; and he himself is released from his debt to the scholar of Orleans by a further act of 'gentillesse' on the part of his creditor:

> 'But God forbede, for his blisful myght,
> But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede
> As wel as any of yow, it is no drede!
> Sire, I releesse thee thy thousand pound.' (1610–13)

Thus the tale can end, like its closest analogue in Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, with a question: 'Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?' (1622). It has been suggested that the Franklin's insistence on the fact that generosity of spirit can manifest itself in clerks and squires as well as in knights betrays some uneasiness about his own claim to be accepted as a gentleman; but this is borne out neither by the historical evidence about franklins nor by the character of the tale itself. Franklins had every justification for regarding themselves as gentlemen, albeit of the country sort; and this franklin's tale, so far from appearing the work of a social climber, may claim to express more fully than any other Middle English poem that generous and humane spirit which marks the best medieval courtly writing, from the time of Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes onwards.

Of all the tales under discussion here the *Knight's Tale* least resembles other medieval romances, French or English. Its source is an Italian poem, the *Teseida* of Giovanni Boccaccio; and the *Teseida* claims to be not a romance but an epic. It is indeed one of the first attempts in a European vernacular to match the twelve-book epics of antiquity. Its title declares this ambition: 'Teseida' from 'Teseo' (Theseus), like 'Aeneid' from 'Aeneas'. In reality, Boccaccio's poem is something of a hybrid, for the story of the two young Thebans Palemone and Arcita and their rivalry for the hand of the beautiful Emilia might well have figured, stripped of its neo-classical trappings, in one of the popular Italian romances of the time; but the poem's epic form marks it out as an altogether more ambitious, not to say pretentious, literary production. Chaucer, of course, could not incorporate a twelve-book epic in his Canterbury anthology; yet even his version, much abbreviated and with most of the epic machinery removed, is itself a complex and many-sided work, which cannot without discomfort be described simply as a romance.[9]

Literary historians sometimes associate the rise of romance in the twelfth century with the increased interest manifested at that time in individual experience. Certainly the heroes and heroines of Marie and Chrétien are activated chiefly by personal considerations, especially the desire for honour and for happiness in love. In this respect, Palamon and Arcite may be accounted typical romance heroes. Although the *Knight's Tale* is not, like so many of Chaucer's works, dominated by a female character, it is the two young knights' love for Emily which exclusively preoccupies their minds, once they have glimpsed her from their prison window. From that moment on, they are lovers and nothing else, in the best romantic tradition. Their love turns them instantly from sworn brothers into sworn rivals; and it is for love that they fight each other, first in the grove and then at the great tournament. Some readers have seen differences in character between them, but it is doubtful whether Chaucer intended any. The prison scene in which Arcite argues that, although Palamon in fact saw Emily first, he himself was the first to love her 'paramour' since Palamon mistook her for a goddess, does not prove Arcite to be a less romantic type than his companion. The argument is obviously a desperate sophistry. Arcite loves Emily quite as much as Palamon does, and in exactly the same fashion. When he later prays to Mars for victory in the tournament, he has Emily just as steadily in mind as does Palamon when he prays for Emily herself to Venus. The only significance of Arcite's choice is that it lays him open, most unhappily, to the equivocating judgement of the planet-god Saturn, who neatly resolves the problem at his expense by granting him what he asked for, not what he wanted.

If there were no more to the *Knight's Tale* than this, it might rank as a piece of sentimental courtly casuistry, to set beside the episode in the *Parliament of Fowls* where three eagles each swear undying devotion to the same female bird – the problem in both cases being to decide how such a situation can be resolved, given that 'gentils' cannot be expected to seek consolation elsewhere when disappointed in love. But the young people in the *Knight's Tale* do not pursue their private ends in isolation: they belong to a larger world with other concerns, best represented by Theseus, Duke of Athens. The full title of Boccaccio's poem was *Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia*, or 'The Theseid, Concerning the Nuptials of Emily'. Whilst indicating the poem's romantic subject, this title gives pride of place to Duke Theseus, whose campaigns against Amazons and Thebans occupy the first two of Boccaccio's twelve books. Boccaccio's ambition to be the first Italian poet to sing of feats of arms in a manner worthy to be compared with that of Virgil or Statius

