

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

FROM MEDIEVAL TO RENAISSANCE?
CHAUCER'S POSITION ON PAST GENTILITY

By A. J. MINNIS

Read 23 October 1986

Catun was an heþene mon,
Cristned was he nouht:
In word ne in werk aþeynes vr fey
No technyg he non tauht.
To holy writ al in his bok
A-cordyng was he euere;
Of god of heuene com his wit,
Of oþer com hit neuere.¹

THESE fifteenth-century verses from the Vernon manuscript, part of the English prologue to the 'Little Cato', reveal an attitude to pagan antiquity which evinces at once sympathy and distance. The writer obviously felt some kinship with the ancient poet-philosopher and putative author of the *Distichs*, that popular grammar textbook of the later Middle Ages and early Renaissance. There is nothing in Cato's 'bok' which contradicts the holy Scriptures, but as a 'heþene', however enlightened, there was no way in which he could have known the tenets of the Christian 'fey'. Obviously, it is important to understand the limits of our anonymous poet's sympathy with this past master, and exactly how much distance he perceived between pagan and Christian values.

There is, however, no real problem of interpretation here, for the parameters of the poet's vision are, quite clearly, those of that classicism which was concomitant with, and indeed fostered by, late medieval scholasticism. There is no suggestion that Cato was divinely inspired; we are in a world very different from that of the Paduan proto-humanist Albertino Mussato (1261-1329), who believed that the language of poetry is divine and saw in poetical

¹ Carl Horstmann (ed.), *The Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript, part ii* (Early English Text Society, os, cxvii, London, 1901), p. 554.

images a kind of revelation expressed in a fictional form.¹ The point is rather that, by using his god-given powers of reason, Cato achieved much for which posterity must be thankful. Such an attitude to non-Christian rationalism was expressed by St Augustine,² and the key ideas are often found, richly elaborated, in the works of the 'classicizing' schoolmen of the later Middle Ages. John of Wales (regent master at Oxford c.1260) spoke warmly of the 'shadowy perfection' of the pagans in his popular compendium of the lives of illustrious philosophers,³ and the argument was taken a stage further by those fourteenth-century nominalist theologians who argued that virtuous heathens, even though they lived in purely natural conditions and lacked the direct intervention of divine grace, had some claim on salvation if they 'did what was in them' and walked by the best light they had.⁴

The matter of Chaucer's attitude to pagan antiquity is far less easy to resolve. There has been a general tendency to ally him with the humanists, because Renaissance humanism remains, in the eyes of many critics, expressive of all that is most truly creative and most truly human in man's unconquerable mind (to adopt some characteristic idioms); whence, if poetry is great it must be in some sense humanistic, whether by deliberate imitation, by anticipation, or even by osmosis. To concentrate on the 'medieval' aspects of Chaucer is to depict him as quaint and backward, and—horror of horrors—to place him uncomfortably close to those benighted scholastics who worried about how many angels could share a pin head. This is, of course, to caricature a particular strain of Chaucer criticism, but there is too much truth here for comfort or complacency. Such attitudes are all the more surprising in face of the emphases which many recent historians and historians of ideas have placed on the intimidating complexities of the passage from medieval to Renaissance, especially with regard to the relationship between scholasticism and humanism.⁵ Certain critics insist on rushing in where historians fear to tread.

¹ Cf. C. C. Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250-1500* (London and Toronto, 1981), pp. 81-2.

² See especially *De civitate Dei*, VIII. xii, and cf. p. 231.

³ *Compendiloquium*, pars ii, cap. 2, ed. L. Wadding (Rome, 1655), pp. 292-3.

⁴ See especially H. A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1967), pp. 47-50, 235-48.

⁵ See especially H. A. Oberman, 'Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism with Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance', *Harvard Theological Review*, liii (1960), 47-76; W. J. Courtenay, 'Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion' in Charles Trinkaus with H. A. Oberman (eds.), *The Pursuit of Holiness*

As a response to this confused and confusing situation, the present paper will endeavour to throw some light on the subject by, in the first instance, suggesting some general guidelines for exploring Chaucer's ancient world, guidelines which rest on two basic principles:

1. That it is essential to consider all the available evidence concerning Chaucer's attitudes and strategies rather than relying on a predisposition towards proto-humanism.

2. That knowledge of the context of a text is crucial. A change of cultural context may alter considerably the significance of even that material which is being directly borrowed, for instance. Hence, knowledge of the process by which major ideas were transmitted and transformed is the *sine qua non* of our inquiry.

Then, as a specific enquiry which will counterpoint these general matters of methodology, we will focus on one aspect of the virtue of Chaucer's virtuous heathen, namely *gentillesse* (or *nobilitas*, to cite the Latin equivalent), as it is presented in *The Franklin's Tale*. Past gentility will also be considered in the sense of 'old nobility' or ancestral descent, as contrasted by 'nobility of soul', my basic point being that there is no reason to doubt that the 'good pagans' of ancient Brittany are noble in both these ways, i.e. in blood and in deed. And this will, of course, lead us to a consideration of how, in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, Chaucer handled the material on true nobility which he took from Dante, the favourite of so many of the Italian humanists.

According to A. C. Spearing, whose stimulating book, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*, is the most recent contribution to the debate on Chaucer's antiquarianism, the poet possessed 'a Renaissance broadness and daring of vision' which led him to express, through pagan mouthpieces, his own questions and doubts about the cosmic order. He can

see no reason to resist the conclusion that Chaucer—doubtless without wishing to abandon his genuine religious faith—felt a personal need to ask such unanswerable questions. It was not only 'benighted pagans' such as Palamon and Arcite for whom certain fundamental aspects of the world provoked irresistible questions yet were beyond understanding;

(Leiden, 1974), pp. 25–59, and also Courtenay's forthcoming book on fourteenth-century English scholasticism. The development and trends of previous scholarship are well summarized by Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston and New York, 1948).

the same was true of Chaucer himself, and he needed to imagine pagan worlds in order to gain the impetus and the courage to interrogate his own God.¹

Here Spearing has in mind passages such as Troilus's questioning of a God who fails to further truth and punish vice (*Troilus and Criseyde*, v. 1706-8)² and Dorigen's protest against those 'unreasonable' black rocks which seem rather

a foul confusion
Of werk than any fair creacion
Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable
(*Canterbury Tales*, v. 869-71)

But it should be noted that, in the lines in question, Troilus and Dorigen are speaking from the very depths of despair, incomprehension, and isolation. Surely this must direct the way we read them—as coming from the heart rather than from the head. Dorigen begins by considering the problem of the apparently 'foul confusion / Of werk' in a way which is reminiscent of the form of the scholastic *quaestio*. The arguments in favour of the proposition that part of creation is 'in ydel'—

1. In general, such rocks do no creature any good, but rather cause trouble (v. 873-5)

2. In particular, rocks have slain 'An hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde', yet mankind is the highest part of creation, being made in God's image (876-84)

—are followed by this *sed contra*:

clerkes wol seyn as hem leste,
By argumentz, that al is for the beste,
Though I ne kan the causes nat yknowe.
(885-7)

But instead of taking the matter further, she agitatedly concludes with a prayer that God should protect her lord (888-9) and a curse as she wishes the rocks which might harm him to hell (891-2). Reason has receded before faith and deep feeling, perhaps even obsession—'Thise rokkes sleen myn herte for the feere' (893). Dorigen's leaving of 'al disputison' to 'clerkes' may

¹ A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 57.

² All Chaucer references are to F. N. Robinson (ed.), *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (2nd edn., London, 1957).

remind us of the Friar's request that the Wife of Bath should leave difficult school-matters to the experts (iii. 1270-7), but a more telling parallel must surely be the conclusion of the famous 'disputation with himself' in which Troilus, stunned by the imminent loss of Criseyde, argues that the universe is governed by strict necessity (*Troilus* iv. 953-1082). That, too, ends with an impassioned prayer, in this case an appeal for intervention from 'Almyghty Jove in trone'—which is quite illogical, given that he has just proved that fate is inexorable and hence neither God nor man can alter it, but perfectly understandable in terms of human feeling.¹ In such instances, it can be argued, Chaucer is conveying extremes of emotion which are clearly 'placed' as such rather than his own darkest doubts about the divine order; he is concerned with truth-to-life rather than with metaphysical truth.

Then there is the fact that Chaucer drew most of the material for the emotional outpourings of his pagans not from any 'Renaissance' source but from the *De consolacione philosophiae* of Boethius, this certainly being the case with the statements of Troilus and Dorigen which we have just considered.² In the Old French translation of the *Consolation* which was a primary source of Chaucer's own *Boece*, Jean de Meun explained how his author had imagined two *personae*, one who is taught and the other who teaches, or one who is suffering and the other who heals. Boethius gives himself the role of a man who is troubled and motivated 'par passions sensibles', Jean explains, and introduces the figure of Philosophy in the role of one who follows intellectual goods. Speaking in his own part he displays 'ses douleurs' and the reasons that lie behind them, and speaking in the part of Philosophy he brings forth arguments which eliminate those sources of grief and show us where we can find comfort.³ In the learned scholastic commentary on Boethius which Chaucer used in translating the *Consolation* and on several other occasions, the 'classicizing' schoolman Nicholas Trevet distinguished between the *persona indigens*, the character in need of consolation, and the *persona afferens*, the

¹ Cf. A. J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 97-8.

