

A Conversation to Be Inserted Between the "Franklin's Tale" and the "Physician's Tale"

Tom Misch

IN THE *Canterbury Tales* the Franklin tells the story of a woman, Dorigen, wife of Arveragus, who, to escape the assiduity of her courtly lover, the squire Aurelius, makes her consent depend upon an impossible condition: that all the rocks on the coast of Brittany be removed. Aurelius enlists the aid of a magician and apparently fulfills the task imposed by his lady love. To her husband, who returns home unexpectedly, the faithful Dorigen confesses the details of her promise to the young squire. Arveragus, believing that honor is more precious than chastity, generously instructs his wife to meet Aurelius and fulfill her part of the bargain. The lover, from a generous remorse, releases the lady from her promise. And the magician hired by Aurelius generously releases Aurelius from his debt. The "Franklin's Tale" concludes with the narrator's question: "Pilgrims, which of these three persons was the most generous?"

The following imaginary conversation might have taken place . . .

Oure Hooste answered than: "I telle yow
That from oure compaigne an answer now
To youre question of proprettee
As to the man who was the mooste free
Wol surely come. For now I do intend
To asken you as to the shrine we wend.
What thinketh yow, Dame Alys, do us telle,
Chees 'mongst these three the wight knowing full welle
The sentence of al generositee."

"Me thynketh that the choys is twixt the twey
Of hem that loved good Dame Dorigen.
That is to seyn, I chese betwixt the men;
A woman's freedom with a man is lost.
With husbandis five, I wiste well the cost.
I doubt a bit the tales conclusioun.
Of Dorigen have I suspecioun:
Syn she han sworn upon her honor gold,

Why sholde she fear to make her spous cokewold?
 Arveragus was but a fool to goon
 To distant lands and leef his wyf aloon.
 So I vouchsauf for lusty Aurelius.
 That was the only man who acted thus
 In greetest freedom, and in alle his lyf
 Forwent to love another mannes wyf.
 If he were here," quod she, "on pilgrimage
 Aurelius wolde I seek, for at my age
 I am a worldly dame, and this estat
 Whan coupled with the silver that I gat
 From husbondes five (God keep their soul
 Except those three who treated me so foul!)
 It maketh well a hende doweree
 For squires seeking not virginitee.
 Tis knowen that men of wisdom when they wedde
 Be nought concerned with but maidenhedde.
 Be oon among ye here that in good sense
 Wolde chosen first a dame of experience?"
 Oure Hooste laugh at this new question.
 "By Christes blood, a mete suggestion!
 If any bacheler in good corage
 Wol seken for to enter marriage,
 Forget not what the Wyf of Bath has sedde
 And look not both for gold and maidenhedde.
 But now, enough of this, for as I ryde
 I seldom hear the scholar at my syde.
 Sire Clerk, do telle us what thou thenkest so
 With furrowed brow that counterfeits swich wo.
 Ne studie you alway, but telle us pleyn
 Which of these ilke three to thee is seen
 To be the wight of generositee—
 The knight, the dame, the squire—which of the three?"
 The Clerk of Oxenford with meek assent
 Did answer thus: "Now in my juggement
 The oon that in this tale knew vertu
 Was Dorigen, the faithful wyf who knew
 The sentence of a worthy constancye
 As eek Ulysses wyf, Penelopye
 That wove an endless cloth upon her loom
 But to unravel all when in her room
 Aloon at night she came and there did sit,
 And trickt the lewed suitors by her wit.
 Of all good dames in bookes old, thou woost,
 There be nat many oon that koude thus boost
 Swich wise and stedfast love of governance

As do Penelopye and good Custance.
 In murie Engoland I ken no dame
 Wolde give a single farthing for swich fame.
 Oure English wyves do desire *en lieu*
 The reputation of a nag or shrew."

At this the Wyf of Bath did stert to burn
 So wroth was she that all her face did turn
 From red to white and back to red agayn.
 "Sire Clerk," quod she, "I know not what to seyn!
 Your wordes have abomination
 Of womankind and her condition.
 No married man I rede thou'll ever be
 For scholars mak not husbondes, par ma fay!
 Swich men as ye who spenden alle youre lyves
 With bookes, han but bookes for your wyves!"

Oure Hoost stood up betwixt the two of hem
 Arguing thus about the tales problem.
 "Enough of this," quod he, "By Adames fall,
 In pees must we proceed. In faith I shall
 Conseil a man that lerned is and wyse
 And kan in statutes justice ther divyse.
 What thinkest thee, good Man of Law, pardee?
 In legal terms, who was the mooste free?"

At this request up spak the povre Persoun,
 "Pardon, mine Hoost but ere we reach the toun,
 Me thynketh that the answer nolde be
 Saught out in terms of mere legalitee.
 This were a moral question. I know
 That to the gospel teaching sholde we go."

"Not so!" exclaimed the Merchant lowd and clear
 So that the men atarrying een could heer.
 "In all my yeers of worthy businesse
 With men of court and eek of gentillesse,
 Not oon of hem wolde buy or sell in faith,
 Moralitee or rules; as thus man saith
 That vertu has its prys, I know full welle . . .
 And ther is naught a merchant nolde selle.
 Therfor the man that was the mooste free
 Was noon of hem that you han named three.
 The mooste free was that magicien
 Who lost oon thousand pound, withouten wen.
 And though his bargain hard had driven been.
 He forfeled all rightes to the claim!"

Oure Hooste laugh at this right heartily
 And seyde, "I heer enough of rivalry;
 Lat us forget all this disputisoun

And seek not for the tales conclusion.
 A lusty tale kan yeve us much more pleasour
 Than idyl talk concerning freedoms measour.
 Sire Doctour, entertain us for a tyme
 With humour goode in prose or els in ryme."

Saturday Afternoon

Louise Grigsby

"**Y**EAH, I HAD A woman once." The stooped man in overalls ran a roughened forefinger over his chin stubble, remembering.

"He, he, he," cackled Pop, his hairy Adam's apple wobbling aimlessly in his withered throat. "A woman, he says. Better say wome. . . ."

"Shut up, ya ol' windbag." Jack reproved the old man absently. "I was sayin'—she was soft as dandyline fluff—little bit of a thing. Sorta goldy hair, 'n eyes. . . ." Jake snuffed audibly, then pulled a greasy unhemmed rag from his right hip pocket and blew his nose vigorously. "Eyes green as—as new lettuce. Ellie, her name was."

"Was, Jake?" Parson Jones looked at the big bony face sympathetically, trying to recall the name Ellie in recent death notices.

"Yeah, she drowned 'n it was my fault. Ya could say I killed 'er." The loungers on the spittle-stained porch sat up, their eyes fixed on Jake's miserable face. He looked round the circle of rhythmically-working jaws, then pulled out a wad of tobacco and whittled himself a mouthful.

"Go on, Jake." Henney Henderson urged him. The others nodded eagerly, repeating, "Go on, Jake."

"I ain't told nobody 'bout this, but now I gotta talk ta somebody. Ellie was a woman'd suit any man—didn't talk much, couldn't hardly get a word outa 'er sometimes. But ya could tell she hated the Little Fork—hated any water, fer that matter, but ex-pecially the Little Fork.

"I mind the day I found 'er plain as anything. The year the Little Fork flooded over the Cavens' corn patch, right after Mac