(*Teseida* XII, 84) evidently failed to inspire a similar ambition in Chaucer, who shows his customary impatience with such subjects by cutting most of the fighting out. Yet Theseus remains a dominating figure in the English poem. The Knight begins his tale with Theseus, introducing him as 'lord and governour' of Athens and conqueror of many nations. It is in these capacities that he exerts his influence over the lives of Palamon and Arcite. First, after his conquest of Thebes, he imprisons the two young Theban princes for ever and without hope of ransom – evidently treating them as war criminals along with their dead leader, Creon, who had put himself beyond the pale of humanity by refusing burial to the bodies of the dead. Later, when he comes upon the two young men fighting in the grove, it is Theseus who decrees and organizes the tournament which is to settle their fate. And finally it is Theseus who, after Arcite's death, proposes the marriage between Palamon and Emily, so securing a bond between Athens and Thebes. By these and other actions, Theseus manifests his concern for matters of foreign relations and public order which have no place in romances such as the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. Unlike Alice's Arthurian Britain, the Knight's ancient Greece has a political dimension. Its great ceremonial occasions – the tournament, the obsequies of Arcite, the parliament at which Theseus proposes the marriage – are not mere scenes in a romantic pageant. They represent man's attempts to accommodate and civilize the anarchic and inescapable facts of aggression, death, and love, as social life requires.

The attitude of Theseus to Palamon and Arcite changes in the course of the story; they are first enemies beyond the pale, then threats to public order at home, and at last friends. Insofar as they are romantic lovers, his attitude to them is best represented in the speech which he makes when he comes upon them fighting in the grove. This oration, beginning 'The god of love, a benedicite!' (1785), opens in a spirit of outright mockery. The Duke remarks pithily on the folly of lovers who can so put their lives at risk for the sake of a woman who does not even know that they love her:

> 'She woot namoore of al this hoote fare,
> By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare!' (1809–10)

But the speech then modulates into a tone of sympathy and forgiveness, as Theseus recalls that he himself, though now a sober married man, has in his time been made a fool of by the overpowering force of love:

> 'But all moot ben assayed, hoot and coold;
> A man moot ben a fool, or yong or oold –
> I woot it by myself ful yore agon,
> For in my tyme a servant was I oon.' (1811–14)

Theseus speaks here as a mature man who has passed through and beyond the stage of life represented by Palamon and Arcite. Like Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which owes much to Chaucer's poem, the *Knight's Tale* displays the preoccupations of young love in a large human context, exhibiting both their utter naturalness and also their funny side. As Shakespeare's Theseus observes:

> Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends. (v, i, 4–6)

There is also a still larger context within which Chaucer sets his romantic adventure – no less than the universe itself, represented in the *Knight's Tale* by the classical gods. In the pre-Christian Brittany of the *Franklin's Tale* Apollo can evidently do nothing for his votary, but in pagan Athens the gods wield real power.[10] It is only when the issue between Palamon and Arcite is taken up by Venus and Mars that it achieves a kind of solution. Yet that solution, engineered by 'the pale Saturnus the colde', raises profound questions about the order of things – questions similar to those raised by Dorigen in her complaint to God about the black rocks which, she says, 'semen rather a foul confusion / Of werk than any fair creacion' (869–70). These two poems have a philosophical dimension lacking in the other Canterbury romances. What chiefly interests Chaucer, however, is not so much the philosophical ideas themselves as the way human beings select and adopt them according to mood or occasion. If Dorigen is prompted by the Breton rocks to reflect on problems of evil and pain in the universe (865–93), it is perhaps only because they threaten her beloved husband. Once he is safely home, one hears no more of that particular difficulty, just as in the third book of *Troilus and Criseyde* Criseyde stops thinking about 'fals felicitee' (III, 814) once she discovers that Troilus is not in fact, as Pandarus has maintained, angry with her. Similarly in the *Knight's Tale*, imprisonment prompts Palamon and Arcite to some deep Boethian reflections on the vanity of human wishes (1251–67) and the miseries of life (1303–27); but once the young men regain their freedom, such considerations are soon forgotten. Some readers have found in the more settled pessimism of Theseus's father Egeus the true voice of the tale: 'This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo' (2847). But one might equally well see that speech as a typical old man's utterance, or as a customary half-consolatory response to the fact of death. It is rather Theseus who, from his commanding position as a mature man and a 'governour', makes the most impressive philosophical utterance in the poem, when he addresses the Athenian parliament: 'The Firste Moevere of the cause above . . .' (2987). This oration (the opening of which Chaucer derived not from Boccaccio but from Boethius) expounds a universal order in which partial and transitory things have their origin in a first cause which is itself eternal and unchanging. Since death is inevitable in the sublunary world, Theseus argues, it would be folly for Palamon and Emily to go on grieving for Arcite – especially since the circumstances of his death were so honourable:

