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 propretee
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 husbonds 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 greatest 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 bachelor 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 pleyyn
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 virtu
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
Alone 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 Penelope 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 booke, han but booke 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
Sought 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 gentilesse,
Not oon of hem wolde buy or sell in faith,
Moralitee or rules; as thus man saith
That virtu has its prys, I know full welle . . .
And ther is naught a merchant nolde selle.
Therfor the man that was the moste free
Was noon of hem that you han named three.
The moste free was that magicien
Who lost oon thousand pound, withouten wen.
And though his bargain hard had driven been.
He forfeeted 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

“YEAH, 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 womne. . . .”

“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 expecially 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