² Troilus's fatalistic soliloquy in *Troilus and Criseyde*, iv. 953-1082, and Dorigen's protestation, are discussed above and below; Troilus's questioning of a God who fails to further truth and punish vice echoes *De consolacione philosophiae*, i, pr. 4, 101-3, 167-74, etc. This and subsequent references to the *Consolation* are to the edition by S. J. Tester in H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand and S. J. Tester (eds.), *Boethius: The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp. 130-435.

³ See the edition by V. L. Dedeck-Héry, 'Boethius's *De Consolatione* by Jean de Meun', *Mediaeval Studies*, xiv (1952), 170-1.

authority figure who provides the correct information and effects that consolation.¹ Chaucer, as a creator of characters, was more concerned with the *persona indigens* than the *persona afferens*, with the sufferer rather than the healer; the tortured Boethius-persona became the role-model for many of his passionate pagans.

The most obvious example of this is probably Troilus's affirmation of the necessitarian hypothesis: a philosophical statement which admirably suited the fatalistic pagan as envisaged in the fourteenth century² is quoted out of context from the fifth book of the *Consolation*. In Trevet's commentary the position in question—labelled as a *dubitacio* or interim stage in an argument—is carefully 'framed' by statements which emphasize its limitations.³ Then again, the main source of the terms in which Dorigen voices her protest about the 'grisly feendly rokkes blake' seems to be the section of the *Consolation* in which the *persona indigens* asks why the good God who created and controls the whole non-human world with such apparent order and wisdom, should leave mankind to the disorderly and arbitrary governance of Fortune. In particular, Dorigen's reference to man being 'so fair part of thy werk' (879) recalls book I, met. 5, 43-4, 'Operis tanti pars non vilis / Homines quatumur fortunae salo', which Chaucer, perhaps influenced by the relevant Trevet gloss,⁴ rendered in his *Boece* as follows:

We men, that ben noght a foul partie, but a fair partie of so greet a werk,
we ben turmented in this see of fortune (52-4).⁵

In the early books of the *Consolation* nature imagery evokes the harmony of the natural world which highlights as a blemish in the world of man all the evil which appears to go unpunished. By contrast, Dorigen is concerned with an apparent blemish in the

¹ All Trevet citations are to the complete but unfinalized edition on which Professor E. T. Silk was still working at the time of his death. I am grateful to him for kindly providing me with a typescript of that edition.

² On late medieval perceptions of pagan fatalism see Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 40-7, 63-4, etc.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 95-7.

⁴ Trevet's explanation is as follows: 'HOMINES NON PARS VILIS immo valde nobilis pars OPERIS TANTI id est mundi QUATIMUR FORTUNE SALO id est mari. Fortuna mari comparatur quis sicut undis iactatur navis nunc in altum nunc in profundum sic homo per Fortunam nunc in prosperitatem nunc in adversitatem.'

⁵ In this metre, as Boethius himself says at the beginning of I, pr. 5, he is 'baying' his 'unabated grief', to quote Tester's translation (ed. cit. in n. 2, p. 209), p. 161. Remarks like that are part of the strategy whereby the limitations of the Boethius-persona are made evident.

natural world. But the underlying problem is the same—the extent and the nature of God's control over His creation—and Chaucer's adaptation is a logical one, given Boethian statements like 'it is surely a monstrous thing in the sight of God that whatever an evil man conceives can actually be done to the innocent' (I, pr. 4, 101-4). The monstrous, explains Trevet in his comment on that statement, is what occurs contrary to the order of nature—a definition which, incidentally, will be echoed during Dorigen's later complaint against Fortune, after she has heard from Aurelius that 'the rokkes been aweye':

wende I nevere by possibilitee
That swich a monstre or merveille myghte be!
It is agayns the proces of nature!

(1343-5)

Just as monsters occur against the order of nature, Trevet continues, so it seems 'according to the state of the sick or weak man (*infirmus*) who is here represented', i.e. the Boethius-persona, that 'evils occur contrary to the order of divine providence'. Thus an (unnamed) philosopher once asked: 'If there is a God, whence comes evil? But whence good, if there is not?' (105-6). It is the implications of the second of these questions which, of course, are affirmed in the subsequent text of the *Consolation*: nothing was made 'in ydel' and there is no such thing as chance; what men see as fate is actually, from the divine viewpoint, all-controlling providence. This solution is anticipated in the much-read metrum *O qui perpetua*, in words which, as Kathryn Hume has pointed out, have something in common with Dorigen's:¹

O thou Fadir, soowere and creatour of hevene and of erthes, that governest this world by perdurable resoun . . . Thow . . . formedest this world to the lyknesse semblable of that faire world in thy thought. Thou drawest alle thyng of thy sovereyn ensaumpler and comaundest that this world, parfytly ymakid, have frely and absolut his parfyte parties. (1-17)

However, Dorigen does not get that far—though one may speculate that the happy outcome of her dilemma may have

¹ 'The Pagan Setting of the *Franklin's Tale* and the Sources of Dorigen's Cosmology', *Studia Neophilologica*, xlv (1972), 291-2. Hume comments, 'If Dorigen's lament is indeed a Boethian complaint spiced with reminiscences of Ovid, and her cosmology "pagan" in accord with the tale's setting, then Christian censure of the protagonists is not appropriate'—a view which my subsequent argument will fully endorse.

confirmed her faith in God's benevolent rule of creation. Like the Boethius-persona in the first book of the *Consolation*, like Troilus in his fatalistic outburst, she is presented as an 'infirm' character in need of instruction and healing, a *persona indigens* in search of a *persona afferens*.

The fact that Chaucer used part of the Boethian pattern of problem-and-solution can hardly be taken as evidence that he was breaking the mould, rejecting the ideological thrust and consequences of the pattern, which ensures that eventually all doubts will be stilled and all questions answered. Moreover, on occasion Chaucer makes some movement towards completing the pattern. In the *Troilus* epilogue, for example, we hear the voice of a sort of *persona afferens* declaring the ultimate failure of the pagan world-view:

Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites,
Lo here, what alle hire goddes may availle;
Lo here, thise wrecched worldes appetites;
Lo here, the fyn and guerdoun for travaille
Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rascaille!

(v. 1849-53)

This should serve to remind us—if we needed reminding—that the views expressed by Chaucer's pagan characters are not necessarily the poet's own views, but have to be understood with reference to the historical period in which *Troilus and Criseyde* is set, a period of (at best) shadowy perfection which has given way to an era of full, Christian enlightenment (cf. v. 1835-48). (This, however, need not imply that the pagan characters should be judged according to Christian standards, held personally responsible for the limitations of their time and culture—a point to which we will return.) A similar act of cultural closure occurs in *The Franklin's Tale* when its cantankerous narrator deploras 'swiche illusiouns and swiche meschaunces / As hethen folk useden in thilke dayes' (v. 1292-3). All we have to go on, apparently, is the traditional pattern, which seems to be firmly in place; we cannot go beyond it to share Chaucer's most personal thoughts on fate, freedom, and the divine will. To prove that Chaucer created his pagan worlds in order, *inter alia*, to interrogate his Christian God would require the powers of a clairvoyant rather than those of a critic.

And this brings us to a second possible test for Renaissance values in Chaucer, namely, an analysis of his respect for the past. As Spearing rightly says, this respect is concomitant with a sense of the universal nature of much human experience. 'Guided by

his reading of Boccaccio', Chaucer 'attempted with remarkable success to re-imagine a classical pagan culture in its own terms—a culture interesting for its difference from his own, and yet imaginable as part of a universal human culture, in which pagan and Christian are at one'.¹ But it should be recognized that a sense of universal human experience is not exclusive to Renaissance ideology. Late medieval compilers and commentators effected a convergence of pagan and Christian authorities on matters of common interest and importance. Their attitude may be illustrated by the uses which the 'classicizing' schoolman John of Wales made of a passage from the *Moralia in Job* of St Gregory the Great,² a commentary on the deeds of a 'good pagan' as recorded in the Old Testament, written by a saint who was regarded as a champion of virtuous heathen (as is witnessed by his association with the Trajan legend).³ 'Be thou ashamed, O Sidon: for the sea speaketh' (Isaiah 23: 4). By 'Sidon', Gregory explains, is signified the Law in which Christians are established, while 'the sea' signifies the life of the Gentiles. Well may Sidon be ashamed, for the life of virtuous pagans reproves life under the present Law, and the deeds of secular men confound the deeds of the religious. Christians promise but do not practice what they receive as precepts, while the Gentiles in their lives kept those things to which they were by no means bound by legal obligation. Thus, in the *exemplum* of Job, 'a gentile, one without the Law, is brought forward to confound the iniquity of those that are under the Law'. This exegesis is cited in the prologue to John of Wales's *Compendiloquium de vitis illustrium philosophorum*, in defence of his collection of 'the notable sayings of the philosophers and imitable examples of virtuous men', which are intended to

stimulate and incite the young, to instruct them, to induce among those who wish to imitate the said philosophers a salutary shame that leads to glory, to repress the elation of an arrogant heart, and to encourage humility in perfect men, so that although they do great and difficult things for God, they be not puffed up, when they hear and read of the gentiles doing perfect things (in so far as these can be perfect without faith working through love) and bearing much for honour and human glory.⁴

¹ Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*, p. 86.

