Introduction

Modern readers can enjoy *The Franklin's Tale* without acquiring any special knowledge of the age in which Chaucer lived or the materials from which he made his story. Chaucer was a marvellously gifted storyteller, and one reason why he is the only medieval English poet who has always had enthusiastic readers is that he seems to demand no more of us than to listen to the stories he tells. In doing so he speaks to us directly, calling on our everyday experience to confirm the truth of his remarks –

> By proces, as ye knowen everichoon,
> Men may so longe graven in a stoon
> Til som figure therinne emprented be (157–9)

– and even anticipating our likely objections:

> Paraventure an heep of yow, ywis,
> Wol holden him a lewed man in this
> That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie.
> Herkneth the tale er ye upon hire crie. (821–4)

Chaucer knew that he would have readers in a future beyond his control; at the end of his greatest single poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, he addresses his 'little book', sending it out into the world, hoping that it will not be 'miswritten' or 'mismetred' by future copyists, and above all praying, wherever it may be read, 'That thow be understonde, God I biseche!' (I beseech God that you may be understood!). I do not wish to come between Chaucer and his readers, and my best hope finally is to leave them alone with *The Franklin's Tale*, members of the *ye* that Chaucer addresses; but he wanted to be understood, and our understanding, and thus our enjoyment, are enhanced by an awareness of some things that stand behind the tale and some that are implied but not stated in

it. First I shall discuss the materials from which *The Franklin's Tale* was made; and this means that I must begin by asking the reader to take on trust the usefulness of information whose relevance will not emerge until later.

The tale and its materials

As with most of *The Canterbury Tales*, the story Chaucer tells in *The Franklin's Tale* is not one he invented. Medieval literary works are nearly always based on sources outside themselves, and a basic assumption of medieval treatises on the art of poetry, the *artes poeticae* (to which I shall sometimes refer in this Introduction), is that a poem's *materia* or subject matter will be supplied as a *donnée*, not invented by the writer himself. The situation was the opposite of that with the novel: authority was prized more highly than originality, and no storyteller wished to give the impression that he was telling a new story. The core of *The Franklin's Tale* is a narrative unit known to folklorists as 'The Damsel's Rash Promise', found in many different medieval versions. As often with medieval popular stories, the oldest known versions are not European but oriental; but it is the European versions that introduce the magician. Chaucer refers to a book or books from which he is taking the tale – 'the book seith thus' (141), 'as thise bookes me remembre' (571) – but we do not know for certain whether one specific version was his source. The version closest to his was written in Italian in about 1336 by Giovanni Boccaccio in his *Filocolo*, a long prose romance including an episode in which a group of young aristocrats, presided over by Fiammetta, discuss questions concerning the conduct of lovers; one question is posed in a story similar to *The Franklin's Tale*. A knight called Tarolfo falls in love with a lady married to another knight. He persistently tries

to attract her love, until eventually she thinks of a 'subtle trick'[1] to get rid of him: she promises to satisfy him if he can create a Maytime garden in January. Tarolfo meets an old man called Tebano gathering medicinal herbs. Tebano claims to be able to carry out the impossible task, and Tarolfo promises him half his wealth if he can. After performing elaborate spells and gathering herbs from throughout the world, Tebano succeeds. The lady and her attendants visit the garden, and she has to admit that Tarolfo has fulfilled her condition. He agrees to wait for his reward till her husband is away and the matter can be kept secret, but meanwhile her husband, noticing her unhappiness, questions her and she admits what has happened. Though she assures him, 'I would kill myself before I would do anything that would dishonour or displease you', he tells her she must keep her promise, and he will love her no less. With attendants, she returns to Tarolfo; and since she is not alone, he guesses that she must have confided in her husband. The lady tells Tarolfo what her husband told her. Tarolfo, realising that he cannot dishonour such a generous man, returns her unharmed. Now Tebano demands his reward; Tarolfo is willing to give it, but Tebano is determined to be no less generous than he and the lady's husband, and will take nothing. The question to be discussed is which of the three men is the most generous, and Fiammetta provides an authoritative solution. Tebano only gave up material wealth, which is not a real good; Tarolfo only gave up 'his lustful desire', which is every man's duty; while the husband insisted that his wife should fulfil an oath that was not binding (being contrary to her marriage vows), and risked giving up his own honour (by being cuckolded), something that could never be recovered. Therefore, Fiammetta argues, the husband was the most generous.

