

CHAUCER
The Franklin's Tale



Edited by Phyllis Hodgson

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This book owes much to previous Chaucerian studies and to the advice of friends and colleagues. The editor is especially indebted to Dr E. Jaffé, Professor E. G. R. Taylor, Professor G. Tillotson, and Mr A. G. Dewey of the Athlone Press.

P. H.

A NOTE ON REFERENCES

Unless otherwise stated references to works of Chaucer other than *The Franklin's Tale* follow the text and the line and page numbering of *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn., Oxford University Press, London, 1957 (published in U.S.A. by Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Mass.).

The letters included in line references to *The Canterbury Tales* designate the commonly accepted groupings of the tales (see page 110).

CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| INTRODUCTION | <i>page</i> 7 |
| A NOTE ON THE TEXT | 33 |
| <i>The Franklin</i> | 37 |
| <i>Link to THE FRANKLIN'S TALE</i> | 38 |
| THE FRANKLIN'S TALE | 41 |
| NOTES | 71 |
| APPENDICES | |
| I. The Poet and his Works | 106 |
| II. Chaucer's English | 111 |
| III. Versification | 121 |
| IV. Astronomy, Astrology, and Magic | 125 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 137 |
| GLOSSARY | 141 |

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To
A.G.H. *and* H.H.H.

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INTRODUCTION

The Franklin's Tale has not hitherto been published separately in England. The omission is surprising. It might be claimed that this is the most gracious of all *The Canterbury Tales* with its glowing illustration of the virtues of generosity and of fidelity to a plighted word and its complete freedom from any rascality. The plot delights by its shapeliness, its maintained suspense, and by the twist at the end. The characters are all likeable, sensitively depicted, and subtly contrasted as they react to situations and to each other. Their experiences are unfolded with a consistent logic and with a variety in the telling of imaginative description, spirited dialogue, philosophical reflection, sentimental soliloquy, parody, humour, pathos and irony. Memorable scenes follow in quick succession—the initial marriage contract between Arveragus and Dorigen; Dorigen's fearful vigil by the shore in her husband's absence; the May festivities in the garden; the Squire Aurelius's declaration of his love for Dorigen and her imposition of a seemingly impossible task as the condition of her favour; Aurelius's hopeless abandonment to grief; his rescue by his brother; their meeting with the magician; their entertainment in the magician's house leading up to their bargaining for the achievement of the seemingly impossible task; the magician's performance; Aurelius's announcement to Dorigen of the fulfilment of her condition; Dorigen's dilemma; Dorigen's confession to her husband and his reaction; Dorigen's journey to keep her promise; Aurelius's compassion and generous renunciation; Aurelius's own dilemma; his final settlement with the magician.

This tale, moreover, warmed by Chaucer's sympathy

Introduction

for his fellow-creatures and conditioned throughout by his astonishingly wide cultural interests, bears the unmistakable impress of the poet's individual genius in the full maturity of his art. It is provided with a setting unusually comprehensive even among *The Canterbury Tales*, for in the development of his plot Chaucer has not only drawn extensively upon his lively reading in contemporary French and Italian literature, Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, and in the works of some of the Church Fathers, but he has also made masterly use of particulars of oceanic and geographical lore, astronomy, astrology, and the craft of magic.

Such wealth of learning naturally calls for detailed annotation, but no one should be deterred by the weight of editorial comment from reading a story which is highly enjoyable and fully intelligible in itself. Unfamiliar words and phrases are translated in the Glossary, baffling allusions explained in the Notes.

It cannot be pretended, however, that full understanding can be reached without further consideration of the significance of *The Franklin's Tale* in the wider context of *The Canterbury Tales*. For just appreciation, the tale must be read on several levels, with an awareness of perspective which includes the Franklin, wholly and intimately associable with his tale, and also Chaucer, the creator, who calls into being both the Franklin and the creatures of *The Franklin's Tale*.

When read in the light of the medieval cosmology in which Chaucer himself believed—for he knew no other (see Appendix IV)—the central story itself will have a meaning quite different from that which would be found by a modern reader knowing only the twentieth-century physics of the universe and taking for granted a heliocentric system insignificantly placed in the Milky Way, which itself is but one of unnumbered galaxies of stars wandering about in unmeasured space.

Introduction

Though it is true that the technical allusions are surprisingly few in a story which turns upon the control of natural forces by the Clerk's skill in astrological magic, and none of these in any way obscures the account of the fortunes and the changing relationships of Dorigen and her husband, Aurelius and the Clerk, yet a close examination of them is unexpectedly rewarding (see Appendix IV). Let no reader be daunted by the long, complicated and abstruse description of how the Clerk set about the feat of removing the rocks. The jargon of Alfonsine Tables, roots, centres, arguments, equations, proves to be ambiguous, and too vague to afford any precise information. It need not be understood by us since we can be sure that not only the majority of the Canterbury Pilgrims but also Chaucer's actual audience were out of their depth. Since there is no doubt from his *Astrolabe* and *The Equatorie of the Planetis* that Chaucer himself had mastered the subject, it seems evident that his purpose here was artistic rather than instructive. We can only guess at his motive. Possibly it was to throw further light on the Franklin, who had prefaced his long description of astrological processes by the assertion that he himself 'ne kan no termes of astrologye' and who might have been using jargon which he had picked up without understanding it, or giving a garbled selection of information out of his contemptuous disapproval of astrology as 'swich a superstitious cursednesse' (564). More likely it was meant to enhance the portrait of the Clerk and to lend an air of strangeness to the central event of the story. No matter how difficult the lines, their effect is clear. The magic is left mysterious, and the Franklin has established beyond doubt that this particular Clerk was very clever indeed. The inevitable conclusion is that the whole passage was intended to impress rather than inform, and is, in fact, the more impressive the less it is understood.