² John of Wales, *Compendiloquium*, prologus, ed. Wadding, pp. 19–28; St Gregory, *Moralia*, praefatio ii. 5, in *Gregorii Magni Moralia in Iob, libri I–X* (Corpus Christianorum, Ser. Lat., cxliii, 1979), 11.

³ On the Trajan legend see Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 1, 53–5, 122, 123–4, 179 n.

⁴ Quoted by W. A. Pantin, 'John of Wales and Medieval Humanism' in

[Footnote 4 continued on page 214]

The same passage from Gregory is cited in John's *Breviloquium de virtutibus antiquorum principum et philosophorum*, a work well-stocked with edifying extracts from pagan philosophers and poets.¹ Quite clearly, the good example set by such pagans is supposed to be directly relevant to John's readers. Although the technical superiority of Christian virtue is affirmed, there is a sense of universal morality, of a science of ethics to which all wise men, whether pagans or Christians, have contributed by their words and deeds, each according to his lights.

The notion of good and bad behaviour 'in general' permeates a work which may have been influenced by the *Breviloquium*,² the *Confessio Amantis* of John Gower (never, to my knowledge, accused of being a humanist). Because Christians and pagans share certain moral standards (however much they may differ in other areas), Gower's framework of the Seven Deadly Sins is by no means inappropriate in a work which orchestrates *exempla* from sources both 'ancient' and 'modern', both classical and medieval. Ovid and the other heathen authorities (as interpreted in the Middle Ages) reached out towards Christian schemes of virtues and vices; medieval Christians who described the moral principles and patterns of their religion looked back to the pagan past for anticipations and confirmations of their present-day beliefs. Moreover, Gower's presentation of Genius as a sort of 'universal priest', whose expertise and relevance extends far beyond *amoris causa*, has its rationale in the conviction that a single, fundamental code of behaviour is appropriate to all mankind.³

Medieval Studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn (Dublin, 1961), p. 309. Cf. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 62–3. This is the type of (Gregorian) argument which Boccaccio narrowed to apply specifically to women in the dedication to his *De claris mulieribus*: 'Whenever you read of a pagan woman having qualities which are worthy of those who profess to be Christians, if you feel that you do not have them, blush a little and reproach yourself that although marked by the baptism of Christ you have let yourself be surpassed by a pagan in integrity, chastity, or virtue': G. A. Guarino (trans.), *Concerning Famous Women, by Giovanni Boccaccio* (London, 1964), p. xxxiv. While Boccaccio distinguishes pagan women from Hebrew or Christian women on the grounds that 'they did not strive for the same goal', he emphasizes that 'these pagans through some natural gift of instinct, or rather spurred by desire for this fleeting glory, reached their goal not without great strength of mind and often in spite of the assaults of Fortune, and they endured numerous troubles' (*ibid.*, pp. xxxviii–xxxix).

¹ *Breviloquium* in *Summa Ioannis Valensis de Regimine Vite Humane* (Lyon, 1511), fol. 206^v.

² See A. J. Minnis, "'Moral Gower" and Medieval Literary Theory' in A. J. Minnis (ed.), *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 59.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 55–62.

Then again, late medieval historians like Vincent of Beauvais and Ralph Higden brought together the dicta and deeds of pagans and Christians within the organizing framework of universal history. The collections of *vitae philosophorum*, several of which were produced in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, provided pagan equivalents to the lives of the Christian saints. John of Wales's *Compendiloquium*, mentioned above, belongs to this genre, as do the anonymous *Liber philosophorum moralium antiquorum*, the sixth book of the *Speculum historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais, and Walter Burley's *Liber de vita et moribus philosophorum*. Doubtless the success of such anthologies encouraged the composition and compilation of lives of virtuous pagan *women*—but more on that later. My point here is that the medieval 'classicism' which we have been considering fostered an awareness of the many correspondences and parallels, as well as the contrasts, which, in the eyes of the medieval beholders, existed between ancient and modern ways of life and value-systems. The readers of, say, the *Breviloquium* and the *Speculum historiale* would have come away with a sense of both the achievements and the limitations of the virtuous heathen, of what should be respected and what should be rejected from alien traditions.

Similar attitudes to pagan antiquity can be found in the writings of many Italian humanists: Spearing goes too far when he implies that they saw pagan and Christian cultures as being 'at one'. 'Much as Petrarch the humanist admired Cicero, Seneca and Horace for their literary gifts and for their powers of persuasion', explains Charles Trinkaus, 'he also severely criticized their conceptions of the relationship of human virtue to divine power.' For the pagan philosopher the goal was virtue, but the 'philosopher of Christ' must go beyond this to seek 'the author of virtue, God'.¹ Boccaccio, whose love for 'the character and words of certain ancient poets' is writ large in his *Genealogy of the Gentile Gods*, therein professes his distaste for the pagans' 'manner of worship': 'I have been fully aware from childhood . . . that all pagan gods were devils, and have therefore disapproved of their absurd misdeeds.'² Erasmus, who had one of his characters exclaim 'Saint Socrates, pray for us!', elsewhere affirms that true virtue cannot be attributed to any pagan, since his actions were

¹ 'The Religious Thought of the Italian Humanists: Anticipation of the Reformers or Antinomy?' in Charles Trinkaus, *The Scope of Renaissance Humanism* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1983), p. 247.

² *Genealogy*, xv. ix, trans. Charles G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry* (Indianapolis and New York, 1956), p. 128.

obviously not done in the love of Christ.¹ Moreover, many humanists, while fully aware of the 'practical value of the alleged virtues of the pagans, . . . insisted on distinguishing between the restraint of human nature [as found in Stoicism] and its purification, which only grace could accomplish' (as W. J. Bouwsma puts it).² And in this way they were in agreement with the late medieval 'classicizing' schoolmen.

But there are, of course, undeniable differences of emphasis, application, and—above all else—of context. The permutations through which aspects of 'the matter of antiquity' could pass may be illustrated by the ways in which Augustine's account of pagan zeal for the state and human glory was regarded by the Florentine Dominican Remigio dei Girolami (a pupil of Aquinas, and in some sense a teacher of Dante) and by Dante himself.³ In book v, chapter 18 of *De civitate Dei* Augustine had cited numerous examples of pagan achievement in making the point that, faced with what the Romans did for their temporal city and for human glory, Christians should be very far from boasting of their deeds for their eternal country (the parallel with St Gregory's opinion concerning the significance of the Gentile Job, as quoted above, is obvious).⁴ Why should any man be proud of his refusal to be seduced by worldly vanity from the fellowship of celestial powers, when he reads how Fabricius could not be drawn from the Romans by all Pyrrhus's promises of vast wealth? If Torquatus killed his son not for fighting against Rome but simply for going against his command as general, why should Christians boast who, for the laws of their never-ending country, give up those things which are not as dear as children, namely earthly goods and possessions? And so forth.

In Remigio dei Girolami's *De bono communi*, which reveals the author's passionate love of strife-torn Florence, Augustine's

¹ *Convivium religiosum* in L. E. Halkin, F. Bierlaire and R. Hoven (eds.), *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami, I. 3: Colloquia* (Amsterdam, 1972), p. 254, trans. C. R. Thompson, *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (Chicago and London, 1965), p. 68. Cf. William J. Bouwsma, 'The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought' in H. A. Oberman with T. A. Brady (eds.), *Itinerarium Italicum: The Profile of the Italian Renaissance in the Mirror of its European Transformations, dedicated to P. O. Kristeller on the occasion of his 70th birthday* (Leiden, 1975), p. 43.

² Bouwsma, 'The Two Faces of Humanism', p. 44.

³ With this discussion cf. Charles T. Davis, *Dante and the Idea of Rome* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 80–5; L. Minio-Paluello, 'Remigio Girolami's *De Bono Communi*', *Italian Studies*, xi (1956), 56–71.

⁴ *De civitate Dei, lib. i-x* (Corpus Christianorum, Ser. Lat., xlvii, 1955), 151–4.

material is placed in a very different context and its significance is drastically altered. This treatise displays that belief in the importance of civic responsibility and statecraft which is a feature of many species of humanist thinking, Remigio being concerned to prove that 'the common good is to be preferred to the particular good and the good of the multitude, to the good of one single individual'.¹ The *exempla* from *De civitate Dei* are marshalled accordingly. Roman nobility is no longer attributed to love of glory but rather to civic unselfishness: Fabricius, Torquatus, and the others cared more about the common good than their own advantage, unlike the officials of this present time.