> 'Why grucchen we, why have we hevynesse,
> That goode Arcite, of chivalrie flour,
> Departed is with duetee and honour
> Out of this foule prisoun of this lyf?' (3058–61)

Yet even these grand truths are being used – and in this case for a very practical purpose – to introduce the proposal that the Theban prince should marry Emily. Theseus speaks not as a philosopher but as a governor, whose business it is to make the best of an awkward human situation, and who is also (we may infer from lines 2973–4) interested in linking the royal houses of Athens and Thebes by marriage. He is so little a philosopher that, in flat contradiction of his earlier argument, he can go on to offer Emily and Palamon the prospect of 'o parfit joye, lastynge everemo' (3072) in their marriage.

The *Knight's Tale* does indeed end in the 'parfit joye' of mutual love in marriage:

> 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 nevere was ther no word hem bitwene
> Of jalousie or any oother teene.
> Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye;
> And God save al this faire compaignye! (3101–8)

This is the customary happy ending of romance. Each of the two other Canterbury romances completed by Chaucer leaves its hero and heroine united in the same fairy-tale felicity: 'parfit joye' in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* (1258), 'sovereyn blisse' in the *Franklin's Tale* (1552). Yet it is a measure of the greater seriousness of the *Knight's Tale* that the happy ending here seems a fragile and questionable thing, shadowed by thoughts of suffering and death and especially by the memory of Arcite's dying words (2777–9):

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

NOTES

1. For fuller discussion of four of the five romances considered here, see ch. 4, ‘Romances’, in Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London, 1985); and for the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, see pp. 86–91 there.
2. The three English analogues are printed in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, eds. W. F. Bryan and G. Dempster (Chicago, 1941). See John Gower’s tale of Florent, *Confessio Amantis*, 1, 1841–6; *The Marriage of Sir Gawaine*, part 2, stanzas 16–17; *The Weddynge of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*, 691–3.
3. Chester was possibly an acquaintance. A Thomas de Chestre appears together with Galfridus Chaucer among those ransomed in 1360. Both men had been captured by the French. See *Chaucer Life-Records*, eds. M. M. Crow and C. C. Olson (Oxford, 1966), pp. 23–4. For all his lack of interest as a poet in fighting, Chaucer was not without military experience.
4. For details of these and other wrong notes in *Thopas*, see the annotations in the *Riverside Chaucer*. Further discussion in Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford, 1989), pp. 299–309.
5. For a survey of critical responses to the tale, including those ‘ironic’ readings which see it as designed to expose weaknesses either in the romance genre or in the young Squire himself, see *The Squire’s Tale*, ed. D. C. Baker, *Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 2 (Norman, Okla., 1990), pp. 59–74. David Lawton gives a strong non-ironic account in ch. 5 of his *Chaucer’s Narrators* (Cambridge, 1985). On the tale as a fragment, see J. Burrow, ‘Poems without Endings’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 13 (1991), 17–37.
6. *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1966).
7. See, however, Jill Mann, ‘Chaucerian Themes and Style in the *Franklin’s Tale*’ in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford, vol. 1, Part 1 (Harmondsworth, 1982), pp. 133–53.
8. So, at the end of *Cligès*, the romance by Chrétien de Troyes, the heroine Fénice marries the hero but is said to continue to be his *amie* and his *dame* as well as his *fame* (lines 6629–38). These terms correspond to the Franklin’s ‘love’, ‘lady’, and ‘wife’ (lines 796–7). What Chaucer calls the ‘law of love’ is the same in both texts.
9. On the *Knight’s Tale* in relation to the *Teseida* and to the Latin epic tradition, see David Anderson, *Before the Knight’s Tale* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1988).
10. Chaucer understands the gods as representing, in modern reality, the planets which bear their names. On astrology in the *Knight’s Tale*, see Jill Mann in this volume (pp. 107–8), and Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 77–84.

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