The study of the possible sources of *The Franklin's Tale*,

Introduction

which forms the second part of this Introduction, will be even more illuminating. Only by comparing Chaucer's conceptions with their analogues can we realize the amazing creativeness of his art.

THE FRANKLIN AND HIS TALE

In his *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* Chaucer included the Franklin in his account of the 'nine and twenty' men and women who assembled one April day at the Tabard Inn in Southwark to ride on a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Thomas of Canterbury and fell in with the plan of their Host, who was to accompany them, that each should tell four tales in competition for a free supper, two on the outward and two on the homeward journey. Chaucer died before his plan was fulfilled, when only twenty-three tales were told and only a proportion of the links between them supplied. Scholars are still disputing the intended order of the existing tales (see Appendix I, 'The Canon of Chaucer's Works'), but by common agreement they place *The Franklin's Tale* late in the series, at the earliest after those of the Knight, Miller, Reeve, Wife of Bath, Clerk, Merchant and Squire.

Like most of the personages introduced in the *General Prologue* and first observed with the sweeping insight of the omniscient narrator, the Franklin later gains in depth and vitality both through the report of his words and actions in the links between the tales and through the appropriateness of the story which he himself contributes.

He is presented as a country gentleman, a wealthy landowner, comfortably established at home and now riding in the company of the important and outstanding Sergeant of the Law. The impressive list of public offices he had held—as president at the sessions of the Justices of the Peace, as a member of parliament ('knight of the shire'), as sheriff (an administrative office of the Crown ranking in the shire next to that of lord lieutenant), and

The Franklin and his Tale

as county auditor or possibly as pleader in court ('countour')—attests that he combined practical ability and industry with his Epicurean love of good living. His prodigious hospitality accorded with his worldly success and with his natural disposition, which Chaucer classified as 'sangwyn'.¹ The only anxiety he betrayed was on account of his son, who frequented low company rather than society where he might acquire culture and the manners common to men of good breeding. There is a strong hint that the Franklin, like Chaucer himself, belonged to that section of society middle-class by birth but sufficiently favoured, rich, and powerful to advance into the nobleman's way of life. Naturally the Franklin was class-conscious. The Knight and his son, his social superiors, were the story-tellers he most admired and imitated, and attention is drawn in the Notes to many resemblances in themes and style. His admiration for the accomplishments of the Squire expressed more eloquently than words his disappointment at his own son's failure to live up to the standard of conduct he expected of the nobility. The Franklin's preoccupation with the idea of 'gentillesse'² irritated the Host, who, town-bred himself, failed, perhaps, to recognize the social distinction of this country gentleman and was provoked to rudeness, to which the Franklin replied with good-humoured tact, while nevertheless persisting in his theme—an example of the geniality, practical common sense and perseverance which had brought him worldly success.

Here was the character especially suited by his temperament and dignity, his public-spiritedness, his experi-

¹ Cf. a fourteenth-century definition in *Secreta Secretorum*, ed. R. Steele, London, 1898, pp. 19f.: 'The sangyne by kynde sholde lowe Joye and laghyng, and company of women, and moche Slegen and syngynge—of good will and wythout malice—fre and lyberall, of fayre semblaunt.'

² See Notes, 46.

Introduction

ence in jurisdiction and his acceptance of the everyday world to settle a controversy which had raged among the Pilgrims with increasing acrimony and to raise the tone of the company which, through a succession of lewd stories and intervening animosities, had fallen sharply from that set by the courtly elegance of the Knight's opening tale. From the start, mounting interest had been shown in relationships in love. The Knight had begun with an aristocratic tale of rivalry between equally matched courtly lovers, which the Miller had parodied on a lower social level, describing the rivalry between a worthless clerk and a squire, and adding cuckoldry to the theme. The Reeve had doubled the bawdry and the farce. The Wife of Bath had concentrated upon the workability of married life, preaching the domination of the wife as the essential condition of success. To this the Clerk had added a counterpoise by describing a tyrannous husband's harsh domination over a wholly subservient wife, and by concluding his tale with ironical praise of the Wife of Bath. Following the Clerk, the Merchant, with more savage irony, had indicted the whole institution of matrimony in the story of a jealous old dotard knight fooled by his young bride, and the Squire, requested to 'sey somewhat of love' which would raise the prevailing tone, had become bogged in a shapeless and seemingly endless story of magic and desertion. It remained for the Franklin to resolve the argument and restore a sense of proportion by a story of ideal relations between a man and wife, based on a reconciliation between the conventions of courtly love and the terms of a workable marriage, a marriage secure through the lack of jealousy and the renunciation of all domination in favour of mutual concessions and forbearance.¹ He clothed his plea for tolerance and good faith in human relationships in a tale generous and sensible like himself,

¹ See Notes, 53ff., 90.