These virtuous heathen appear yet again in the fourth treatise of *Il Convivio*, wherein Dante, for the first time, advances his theory of an all-powerful world empire which the Roman emperors are destined by providence to govern.² Moreover, Rome had a special birth from God, who subsequently fostered her growth, as is manifest by the superlative virtue of her past rulers and citizens and by the divine miracles and favours which protected her. From the time of Brutus, the first consul, until the time of Caesar, for example, Rome was 'uplifted not by human but by divine citizens, into whom was inspired not human but divine love, in their love of her. And this could not nor might not be, save for some special end . . .'³ Who shall say that it was without divine inspiration that Fabricius refused an almost infinite quantity of gold because he would not abandon his fatherland? Who shall say of Torquatus, who judged his own son to death, for love of the public good, that he endured this without divine help? In this context, it seems that the virtuous heathen had God on their side. Here, then, is a definite and traceable movement from medieval to Renaissance, as Augustine's types of impressive but inadequate virtue are changed, changed utterly to serve the needs of political theory of growing sophistication, theory which arose out of the intrigues and faction-fighting of the Italian city-states.⁴

¹ See the passage cited by Minio-Paluello, p. 62.

² G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli (eds.), *Il Convivio*, iv, iv-v (Florence, 1954), ii, 28-58.

³ P. H. Wicksteed (trans.), *The Convivio of Dante Alighieri* (4th edn., London, 1924), pp. 248-9.

⁴ It should be noted, however, that Augustine's *exempla* were often adapted and quoted out of their original context by 'classicizing' schoolmen also. John of Wales drew on them for his section on 'Justice' in the *Breviloquium*, which emphasizes the concern which many ancients had for the safety and well-being of the state. See Pantin, 'John of Wales', p. 299, who also makes the general point that, in their commentaries on *De civitate Dei*, Thomas Waleys and

[Footnote 4 continued on page 218

Can this kind of 'reception history' analysis, then, be applied to Chaucer's sense of history? Does Chaucer's depiction of the past evince features distinctive enough to enable us to align him with either the 'classicizers' or with the humanists? This is a very debatable point, as Spearing has shown with admirable clarity. Discussing Chaucer's treatment of pagan philosophizing, he enters this important caveat:

. . . in this area the distinction between 'late-medieval' and 'Renaissance' can scarcely be made, and . . . what Chaucer may have derived from Holcot and other late-medieval *moderni* fitted neatly into the historical conception of classical antiquity that he would have gained through his contact with Italy.¹

One could argue with equal force that what Chaucer made of his contacts with Italy fitted neatly into the historical conception of pagan antiquity which he had elicited from the likes of Robert Holcot, Vincent of Beauvais, and Nicholas Trevet, all essentially 'scholastic' writers and 'classicizing' schoolmen. Here, on the strictest reckoning, the score would seem to be 'nothing either way'. And those who would wish to argue that Chaucer's respect for the past has, in its characteristic idioms and attitudes and its implicit priorities, more in common with the values of late medieval classicism than those of early Renaissance humanism, are quite at liberty to do so.

That is the kind of argument I wish to mount in the next part of this paper, with special reference to the virtuous heathen presented in *The Franklin's Tale*. In my opinion, the respect for the past which that text reflects, and its inherent belief in the universal nature of much human experience, fall within the parameters of late medieval classicism—but it must immediately be emphasized that Chaucer is making highly sophisticated and often very original use of traditional ideas relating to pagan antiquity.

Nicholas Trevet 'dwell almost entirely on the antiquarian passages, to the exclusion of the doctrinal'. Cf. B. Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 62–3, 88–100, 103–5, and (on John Ridevall's Augustine commentary) pp. 128–30. Similarly, in his commentary on *De consolazione philosophiae*, II, met. 7, 15–18, where Boethius asks, 'Where now are the bones of good Fabricius? What is Brutus now, or stern old Cato?', Nicholas Trevet offers as much information as he could find about those virtuous heathen, thereby tacitly contradicting his author's point that these figures have 'little fame . . . left them—just their names in a few old stories!' *Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. Tester, p. 223.

¹ *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*, p. 46.

Original use of essentially medieval ideas should not, however, be mistaken for humanism.

The pagan setting of the tale has often been commented on since Tatlock observed that 'Chaucer took much pains to put the story back in Roman times'.¹ Brittany is called *Armorica*, *Arveragus* and *Aurelius* are Latin names (with ancient British associations), *Aurelius* prays to *Apollo* and vows to go on pilgrimage to his 'temple in *Delphos*' (v. 1077), in a speech which also includes references to *Lucina*, *Neptune*, and *Pluto*, and the magic in the tale is firmly placed as an integral part of its pagan world. It is this setting which makes the poem so very different from its closest analogue, perhaps even its source, *Menedon's* tale in *Boccaccio's Filocolo*, which is set, rather vaguely, in the present.² (No one, it should be added, has claimed that there is any substantive humanism in this Italian work.) Moreover, Chaucer's treatment of virtue differs in tone and texture from *Boccaccio's*. The *Franklin* initially speaks of *gentillesse* in the sense of the manners and accomplishments characteristic of the medieval class of gentlefolk (v. 673-94), but in his tale the term is used in the moral sense of virtuous behaviour, following the definition of true nobility which medieval scholars derived from *De consolatione philosophiae*, III, pr. 6-met. 6. The true nobility—which comes from personal achievement rather than being determined by ancestry—of four 'good pagans' is tested in the most extreme of situations, and they all acquit themselves well. The *Franklin's* tale, then, is to be read as a generally favourable portrait of gentle Gentiles, whose virtue is as universal and far-reaching as their culture is limited and circumscribed.

Let us proceed by examining the definition of true nobility which the 'classicizing' tradition derived from *Boethius*. The heart of the matter is reached in book III, met. 6, in which, as *Trevet* explains in his commentary, *Dame Philosophy* proves that all men are noble, with the exception of vicious men. Since nobility is a certain excellence produced by origin, *Trevet* continues, and it is manifest in man alone, that aspect of his origin which makes man man must chiefly be considered. It is obvious that man is man by

¹ J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Scene of the Franklin's Tale Visited* (Chaucer Society, London, 1914), p. 20.

² For translations of *Menedon's* tale see R. P. Miller, *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (New York, 1977), pp. 122-35, and N. R. Havelly, *Chaucer's Boccaccio* (Chaucer Studies, III, Cambridge, 1980), 153-61 (extracts only). For a recent statement of the view that Chaucer knew *Il Filocolo* see David Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio* (Chaucer Studies, XII, Cambridge, 1985), 6, 23, 30, 39-73, etc.

dint not of his body but his soul, whence he is rational. But the soul in each and every man has the same origin, because all souls are from God. Therefore all men are, on account of this common origin, equally noble; only those who degenerate from their origin are ignoble. The soul is produced originally in the likeness of God, and so those alone degenerate from nobility who by vicious actions obscure that divine likeness. 'All human kind', i.e. all men in general, both rich and poor, of whatever condition on earth, 'arises from the same origin' (1), because in respect of the soul all men are from one Creator, wherefore Dame Philosophy adds that 'There is one Father of all things', i.e. the Creator, 'who looks after all' through his rule (2).¹ Since this Father cannot be regarded as ignoble, all his creations must be noble. 'No man is now degenerate save the one who, embracing baser things in vice, forsakes his proper origin' (8-9), this being the divine likeness which originally he possessed. Man, in sum, is noble by virtue alone and ignoble by vice, which is why Juvenal said in his eighth satire that 'virtue is the one and only true nobility'.² 'A noble seed produced all mortals' (5), there being the clear implication that the seed of nobility is present in all men; the individual must decide whether he wishes to cultivate this or not.

But, while all men are potentially noble, it seems that the potential for nobility is greater in some than in others. This is made clear from Trevet's commentary on the preceding prosa, wherein he amplifies Boethius's account of the relationship between nobility and glory. Glory is said to be a limited good or false felicity which does not bring real happiness. Dame Philosophy shows that this is true both of the glory which results from praise of personal virtue (*laus proprie virtutis*) and of the glory which some have through nobility of blood (*nobilitas sanguinis*).³ Trevet's discussion of the former is concerned to emphasize the point that glory which has falsely been acquired is base (cf. pr. 6, 7-8). Those who are much talked about must surely blush to hear their own praises, when they know them to be false. Aristotle, in the fourth book of the *Ethics*, says that blushing is the same thing as fear of infamy. Whoever knows that he is unjustly praised must fear to be stripped of that praise through revelation of the truth, which would cause him to fall into infamy. Then, Trevet continues, Boethius proves that glory acquired by genuine merit does not lead to happiness either. In particular, popular favour

¹ *Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. Tester, pp. 256-7.

² *Satura*, viii. 20.

³ See *Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. Tester, pp. 252-5.

is unimportant; wise men do not consider this to be conducive to self-knowledge.

Boethius begins to treat of *nobilitas sanguinis*, Trevet explains, when Dame Philosophy asks, 'who does not see how empty and vain is a reputation for nobility?' (20-1). If it is related to fame, it belongs to another; in this sense nobility seems to be a kind of praise deriving from the merits of one's parents (22-4). If being talked about produces fame, then those must be famous who are talked about, but these are your parents and not you. If you have no praise of your own, that which proceeds from your parents does not make you renowned. If there is anything good in nobility by descent, it is this, that there seems to be an obligation imposed on the noble not to let their nobility degenerate, through vicious actions, from the virtue of their ancestors. It is better to come from an ignoble family and be eager to please than to be from noble stock and degenerate through vices. Therefore, Juvenal says in his eighth satire, 'I would rather that Thersites were your father if only you were like the grandson of Aeacus [i.e. Achilles], and could wield the arms of Vulcan, than that you should have been begotten by Achilles and be like Thersites.'¹ Here Thersites is the type of the low-born upstart, and Achilles, of the high-ranking, and high-minded, aristocrat. Better to rise from low to high, than lapse from high to low!

