

---

## COURTLY LOVE

### A short note on the Tales of the Franklin and the Wife of Bath

**Louis J. Scerri**

---

Early in the twelfth century there appeared in the lyric poetry of the troubadours of the south of France an essentially novel and revolutionary conception of love. Though love and lust are as old as the first man, courtly love or *fin amour*, was the product of a medieval consciousness.

Till early medieval times, the relationship between man and woman was quite clearly cut. The church officially condoned the viewpoint that woman was to be completely subject to man, as man himself was to be completely subject to God. St. Paul had hinted at a similar idea; Thomas Aquinas actually stated it. Marriage itself was looked upon as something to be tolerated in order to propagate the species. Indeed even passion and pleasure within marriage were considered sinful. To be honest, one should not, however, single out the Church as the sole perpetrator of this point of view; throughout the feudal period, the cultural and social mileau of the age were in total agreement with the natural inclinations of the dominant, and frequently brutal, male.

The sudden appearance of *fin amour* is therefore somewhat mysterious. One school of thought sees its origin in the lyric poetry of Moslem Spain, which must have had a considerable effect on the poetry of

the troubadours just across the Pyrenees. The other school of thought sees the troubadours and their poetry simply as the spontaneous outgrowth of the settled, fortunate environment of southern France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The earliest poet of the new tradition is William IX, Duke of Aquitaine (1071-1127). His granddaughter, Eleanor (1122-1204), Queen of France (1137-1152) and later of England (1152-1204) became the foremost patroness of the troubadours, and is credited with the introduction of the courtly ideas into Northern France. Her daughter, Marie of Champagne was to take her place as the chief advocate of the troubadours and courtly love.

The chief twelfth century propagator of courtly ideas in Northern France was Chretien de Troyes, one of Marie's proteges. He introduced the courtly code into the stories of King Arthur and the twelve Knights of the Round Table, thereby giving them a particular character that was to persist up to our own days.

However, the chief source of information regarding *fin amour* is *De Arte Honeste Amandi* written by Andreas Capellanus (Andrew the Chaplain). His is a comprehensive treatise regarding love in all its aspects. He in-

sists that love must be found outside marriage, since medieval marriages were only matters of convenience. True Love should be mutual, secret, noble and ennobling. In public the lover must treat his lady as a complete stranger and communicate with her only furtively. When he sees her his heart should beat heavily and and he should turn pale, even though this could endanger this secret love. This intensity of his love should make him eat and sleep very little. It is clear that such love could not exist within marriage: "Everybody knows that love has no place between husband and wife."

One should not however consider medieval aristocracy as more morally degenerate than any other section of society before or since. Indeed the sounder judgement seems that expressed by Professor Morris Bishop: "On the whole, it seems that courtly love was mostly a game, an intellectual diversion with little effect on moral behaviour."

From Aquitaine, the effect of the troubadours passed over to Italy where it was to have a deep influence on the poetry of Francis of Assisi who saw himself as the 'troubadour of God', and from where it was to exert a deep formative influence on the poetry of the Sicilian court: *il dolce stil nuovo*. Indeed even the relationship between Dante and Beatrice is essentially courtly and it is actually Beatrice who 'beatifies' Dante by leading him through Purgatory and into Heaven. In Dante's case, his earthly love for Beatrice was to lead him to the divine source of love Himself. Similarly the relationship between Petrarch and Donna Laura is entirely courtly in its concept and its realization. With Petrarch the tradition was to return to Renaissance France as a

theme for the royal pageants.

It was primarily as a poet of love that Chaucer obtained contemporaneous fame. Eustache Deschamps, a French poet, praises him as 'an earthly God of Love in Albion' in 1386. John Gower calls him the 'poet of Venus', while Thomas Usk eulogizes him as 'Love's own true servant'.

Chaucer's apprenticeship as a poet of Love had started with his translation of the *Romance of the Rose*. Even in *The Book of the Duchess*, his work only makes complete sense if viewed in a courtly atmosphere. In the *Parlement of Foules*, the merits of courtly love are argued by the 'royal tersel' as he puts forward his candidature for the 'formel egle'.