[1] I quote Boccaccio's story from the translation in *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, ed. Robert P. Miller, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977.

Boccaccio retold this story in the 1350s, as the fifth tale on the tenth day of his famous story collection, the *Decameron*. The two versions differ in various details; Chaucer's is closer to that in the *Filocolo*. There is no evidence that Chaucer had read the *Decameron*; it is generally thought that he had read at least part of the *Filocolo*, but that he did not possess a copy of it. So, whereas when he wrote *The Knight's Tale* he could work closely with another work of Boccaccio's (the *Teseida*), because he had brought a copy back from Italy, in *The Franklin's Tale* he was probably retelling Boccaccio's story from memory and adapting it quite freely. Apart from the narrative outline, it is easy to see how some elements in *The Franklin's Tale* are derived from others in the *Filocolo* story, as though a kaleidoscope had been shaken to produce a new pattern. The most striking is this: for the creation of a Maytime garden in January as the suitor's task, Chaucer substituted the removal of the black rocks from the coast of Brittany, but he seems to be recalling the original task ('as thise bookes me remembre') in lines 571–83, where he mentions the turn of the year from December to January as the moment when the rocks were removed and imagines what a garden would really be like at that season:

> The bittre frostes, with the sleet and reyn,
> Destroyed hath the grene in every yerd. (578–9)

Another example of kaleidoscopic variation can be seen when Aurelius includes in his prayer to the sun-god Apollo a request that he should ask his sister Lucina, the moon, who 'folweth yow ful bisily' (379), to produce an extra high tide; this recalls Tebano's prayer to 'you, O stars, who together with the moon follow the resplendent day; and you, O most high Hecate . . . ', especially since Hecate and Lucina are both names for the goddess Diana. A third example is that Boccaccio applies to Tarolfo's determined wooing the proverb that 'with persistence soft water pierces hard

rock', while Chaucer applies the same saying in lines 157–9 (quoted above) to the persistence of Dorigen's friends in consoling her for Arveragus's absence. Boccaccio attributes the saying to Ovid: it occurs in his *Ars amatoria*, where Chaucer must also have read it, but it was probably its occurrence in the *Filocolo* that brought it to mind when he was writing *The Franklin's Tale*.

Chaucer never mentions that the story told by the Franklin is based on one by Boccaccio, and in concealing his debt he follows his usual practice, for nowhere in his works is Boccaccio's name mentioned. He ran little risk of detection, for in all probability Boccaccio's work and name were unknown in fourteenth-century England. In Italy, Boccaccio was one of three great vernacular writers who enjoyed widespread fame during their lives and after their deaths; the other two were Dante and Petrarch, whose work Chaucer also knew and imitated in English. But he came to know the writings of these three only as a result of visits he made to Italy on royal business in 1372–3 (to Genoa and Florence) and 1378 (to Milan); probably none of his readers had shared these experiences. Besides *The Franklin's Tale* and *The Knight's Tale*, a third of Chaucer's major poems is also based on a work of Boccaccio's – *Troilus and Criseyde*, translated and adapted from Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. These three poems form a group with much in common. All three take their narratives from Boccaccio, but pretend to be drawing on different sources; all three are set not in Boccaccio's Italy or Chaucer's England but in the pagan past, as imagined by learned men of the late Middle Ages; and all three add to a story from Boccaccio's philosophical questionings borrowed from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Boethius was a Roman philosopher and statesman born in about AD 480, after the barbarians had conquered Rome. The *Consolation*, his last and most famous work, written shortly before his execution for treason in 524, is an attempt to see how far the philosophical truths available to human intelligence, without the benefit of any religious revelation, can console someone who has