Commentary such as this helps us to understand the appeal which Boethius had for aristocratic readers, and explains why Jean de Meun could address his version of the *Consolation* to the king of France, King Philip the Fair, and also why the Old French Boethius could appear in the same manuscript as Henri de Gauchy's translation of the *Regiment of Princes* of Giles of Rome. The doctrine that men who are noble by birth should also be noble in deed would have at once edified and reassured such an audience.² In Boethius they found no threat to their 'gentle' status but rather an implicit confirmation of it. In Achilles they saw their image of themselves; in Thersites, the unthinkable alternative, the unacceptable face of failure. And they were, for the most part, content to leave to 'wise men' the thought that glory acquired even by genuine merit did not bring true happiness.

These same principles underlie two passages in Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, wherein the Boethian distinction between

¹ *Satura*, viii. 269-71.

² Cf. A. J. Minnis, 'Aspects of the Medieval French and English Traditions of the *De consolatione philosophiae*' in Margaret Gibson (ed.), *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 333-4.

nobility of blood and nobility of soul is invoked. In the first of these, Phanie, the daughter of King Croesus and an admirable pagan prophetess, argues that Fortune values only gentility (in the sense of moral nobility).¹ If her father were truly 'gentle', she argues, he might avoid the downfall to which his pride and vanity are leading him. Gentility, being noble, will not enter the heart of a 'villain' in the moral sense of the term; therefore, Croesus should flee from such villainy and set an example to the rich by his liberal and merciful rule. The second passage is much more elaborate.² Therein Dame Nature states that, if anyone wishes to vaunt his

¹ Ernest Langlois (ed.), *Le Roman de la Rose*, ll. 6541-92 (Paris, 1914-24), iii. 9-10.

² *Roman*, ll. 18607-718, ed. Langlois, iv. 236-40. However, the most systematic scholastic treatment of the nature and types of nobility seems to be William of Aragon's *De nobilitate animi* (late thirteenth century): see the edition by M. L. Colker, *Mediaeval Studies*, xxiii (1961), 47-79, and for the identification of its author see M. Thomas, 'Guillaume d'Aragon auteur du *Liber de nobilitate animi*', *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes*, cvii (1945/6), 70-9. The second book of this treatise offers 'many proverbs, *sententiae* and succinct statements' whereby a 'person of whatever station may learn . . . whether his actions are noble or vile', which include quotations from troubadour poets; on which see A. Thomas, 'Le *Liber de nobilitate animi* et les troubadours', *Studi medievali*, ns, ii (1929), 163-72. In the first book, 'noble' is defined as 'functioning well and properly' (*bene operans*), its contrary being 'vile and bad operation'. The species of nobility are identified as follows: nobility of soul, nobility of body, and nobility of fortune, the last of these being subdivided into nobility of dominion, of riches, and of fame or glory. Nobility of soul is said to be wisdom in speculation and diligence or zeal (*studiositas*) in behaviour, whence philosophers and wise men may be said to be noble. The discussion of nobility of body includes the statement that to be born of noble stock does not make one noble in oneself—that is a false opinion of the common herd. William's treatment of nobility of dominion is of special interest to us, since he follows Boethius's invocation of the (Platonic) ideal of the philosopher-king. A delinquent ruler 'according to the truth of things is not a lord but a slave, and not noble but vile'. Indeed, the nobility of lords who use their intellect and reason to serve the welfare of all their subjects and to keep the peace, is superior to that of the common people, since they have more people in their control than have commoners (ed. cit., p. 61, cf. p. 49). William returns to this idea in his subsequent consideration of which kind of nobility is the best (p. 65). The nobility of dominion seems to be the best, he argues, for it has the greatest potential for good operation. However, it should be remembered that nobility of soul is what makes the ruler truly noble. So, in this sense, nobility of dominion is the *effect* of nobility of soul. Once again, then, powerful position and true nobility are seen to be the best possible combination. The major influence on William was, of course, the *Consolation* of Boethius. For William's commentary on that work—the prologue of which was the primary source of Jean de Meun's preface to his Old French Boethius—see Minnis, 'The Medieval French and English Traditions of the *De consolazione philosophiae*', pp. 314-32 *passim*.

gentle birth, her reply would be that no man who is not intent on virtue is truly gentle, while no one is ungentle except by foolish outrage or by vice. Nobility (*noblece*) comes from an upright heart (*bon courage*); gentility of birth is worthless if it lacks goodheartedness. Ancient men who did good works died and took their virtues with them; their descendants have their fathers' wealth, but nothing more, no nobility or worth, unless they themselves act in a noble fashion. Then the argument takes an unusual turn. Clerks, Jean claims, have a greater chance to be gentle, courteous, and wise (*gentill, courteis e sage*) than princes who may be unlearned, because clerks may find in books the good they must pursue. Every clerk is, or should be, truly 'gentle': his evil heart is to blame if he is not, for his advantages are far greater than those of aristocrats who may never have learned to read a book in which the virtues are described. Alternatively, a prince may know how to read, but have little time for study. To possess *gentillece*, the most honourable thing on earth, one should guard against pride and idleness—whether one chooses study or arms—and be without villainy (*vilenie*). Let him be humble in heart, courteous, and gentle (*gent*) in all places and towards all men, except the enemies whom he has failed to reconcile; he ought to honour all women. Men who do all these things are truly 'gentle'. Jean concludes his discussion by recommending that knights strong in arms and courteous in speech, who practised liberality (*largece*), honour, and chivalry, should everywhere be praised. Honour is also due to those learned clerks who labour with intelligence and strive to practice the virtues set forth in their books. There were, Jean assures us, many such clerks in ancient times.

It is obvious that the Franklin agrees with him: the pagan magician portrayed in *The Franklin's Tale* is essentially a 'gentil' clerk of long ago. On his first appearance, this character is called a 'Briton clerk' (v. 1179; cf. 'clerk', 1234; 'subtil clerk', 1261); on the one occasion on which he mentions his own status he chooses the term 'clerk' (1611). In no less than six instances he is described as a 'maister' (1202, 1209, 1220, 1257, 1302, 1576): that is, he is the pagan equivalent of a Master of Arts or some higher discipline.¹ There is, therefore, no reason to suppose that the books in his study (referred to twice: 1207, 1214) are confined to the astronomical lore which is the basis of his 'magik'; if his subsequent behaviour

¹ 'Maister' could, of course, be used in a loose sense as a term of respectful address, but in *The Franklin's Tale* the words *clerk*, *maister*, and *philosophre* apparently form a lexical set which serves to indicate the magician's respectable credentials.

is anything to go by, his library must include books in which the virtues are described, to adopt an idiom from Jean de Meun. 'Philosophre' occurs three times (1561, 1585, 1607), this being a term of the highest praise when applied to a pagan, as is made very clear by the late medieval *vitae philosophorum*, to which we have already referred. 'Magicien', which could have a derogatory connotation for Christians¹ and the most enlightened of pagans (as imagined in Chaucer's day), appears only twice (1184, 1241). In sum, the vast majority of terms applied in designating the magician's status and role are honorific.

The contrast with the sorcerer and devil-worshipper portrayed by Boccaccio, Tebano by name, could hardly be greater. A blatant anachronism in a tale wherein no attempt is made to create an antique setting, he lives in Thessaly (where, according to Ovid, Jason brought the sorceress Medea to restore his old father to youth), and his magic rite is obviously modelled on the one employed by Medea on that occasion.² Roughly a quarter of Menedon's tale is given over to this grotesque ceremony, in which Hecate and Ceres are invoked, and Tebano reveals that his skills include necromancy and the means of interfering with the moon's natural course. All this is a far cry from the way in which the Franklin presents the magic of his pagan 'maister'. Aurelius prays for a 'miracle' (1056, 1065; cf. 1299) in the form of a high tide of abnormal duration, requiring interference with the moon's natural course for two whole years (1066-70). However, that is not shown as actually happening during the description of the clerk's magic (1261-96), which is curiously vague.³ There the Franklin's references to 'illusioun', 'apparence' and 'jogelrye' (1264-5) tend to reduce the magician's activity to the level of sleight of hand, a mere conjuring trick, which is devious but hardly dangerous in itself. This impression is reinforced by two other passages in the tale, the first being the reminiscences of Aurelius's brother about his college days at Orléans: he recalls a book of 'magyk natureel' which taught the art of 'illusioun', which he then puts on a par with the 'diverse apparences' that clever

¹ But see n. 1, p. 21.

² See especially *Heroides*, vi. 83-90, *Metamorphoses*, vii. 191-216.

³ As an alternative, Aurelius prays that the Moon/Lucina/Diana/Proserpina should sink every rock down into her own dark region, i.e. the underworld (1073-5), but we are not shown that happening either. The Franklin simply mentions the possibility that the rocks may have been 'sonken under grounde' (1269), but does not expand on this. The restraint of his account of the magician's behaviour may therefore be taken as one of the devices whereby that character's noble deed at the end of the tale is rendered quite credible.

conjurers can create at banquets (1139-51). Secondly, there is the account of how the magician entertains his guests before supper with marvellous images (1186-218). No attempt is made to specify the source of that magic either, and certainly there is no suggestion that devilish forces were at work.