It was to be *Troilus and Criseyde* that was to earn for Chaucer his great contemporary repute. Again it is only if we keep in mind the conventions of courtly love that the poem can be fully understood. The sudden falling in love on Troilus' part, his wasting away because of this secret, his need to confide in someone who will help him to obtain Criseyde are all typical of the courtly convention.

But Chaucer, especially in his more mature works, shows himself as too consummate an artist to follow any formal convention slavishly. Indeed one is bound to feel that Chaucer is never completely satisfied with the courtly code and the solutions that it put forward.

The main reason for Chaucer's growing dissatisfaction with courtly love is that it is supremely impractical as a viable means of establishing married bliss. Indeed there is a light-hearted tone in the pompous tercels' declaration of his love in courtly terms. The same thing occurs in the Nun's Priest's Tale where Pertelote the hen upbraids Chaunticleer the cock

for failing to come up to courtly expectations (NPT 142-154). Again the fact that courtly love is taken so seriously by birds should make the reader take it lightheartedly.

Even for Troylus, a faultless follower of the courtly code, the adventure ends sourly. The very last view we get of Troylus is one of him laughing at the woe of those who lamented his death, as he looks down at earth from the heavens. From there he condemns the work of those authors (ironically enough Chaucer himself is one of them) who write about 'blynde lust' and he proceeds to repudiate earthly love in favour of the celestial variety.

It must be also kept in mind that by the time that Chaucer came to write his works in the latter half of the fourteenth century, courtly love and its literature had been in existence for more than two centuries and it had already an old-fashioned aura about it. Indeed the Franklin's very choice of courtly love to set his plot in motion, together with the equally old-fashioned Breton Lai as the immediate 'auctoritee' for his tale, mark him out as provincial and old-fashioned in his turn.

### THE FRANKLIN'S TALE

In the Franklin's Tale, the courting of Dorigen by Arveragus proceeds on strict courtly love terms. Just like any other knight, Arveragus first does his service and performs 'many a labour, many a great emprise'. Dorigen herself is 'oon the faireste under sonne', and she finally takes pity on him and consents to marry him from a position of superior strength. Once they are married, however, their relationship does not proceed in the manner we expect, since in their case

love between them continues to exist even after marriage.

Within their marriage, Dorigen is prepared to forego the feminine domination which is part and parcel of courtly love. She is prepared to treat Arveragus as 'hir housebonde and hir lord'. On his part Arveragus insists that he will never claim 'maistrie' over her against her will, which means that he will continue to treat Dorigen as his lover. In this respect, their marriage goes against the accepted medieval norm. Love continues to exist within their marriage which had been unthinkable hitherto. This had provided the rationale for courtly love.

It is into this ideal marriage that Aurelius, the young squire, intrudes, and insists upon loving Dorigen in the typical courtly manner. The main question will be whether the happy marriage will be able to withstand this external threat.

Aurelius is the typical courtly lover-aspirant:

'Yong, strong, right  
vertuous and riche and  
wys  
wel beloved and  
holden in gret prys'  
(FT,261-2)

He proceeds in typical courtly manner to adore Dorigen from afar 'two yeer and moore', even though he dares not declare his love. This parallels the behaviour of Troylus, Dante and Petrarch, and like them Aurelius proceeds to compose:

'many layes,  
songes, compleintes,  
roundels, vireleys.' (FT, 276-7)

Even when he plucks up enough courage to declare his intentions, Dorigen informs him that she is devoted to her husband and tells him off, but in a moment of levity she performs like the courtly lady by promising to return his love and love him 'best of any man' if only he could remove the black rocks of the Breton coast that weighed so heavily on her mind. Dorigen fondly believes this to be an impossible task. Of course her intention imposed a difficult task in order to test the sincerity and steadfastness as well as to improve the general worthiness of their lovers.

Aurelius treats Dorigen's wish as the typical courtly imposition, and he proceeds to despair when he realizes the impossibility of making the black rocks disappear. And just as Troylus had found his Pandarus, so does Aurelius open his heart to his brother and to no one else. Just like Pandarus, Aurelius' brother will show the practical way to obtain the lady, though this time through magic.

The rest of the story need hardly bother us at the moment, except perhaps to note that Dorigen, on being confronted with the realization of her wish, is confounded, and tries to find a way out of her predicament, which is itself not a very courtly manner of behaving.