been unjustly toppled from high distinction to absolute ruin – Boethius's own situation. It forms a dialogue in which Boethius himself voices objections to the way the world is run that would naturally occur to someone who has been unfairly accused and persecuted, and Lady Philosophy shows him how unreasonable his complaints are. Boethius was a Christian, but in this work he wrote as if he were a philosophically minded pagan, presumably because he wanted to provide arguments that would offer comfort to present and future readers whatever their beliefs. These arguments are always compatible with Christianity: Boethius assumed that the human mind, unaided, could reach belief in a single God and in life after death (as pagan philosophers such as Plato and Cicero had indeed done). In the Middle Ages, Boethius's *Consolation* was widely read; it meant much to Chaucer, who translated it from Latin into English. He also borrowed frequently from it in his more serious poems, and, whatever his view of its complete doctrine, the chief use made of it was as a source of philosophical arguments that could be attributed to pre-Christian pagans. In *The Franklin's Tale* the chief debt to Boethius is in Dorigen's speech about the black rocks (193–221). No such questioning of God's ordering of the universe occurs in the *Filocolo* or any other version of 'The Damsel's Rash Promise'. In the Middle Ages, Christian belief was universal, and was supported by a single church with no serious rivals, so that, as Chaucer puts it, 'hooly chirches feith in our bileve / Ne suffreth noon illusioun us to greve' (461–2). Chaucer shared this faith, but questions about the reason why evil and suffering exist – questions foreclosed by 'feith in our bileve' – intrigued and troubled him, and are raised repeatedly in his poems. That must have been one reason why he so often imagined characters from the pagan past.

Concealing his debts to Boccaccio and Boethius, Chaucer claimed that *The Franklin's Tale* had a quite different source. The Franklin's statement in his prologue is unequivocal:

Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
Of diverse aventures maden layes,
Rimeyed 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 wil as I kan. (37–43)

In itself this deceptiveness about sources is a common medieval practice. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer claimed that his source was a non-existent Latin author called Lollius. There Chaucer wanted to give the impression that a narrative set in classical antiquity had an authentic classical origin. One might expect him to do the same in *The Franklin's Tale,* so why did he claim to be repeating a Breton lay?

In naming a Breton lay as its source, Chaucer is relating the tale to a specific literary genre. The earliest known Breton lays are by Marie de France, a French poet writing in twelfth-century England. She claims to be repeating stories recited by Breton minstrels; it seems likely that she was the inventor of the genre as a written form. Her lays are short verse romances, dealing with the adventures of idealised knights and ladies, and often involving magic or the supernatural. Her plots frequently have a dream-like randomness; her lays are elegantly concise in expression, yet charged with feelings and meanings that go far beyond what is said. *The Franklin's Tale* does contain a large supernatural element, yet this is not left mysterious but is explained in detail as 'scientific' natural magic or as illusion. It does begin with aristocratic characters of an idealised and typified kind, but at crucial points in the narrative these tend to be developed in ways that incite us to take a keen interest in them as individuals. The narrative itself, far from unfolding like a dream, is compactly ordered. Moreover, while Marie's lays generally take extramarital love as the norm of interesting human relationships, Chaucer

focuses attention upon the relationship of the married couple Dorigen and Arveragus. Aurelius's attempt to break up this relationship by having an affair with Dorigen is halted by his own decency; if *The Franklin's Tale* were really a Breton lay, his affair with Dorigen would probably be the emotional and imaginative centre of the work. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that Chaucer had actually read any Breton lays in French; the only indication of a link with the lays is found in the information about them in lines 37–43 (quoted above) and this corresponds to material in a preface attached to two English versions of lays, both surviving in a fourteenth-century manuscript written in London. It seems quite possible that Chaucer knew this very manuscript and took from it all he knew about lays.[1]

Whether or not Chaucer knew any French lays, we can speculate as to why he claimed a Breton lay source for *The Franklin's Tale*. Some possible reasons are as follows. First, even though he presents magic more rationalistically than it appears in real Breton lays, he gives it a crucial role in *The Franklin's Tale*, and that makes it unusual among his poems. Among *The Canterbury Tales*, only *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Squire's Tale* include magic at all, and only the latter (which immediately precedes *The Franklin's Tale* in the collection) describes it in any detail. So Chaucer could well have felt that *The Franklin's Tale* had some affinity with a romance genre in which magic was prominent; indeed, his own scepticism about magic might have led him to regard magic as a generic feature of the Breton lay.