Returning to the magician's apparent removal of the rocks, it should be noted that he possesses nothing more sinister than sets of astrological tables (1273-9), and that a strong emphasis is placed on the subtlety of his calculations (1284). Consequently, the reader is allowed to feel that this Breton clerk is something of a scientist. Chaucer's attribution of astrological lore to him cannot be taken as *prima-facie* evidence that his character is dubious; the elaborate late medieval distinctions between acceptable and non-acceptable forms of astrology have been blurred by some modern critics.¹ For good measure the Franklin launches an attack on 'supersticious cursednesse' (1272), but in context that sounds

¹ The late medieval attitude to magic has similarly been over-simplified. On acceptable forms of magic see Bert Hansen, 'The Complementarity of Science and Magic before the Scientific Revolution', *American Scientist*, lxxiv (1986), 128-36, and Linda Voigts, 'The Latin Verse and Middle English Prose Texts on the Sphere of Life and Death in Harley 3719', forthcoming in *The Chaucer Review*, who emphasize the fact that what the Franklin's magician actually does is not specifically condemned. Moreover, the Franklin's reference to 'natural' magic is probably meant to imply that the magician is exploiting natural processes, and not seeking to change them (in the manner of Tebano). Hence Spearing can remark that 'the "disappearance" of the black rocks . . . may, it is hinted, be simply a matter of predicting and taking advantage of an unusually high tide': *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*, p. 39. However, in his learned edition of *The Franklin's Tale* (London, 1980), p. 102, Gerald Morgan cites Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2a, 2ae, 96. 2 ad 2, as proving that there is no distinction between natural magic and black magic, which are equally reprehensible. But what Aquinas is doing here is warning against the use of astrological words, signs, and characters (to some extent equivalent to necromantic images) which are supposed to direct and control the influence of the stars and planets. Such power, Aquinas continues, is not the result of a natural and necessary connection between some symbol and some cosmic force, but is rather due to the agency of demons, who seek to delude souls by such means. 'There is nothing superstitious or wrong', he declares, 'in using natural things for the purpose of causing effects which are thought natural to them. But if in addition there be employed certain cyphers, words or other vain observances, which clearly have no efficacy by nature, then this is superstitious and wrong': T. F. O'Meara and M. J. Duffy (eds.), *St Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, vol. 40: Superstition and Irreverence (2a, 2ae, 92-100)* (London and New York, 1968), pp. 74-7. The Franklin's magician, however, is not shown as making any compact, explicit or implicit, with demons; of employing 'cyphers, words or other vain observances'. Astronomical tables enable one to predict, not to control, what will happen in the heavens.

rather like a nervous over-reaction (cf. pp. 236–7), since the magic has been rendered quite tame—it certainly is tame by comparison with Tebano’s ghastly ritual. Here, then, is no obvious ‘miracle’, though obviously it is in Aurelius’s interest to convince Dorigen that that is what has occurred. Birnham wood has come to high Dunsinane hill—but there may be a perfectly rational explanation.

A comparison with another pagan astrologer, the priest Calkas as depicted in *Troilus and Criseyde*, is instructive.¹ Chaucer identifies two main sources of his knowledge of the future fall of Troy, astronomical ‘science’ and ‘calkulynge’ on the one hand and the Delphic oracle on the other (i. 64–77, iv. 114–19, 1397–411). Calkas’s scientific prediction of the catastrophe is a ‘general’ prediction (like weather forecasts and plague warnings) of the type which was supposed to be useful to mankind and perfectly licit for Christians, according to such eminent schoolmen as Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, John Ashenden, and Robert Holcot. Likewise, none of them felt obliged to warn their readers of the dangers of using astronomical/astrological tables. Much late medieval science, it was freely admitted in the period, was dependent on the expertise of authorities who were ignorant of Christ; the ideologically sound aspects of pagan science formed the basis of much Christian science. But Calkas’s other source of knowledge, the ‘answere of his god’ Apollo (i. 69) is a very different matter; that is part and parcel of those pagan rites in which Chaucer’s spirit had no faith (to adopt an idiom from his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*).² Calkas actually did consult the Delphic oracle, and Tebano’s horrid rite is shown as actually causing a spring garden to appear in January. But the Franklin does not provide us with any hard evidence of the pagan clerk’s ‘superstitious cursednesse’—he does not even pray to the pagan deities (as Aurelius had done). Because the statutory charge of ‘cursednesse’ is not substantiated, the reader is given no definite reasons for feeling highly suspicious of, or hostile towards, the magician. Certainly, there is no clear suggestion that the tale’s ‘astronomical magic’ should be regarded as a kind of ‘spiritual deformity’.³ Presentation is all; we should not respond with righteous indignation to something which is not actually in the text.

Whatever one may think on these controversial issues, surely it is clear that the magician’s character as such is not besmirched by

¹ Cf. the fuller version of this argument in my *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 80–3.

² *Works of Chaucer*, ed. Robinson, p. 551.

³ *Franklin’s Tale*, ed. Morgan, p. 39.

the Franklin's attack on 'supersticious cursednesse'; an ancient (unspecified) practice is being condemned, not this practitioner in particular. This figure is going to perform a 'gentil' and liberal act at the end of the tale; his character cannot, therefore, be assassinated *in medias res*. Thus, Chaucer avoids a volte-face of the kind which occurs at the end of Menedon's tale, wherein the frightening sorcerer turns into a sage who, in the judgement of Fiametta (who solves all the 'problems in love' brought before her 'court'), acted wisely because he probably recognized that poverty is a blessing in disguise.

In its context at the end of the tale, the magician's good deed functions as the culmination of a sort of chain reaction of *gentillesse*. Aurelius, on learning that Dorigen is coming to him 'as myn housbonde bad', decides that to take advantage of her would be 'a cherlyssh wrecchednesse / Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse' (v. 1523-4). To put it in terms of Boethian morality, were Aurelius to hold Dorigen to her promise, this would be moral 'churlishness', the diametric opposite of moral 'gentility' or nobility of soul. But Aurelius does possess true *gentillesse*, just as Arveragus does: 'Thus kan a squier doon a gentile dede', he declares, 'As wel as kan a knyght, withouten drede' (v. 1543-4). When his turn comes the wise 'philosophre' (as he is called in this part of the tale) accepts the situation with equanimity: he will not be outdone in *gentillesse* by a knight or a squire.

This philosophre answerde, 'Leeve brother,
Everich of yow dide gentilly til oother.
Thou art a *squier*, and he is a *knyght*;
But God forbede, for his blisful myght,
But if a *clerk* koude doon a gentile dede
As wel as any of yow, it is no drede!'

(v. 1607-12, my italics)

Secular men, according to Jean de Meun, should be praised for their liberality, honour, and chivalry; learned clerks who labour with intelligence and strive to practice the virtues set forth in their books should similarly be honoured. By portraying representatives of both walks of life (secular men being represented by a knight and a squire) in an admirable light, the Franklin is tacitly following Jean's recommendation.

The fact that it is differences of *profession* rather than of class which are in question here, requires some emphasis, given that for some readers the magician, whom they identify as the Franklin's *alter ego* or mirror-image in his tale, typifies those who through

'gentil' actions raise themselves into the 'gentle' rank in society, which is precisely what the Franklin himself wishes to do.¹ But the magician has a squire of his own (1209-16), possesses all the material trappings of high position and wealth (in marked contrast with Boccaccio's poor jobbing sorcerer), and seems to be on the same social plane as the unnamed brother of Aurelius, who is a 'clerk' himself and once studied at Orléans and has, or had, acquaintances in common with the magician—there is a definite sense of 'the old college tie' (1118-19, 1179-82). In other words, they all seem to be aristocrats, united by the privileges, education, and obligations which are commensurate with their rank in society.² (It may be added that the description of the magician, on his first appearance, as a 'yong' clerk (1173) serves to reduce further the distance between him and the two brothers.) The only people, then, who perform virtuous actions in *The Franklin's Tale*, are noble by birth, for that is the single social stratum from which his *dramatis personae* are drawn. There is neither a moral nor a social Thersites among them. *Noblesse oblige*; the pagan nobility is fulfilling the obligations placed upon it by its class every bit as much as the obligations placed upon all men by God to fulfil their potential nobility of soul.

But how does Aurelius, the source of so much of the agony and the *Angst* in the tale, fit in with this consonance of moral nobility and *nobilitas sanguinis*? His portrayal is a masterpiece of tact. It would have been all too easy for Chaucer to have portrayed him as lustful and utterly selfish; that, after all, was Fiametta's judgement of Tarolfo, his equivalent in *Il Filocolo*. On the contrary, Aurelius is allowed to experience 'courtly love' without being condemned either explicitly or implicitly, and with a modicum of irony. His youth is emphasized, the point being that we expect a young man to indulge his emotions—he will learn, and indeed he does learn a great deal in the course of the tale. But the most significant device whereby Chaucer deflected blame from Aurelius was his creation—at least, there is no equivalent in Boccaccio—of the dutiful brother of Aurelius. In *Il Filocolo*, it is the lover Tarolfo who solicits the sorcerer Tebano on his own behalf; in *The Franklin's Tale* it is the brother of Aurelius, and not Aurelius himself, who

¹ See for example John Lawlor, *Chaucer* (London, 1968), p. 135.