The Franklin, in the final part of the story, is more concerned with 'gentillesse'. It is true that this quality is inextricably tied up with courtly love, since the main intention behind the long, trying 'apprenticeship' of the lover was directed at increasing the general worth of the candidate. Arveragus, Aurelius and the clerk all vie with one another as they try to outdo the other's magnanimous behaviour. As in the *Parlement of Foules*, Chaucer once again avoids giving us an an-

swer as to who behaved most nobly; instead he directs the question at the reader, in the typical manner of the *demande d'amour* convention.

## THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

In the Wife of Bath's Tale, the story takes place in the courtly atmosphere of Arthur's kingdom. The crime of the young, inexperienced aspirant-knight is particularly heinous. The rape of the young virgin symbolizes the brutal male sexual domination over woman. In this respect, rape becomes a far more abominable crime than murder, and as such the knight is condemned to death. The queen however asks the king to be granted the power of life or death over the condemned knight. By consenting to this demand, the king acknowledges the queen's sovereignty and the Knight finds himself dependent on a lady's grace, and this must represent, as far as the Wife of Bath is concerned, the true position of man.

The knight is granted a chance to earn a reprieve but he has to seek out the answer to the question of which is that thing that woman desires above everything else. This is of course reminiscent of the traditional 'emprise'. Ironically enough, woman's primary desire becomes the main concern of the same knight who had not listened to the young girl's entreaties. Without knowing it, the young knight is performing just like a typical courtly lover. He now has to listen to all women to get the right answer.

In the end the answer is provided by a ghastly old woman, so ugly that 'a fouler wight ther may no man devyse' — the very antithesis of the young girl. Even in this case, however, the young knight has to accept the old

hag's superiority, and he acknowledges this by promising to do the first 'thyng' that she might ask him to do before she gives him the answer.

He returns to Arthur's queen with the answer that satisfies all the women who provided the 'jury'

'Wommen desiren to have sover-  
ayntee,  
As wel over hir housbonde as hir  
love,  
And for to been in maistrie hym  
above.' (WBT, 1039-41)

It is then that the old hag jumps up to demand her share of the bargain, namely, that the young knight should marry and love her. It is this last condition that sounds particularly preposterous. The point behind the hag's insistence is that the bachelor-knight is to be tested whether he is ready to submit actually to woman. It is not enough to pay lip-service to woman's superiority. Like Jankin before him, the young knight finally bows his head to woman — and it is then that complete domestic bliss follows.

It is evident that it is beyond the scope of the present paper to deal exhaustively with all the aspects of courtly love that demonstrate themselves in these two tales. Indeed, both tales revolve around the concept of 'gentillesse'. Neither is it possible to examine minutely the linguistic structure of these two of the most artistically mature of the *Canterbury Tales*.

It is however interesting to note how in both tales, Chaucer uses courtly love to provide two different answers to the age-old question of just what form of relationship there should be

between man and woman.

The wife of Bath is, naturally enough, attracted to the concept that underlines courtly love, mainly that woman is superior to man who should satisfy her every whim. The Wife of Bath's Tale does not really go much beyond this simplistic acceptance of courtly love's basic notion. Indeed her own life had been a bourgeois interpretation of the aristocratic courtly convention. In her tale, courtly love is accepted at face-value.

The Franklin and his tale provide a completely different situation. The Franklin is a far more mature personality with his own aspirations of 'gentillesse'. His use of the courtly love background is more mature and complex

Despite his disclaimer, the Franklin is really a man of some culture, unlike the Wife of Bath whose main source of education had been her momentous fifth marriage. The Franklin handles his source far more maturely. He transcends the idea of love that underlies courtly love and the Franklin comes out with a solution that appears so naive today but must have been so revolutionary in the fourteenth century, namely, that love *can* exist within marriage. It is this perhaps that makes the Franklin's Tale so mature and pleasing to the modern reader. And this may be the real reason why we feel more at our ease with him than with the aggressive Wife of Bath. He speaks to us in our own language, and uses terms and ideas that sound so contemporary to the modern ear.

---

*Louis J. Scerri M.A. teaches English at the Upper Secondary School, Valetta.*