Second, Breton lays characteristically give special emphasis to human feelings: it is feelings that drive the action, give meaning to the characters' lives, and charge objects and settings with symbolic significance. By contrast with Boccaccio's versions of the story,

[1] L. H. Loomis, 'Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck MS', *Studies in Philology*, 38 (1941).

which are little more than ingenious narrative machines (amplified in the *Filocolo* by a sensational treatment of magic as pagan ritual), Chaucer's version gives central importance to the characters' feelings. The longest speeches – Dorigen's address to God (193–221), her *compleynt* (682–784) and Aurelius's prayer to Apollo (359–407) – are all expressions of extreme emotion, and the whole tale focuses on the emotions underlying its events: Dorigen's longing and fear during her husband's absence in England, her suicidal grief at the thought of keeping her promise to Aurelius, and her half-mad misery (839) when it seems that she cannot avoid doing so; Aurelius's desire for Dorigen and despair of gaining her, culminating in the 'langour and . . . torment furius' (429) of his prolonged lovesickness and the reckless joy with which he promises the magician an impossibly large reward; the 'wo, . . . peyne, and . . . distresse' (65) suffered by Arveragus at the gap in rank that initially keeps him from declaring his love, and his anguish when he feels obliged to tell Dorigen to keep her promise even though she believed when making it that it need never be fulfilled. The Clerk alone is never at the mercy of his feelings. Outward expressions of emotion occur everywhere: tears, 'sorweful sikes colde' (192), lamentations, imploring looks (285–6), 'raving' (354), swooning, turning away (339), leaping up (496), turning suddenly pale (668), kneeling in supplication or gratitude, cursing. Most of these emotions are painful; they are repeatedly associated with the fear or threat of death. Arveragus sent Dorigen word that he would soon return from England, 'Or elles hadde this sorwe hir herte slain' (168). Aurelius's response to Dorigen's demand that he remove the rocks is 'Thanne moot I die of sodeyn deth horrible' (338), and he begs the Clerk either to relieve his suffering 'Or with a swerd that he wolde slitte his herte' (588). Aurelius assures Dorigen, 'Ye sle me giltelees for verray peyne' (646); when she learns that he has fulfilled her condition, she considers suicide and lists many cases of women who 'Chees rather for to die' (712) than be dishonoured. Arveragus assures her

that he 'hadde wel levere ystiked for to be' (804) than have her break her word, but warns her 'up peyne of deeth' (809) never to reveal the shame she will bring upon them both by keeping it. And Aurelius reports to the Clerk that Arveragus

> Hadde levere die in sorwe and in distresse
> Than that his wyf were of hir trouthe fals, (924–5)

while Dorigen 'levere had lost that day hir lyf' (928) than be unfaithful to her husband.

Many of these painful feelings are treated with a certain distance or even disdain, as in Chaucer's rapid summary of Dorigen's expressions of distress at Arveragus's absence –

> For his absence wepeth she and siketh,
> As doon thise noble wives whan hem liketh.
> She moorneth, waketh, waileth, fasteth, pleyneth(145–7)

– or his callous dismissal of Aurelius's lovesickness: 'Chese he, for me, wheither he wollive or die' (414). The reason for this will be discussed later, but here I must add that it coexists with repeated emphasis on warm and practical sympathy among the characters for each other's sufferings. Dorigen's friends 'Conforten hire in al that ever they may' (151) when she misses her husband, begging her to join them in strolling along the coast and, when that fails, in visiting 'othere places delitables' (227), playing boardgames, picnicking and dancing. Aurelius's brother puts him to bed when he finds him unconscious from unrequited love, weeps secretly for his sorrow (444) and rejoices when he thinks of the possibility of curing him by magic. When Arveragus learns of the dilemma that is troubling Dorigen, he is not angry but responds 'with glad chiere, in friendly wise', asking only, 'Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?' (795–7). And it is a capacity to feel *compassioun* and *pitee* for others that leads to the competitive exercise in generosity that