² In other words, within the Franklin's tale there seems to be a definite 'sense of the community of class' (to adapt a phrase from Morgan (ed. *Franklin's Tale*, p. 13)). As far as the Franklin himself is concerned, however, it is the *differences* between him and the high-ranking Canterbury pilgrims which Chaucer seems to be most aware of: see my argument on pp. 236-7.

initiates this course of action. This comes across as an act of brotherly love (see especially v. 1104-16, 1138, 1156, 1166-70), which is to the credit not only of the unnamed brother but also of Aurelius, who can inspire such *amicitia*. More importantly, Aurelius is thereby denuded of some of the responsibility for, as it were, not playing the game of love according to the usual rules.¹ Various reasons may be suggested for this carefully restrained treatment of Aurelius: for example, perhaps the Franklin did not wish to offend the Squire, whom he greatly admires, by depicting Aurelius the squire as unsavoury. But, in my opinion, the overriding reason was that the Franklin wished to avoid doing anything which might create the impression that the 'fre' action subsequently performed by Aurelius was uncharacteristic or inferior in quality to the other 'gentil' deeds in the sequence. The squire, like the 'philosophre', must be left free to perform his 'fre' action at the end of the tale.

Dorigen, too, is essentially 'gentil' in deed; there is no good reason to condemn her as highly blameworthy or blasphemous. Her promise to Aurelius is not made in a serious manner—which must be what the Franklin means when he said that she spoke 'in pley', there being no suggestion that she is being either frivolous or flirtatious.² More importantly, the fact that her 'asking the impossible' takes the form of a request for the rocks to be removed from the coast of Brittany (in contrast with the spring garden requested by Boccaccio's more lightweight heroine) is very much to her credit, since it clearly reflects her deep concern for her husband's safety. Re Dorigen's famous (or infamous) complaint, suffice it to say here that I am in general agreement with Morgan's view that it expresses her 'absolute commitment to the moral values of chastity, fidelity and honour, and especially to chastity'.³ The *exempla* of virtuous pagan women which Chaucer

¹ I cannot, therefore, accept Gerald Morgan's outright condemnation of Aurelius: 'The blame for her [i.e. Dorigen's] predicament is firmly placed where it belongs, that is, on the disordered love of Aurelius and his preparedness to pursue it by fraudulent and superstitious means.' 'Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and the Moral Argument of the *Franklin's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review*, xx (1986), 297-8.

² Cf. Morgan's eloquent defence of Dorigen's answer to Aurelius; *ibid.*, pp. 294-8. Like him, I cannot share the view that she has made a rash promise of the type which should definitely not be kept, as propounded by Alan T. Gaylord, 'The Promises in *The Franklin's Tale*', *English Literary History*, xxxi (1964), 331-65, and E. J. Mathewson, 'The Illusion of Morality in *The Franklin's Tale*', *Medium Aevum*, lii (1983), 27-37.

³ Morgan, ed. *Franklin's Tale*, p. 43. For the full version of this argument see his article 'A Defence of Dorigen's Complaint', *Medium Aevum*, xlvi.1 (1977), 77-97.

adapted from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum* are meant to be impressive, and should not be seen as undermined by the Franklin's rather bathetic specification of the time that Dorigen spent lamenting (for a day or two, as he tells us both before (1348) and after (1457) the complaint). Dismissive remarks of this kind occur throughout the tale, and should be seen as one of the Franklin's distinguishing features, or eccentricities, as narrator; certainly they cannot be taken as evidence that Chaucer is viewing Dorigen ironically. Moreover, her thoughts of self-slaughter should not cause us to think ill of her: for a pagan heroine in dire straits, this is a quite valid and perfectly honourable course of action, as is borne out by many of Dorigen's *exempla* and indeed by Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. In the case of Dorigen, as in the legends of the pagan 'saints of Cupid', Chaucer 'assumes that a Christian perspective is historically impossible' for his pagan heroines who lived under the natural law.¹ As John McCall puts it, 'because they cannot see with the eyes of faith', their beliefs and actions, 'even if mistaken, are more understandable and occasion more sympathy than would otherwise be the case'.² For Christians, suicide is certainly a mortal sin, but for many pagans, both male and female, it was the crown of a life of virtue.

What, then, of Dorigen's protest against those 'unreasonable' black rocks which seem to be a foul confusion rather than part of a fair creation? It is, in my view, the degree of *enlightenment* evinced by that speech which gives it its ultimate importance in the tale. That may seem a surprising claim to make for a passage in which modern critics have found cynicism, scepticism, blasphemy, and even downright stupidity, but too many readings have attempted to impose on it Christian standards which are quite inappropriate. Dorigen believes that the world was created by 'a parfit wys God and a stable' (871), a God who, moreover, made man 'lyk' to His 'owene merk' (880). That is not mere anachronism, for the concept of a creator-god is allowed to good pagans in some late medieval vernacular works which strive to depict pagan ideology authentically, for example, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Willehalm* (c.1217) and the Middle English *roman antique* known as the

¹ John McCall, *Chaucer among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth* (Pennsylvania, 1979), p. 164, n. 1, cf. pp. 131 ff., 180-1.

² Ibid. p. 164, n. 1. See further the perceptive remarks on the historical location of the *Legend* by V. A. Kolve, 'From Cleopatra to Alceste: An Iconographic Study of *The Legend of Good Women*' in J. P. Hermann and John J. Burke (eds.), *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer's Poetry* (Alabama, 1981), pp. 177-8, and cf. my n. 4, p. 213.

*Alexander B.*¹ Chaucer's Troilus prays to 'God, that auctour is of kynde' (*Troilus and Criseyde*, iii. 1765), while Criseyde refers to 'al the good that god made under sonne' (*ibid.*, iii. 378), and, to return to *The Franklin's Tale*, Aurelius swears 'by God that this world made' (v. 967).

Such occasional attributions of great insight to pagans are fully supported by late medieval scholasticism. Augustine's praise of Plato for having conceived of a creative deity was often cited (as, for example, in the *De causa Dei* of 'Bisshop Bradwardyn'),² and of course the same idea is a feature of Boethius's *De consolacione philosophiae*, a work which, in the later Middle Ages, was regarded as a repository of philosophy in the strict sense of the term, i.e. a specialist discipline, quite distinct from theology, which was grounded upon natural reason³ and in which most of the experts were pagans. In the thirteenth-century University of Paris many schoolmen worried over the theory of the eternity of the world, which they saw in Aristotle and found affirmed by his Arabian commentators.⁴ This was a dangerous theory because it seemed to contradict the truths of Christian revelation that the world, created *ex nihilo*, had its beginning and end in time. In the anthology of pagan errors which he compiled around 1270, Giles of Rome attacked Averroes for opposing 'even more vehemently than did the Philosopher [i.e. Aristotle] those who held that the world had a beginning'.⁵ Giles continues in a vein which is remarkable

¹ On the *Willehalm* see Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, p. 5; discussion of the *Alexander B* is included in T. G. Hahn's important thesis, 'God's Friends: Virtuous Heathen in Later Medieval Thought and English Literature' (Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1974).

² Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, viii. xiii; cf. Thomas Bradwardine, *De causa Dei contra Pelagium*, i. 1, coroll. pars 40, ed. H. Savile (London, 1618), p. 136, and see also coroll. pars 34, on p. 71. At these points Aristotle is attacked for having gone against the doctrine of his master, Plato. Chaucer refers to 'Bisshop Bradwardyn' in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* (*Canterbury Tales*, vii. 3242).

³ Hence William Caxton, in the epilogue to his 1478 printed edition of Chaucer's *Boece*, declared that the *Consolation* provided 'as moche as maye and ys possible to be knowen naturelly' about 'the predestynacion and prescience of God': W. J. B. Crotch (ed.), *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton* (Early English Text Society, os, clxxvi, London, 1928), p. 36.

⁴ See especially the articles concerning the eternity of the world which were condemned at Paris in 1277, discussed by Roland Hissette, *Enquête sur les 219 articles condamnés à Paris le 7 Mars 1277* (Louvain and Paris, 1977), pp. 147-60. The matter was still very important to Bradwardine, who attacked the doctrine of the eternity of the world in *De causa Dei*, ed. Savile, pp. 65-6, 119-45.

⁵ Josef Koch and J. O. Riedl (eds.), *Giles of Rome: Errores Philosophorum* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1944), p. 15.

for the amount of enlightenment it allows to a non-Christian religion. Averroes is said to have reviled not only the law of Christians but also that 'of the Saracens, because they maintain that the universe was created and that something can be produced out of nothing'.¹ In sum, Dorigen's beliefs are at once historically appropriate and also impressive, given the errors which pagans could fall into. Chaucer is, in a sense, indicating his approval of Dorigen by giving her such views, and expects the audience to respond positively to them. There is, therefore, no compulsion to follow Morgan's suggestion that, because Dorigen's metaphysic is specifically Christian (in his opinion), the values of the poem must be Christian values and so suicide is not a possible way out of her dilemma.² It is all a matter of point of view. Viewed from the standpoint of revealed Christian truth, Dorigen's views on the universe reach only a shadowy perfection (to use John of Wales's term again), but, viewed from the standpoint of the time and place in which she lived, they must be regarded as being greatly to her credit.³

The implications of this relativistic approach are considerable; let us ponder a few of them. When faced with the (apparent) removal of the rocks, Dorigen's belief in 'a stable providential order that gives meaning to moral activity'⁴ is threatened. Surely it is proper to emphasize the fact that she *has* such belief every bit as much as the fact that it is being threatened, just as it is important to recognize the element of enlightenment in the passage in which she confronts the problem of the black rocks. Dorigen may be bewildered, she may feel threatened, but there is no implication that her fundamental beliefs are altered by her fortunes. Nowhere has Chaucer portrayed a woman who so vehemently *wants* to believe in a benevolent divine order. And, ultimately, her idealism is vindicated, as the 'noble seed' which is present in all men begins to bear fruit.

Finally, we come to Arveragus. The corresponding (unnamed)

¹ *Giles of Rome*, ed. Koch and Riedl, p. 17.

² *The Franklin's Tale*, ed. Morgan, p. 39; cf. his note on ll. 157-85 on p. 93. Morgan reiterates this view in his article 'Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and the Moral Argument of the *Franklin's Tale*', pp. 298-9, arguing that since 'to a medieval Christian suicide is an outrageous act' therefore 'the choice of suicide . . . is no moral choice at all' for Dorigen. For Morgan the Franklin's story is a 'tale of simple Christian piety' (*ibid.*, p. 305).

³ Cf. pp. 212-14, and see especially n. 4, p. 213, on the type of virtue possible for pagan women.

⁴ Here we adopt an idiom from Morgan, 'A Defence of Dorigen's Complaint', p. 81.

character in Boccaccio acted, in the opinion of Fiametta, with unnecessary generosity: his marriage contract with the lady rendered her subsequent oath invalid. In other words, a firm distinction is made between generosity and wisdom: the husband-figure was certainly generous with his wife, but maybe he was foolish to do what he did, thereby losing honour of a kind which cannot be recovered. By contrast, there is no such distinction in *The Franklin's Tale*. Arveragus acts in a way which is presented as rigorous but commendable.

In Arveragus's view, the moral imperatives of 'trouthe' govern his wife and himself equally and reciprocally; he is performing his moral duty by urging Dorigen to fulfil her moral obligation to keep her promise.¹

Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!
 For God so wisly have mercy upon me,
 I hadde wel levere ystiked for to be
 For verray love which that I to yow have,
 But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save.
 Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe . . .

(v. 1474-9)

In *The Knight's Tale*, one may recall, the highest thing or ultimate objective known to man was defined by Duke Theseus, the superlatively virtuous ruler of ancient Athens, as the achievement of fame (i. 3047-56).² The Christian reader can protest that there are more things in heaven and in earth than were dreamed of in pagan philosophy, that 'truth' and 'fame' are both limited goods which must cede place to the higher objective of salvation. But Theseus and Arveragus are pagans who are acting *ex puris naturalibus*; and besides, 'truth' and 'fame' are of great value to Christians as well as to pagans. Thus, the ancient behaviour depicted in both the poems in question is at once historically located in time and place and also universal in so far as it relates to present-day interests.

Surely an audience should not fail to be impressed by just how far Arveragus was prepared to go in the service of 'trouthe': he was, in a sense, prepared to sacrifice his wife for it (though it should be remembered that he sees their moral obligations as interrelated, as we have just noted). That superhuman (perhaps

¹ Cf. Morgan's spirited defence of Arveragus's behaviour, 'Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and the Moral Argument of the *Franklin's Tale*', pp. 299-304.

² On the limitations of Theseus's emphasis on fame see Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 128-31.

inhuman?) stance has outraged some modern readers—extreme behaviour, even in a good cause, can appear as suspect—but it should, I think, be viewed in the light of those atypical acts of self-denial, for which virtuous heathen (particularly politicians and philosophers) were renowned. One thinks of how Torquatus and Brutus killed their sons, of how Fabricius refused vast wealth, and the like—acts which at once arouse admiration and strain credulity.¹ Arveragus's action has the same ambivalent quality, though his ultimate sacrifice is, of course, a matter of personal and familial ethics rather than of state politics. To suppose that the potential for tragedy is less in his case, however, would be to espouse a principle that would deny *Othello's* claim to be a tragedy as significant as *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*. Life would have been a lot easier for Arveragus and Dorigen if he had simply ordered Dorigen not to go, perhaps declaring (in the manner of Fiametta) that the promise was not legally binding—but the most noble of the 'good pagans' were absolute for sacrifice and even death, being not numbered in the roll of common men. The Franklin himself, to be sure, is not the stuff of which tragedians are made, but there is no reason to doubt the potential for tragedy in the tale he tells.

Arveragus's order that Dorigen must not, on pain of death, tell anyone of her assignation with Aurelius, has offended the sensibilities of some modern critics, but in context the remark reveals the emotional strain he is under: he is weeping as he makes it (1480), in contrast with Menedon's tale, wherein the lady does the weeping.² Arveragus, then, is not inhuman: he will bear his misfortunes like the exceptional man he is, but he must also feel them as a man. Besides, Arveragus's personal reputation is important to him (and he is enough of a realist to realize how hurtful the ensuing gossip would be), although it is not his primary consideration. As a noble pagan he acts with the highest motives possible to him, invoking a merciful God of whom he has imperfect knowledge, and affirming that 'trouthe' is the highest thing which a man (or woman) can maintain. Certainly, Arveragus's action impresses the other two main male characters in the tale, and we probably cannot do better than share the respect which Aurelius evinces for the mutual love and morality, and the moral solidarity,³ of this husband-and-wife team:

¹ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, v. xviii; discussed above, pp. 216–17.

² Cf. Morgan, 'A Defence of Dorigen's Complaint', p. 96.

³ The morality of Arveragus and Dorigen is presented as being reciprocal—just as their relationship as man and wife, and lover and mistress, was presented as being reciprocal (v. 791–8). Like Morgan, ed. *Franklin's Tale*, p. 33, I see no

'Madame, seyth to youre lord Arveragus,
 That sith I se his grete gentillesse
 To yow, and eek I se wel youre distresse,
 That him were levere han shame (and that were routhe)
 Than ye to me sholde breke thus youre trouthe,
 I have wel levere evere to suffre wo
 Than I departe the love bitwix yow two. . . .

. . . heere I take my leve,
 As of the treweste and the beste wyf
 That evere yet I knew in al my lyf.'

(v. 1526-40)

Aurelius and Dorigen, it seems, have not lost any honour, but rather gained some.

In sum, *The Franklin's Tale* is a story of pagan nobles who all turn out to be noble pagans. There may be a distinction in terms of profession and social role within the tale (knight and his lady, squire, the two clerks), but there is no attempt to make a distinction between classes. What, then, of the Franklin himself, who has often been regarded as a *parvenu*, an upper middle-class figure who is striving to climb the social ladder both materially and in terms of manners?¹ According to the recent study by Henrik Specht this view is incorrect, for Chaucer's Franklin is, in fact, in 'position and authority, way of life, and common esteem . . . a true and worthy "gentilman"'.² Reviewing Specht's book, Morgan expressed the hope that it would 'decently put to rest the erroneous opinion of the Franklin as a social upstart and the literary interpretations of the Franklin's Tale that have been spawned by it'.³ Yet, in the same issue of *Medium Aevum* in which this review appeared, Nigel Saul was able to argue that Chaucer was indeed portraying 'a man unsure of his status in the world; one whose material prosperity is not matched by a recognition of gentle birth. He is after all only a franklin, inferior in quality to those of noble and gentle birth.'⁴ Whatever the exact truth of this vexing issue may be, it is quite clear that the Franklin is not of the same social stratum as Chaucer's Knight or his son the Squire.

reason to doubt that Chaucer is expressing a marriage ideal at the beginning of *The Franklin's Tale*.

¹ See, for example, A. C. Spearing (ed.), *The Franklin's Prologue and Tale* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 11, 34-5.

² *Chaucer's Franklin in 'The Canterbury Tales': the Social and Literary Background of a Chaucerian Character* (Copenhagen, 1981), p. 141.

³ *Medium Aevum*, lii (1983), 125.

⁴ 'The Social Status of Chaucer's Franklin: A Reconsideration', *ibid.*, p. 21.

Harry Bailly would never be rude to those characters in the way in which he can be rude to the Franklin, for a start. And the Franklin's preoccupation with degree is obvious: he regards the Squire as a model of behaviour for his own son (v. 682-94), and drops a broad hint to the effect that Dorigen came of a higher 'kynrede' than Arveragus (735). He is, moreover, inclined to put a price tag on everything, and to insist on conspicuous consumption—thereby indicating his material rather than social security. The marks of the late medieval 'yuppie' are all too obvious. This difference of station is also reflected by his view of pagan antiquity. Chaucer's Knight saw in ancient Athens images of wise government and superlative chivalry in the face of impossible metaphysical odds; the Squire found in the heathen kingdom ruled by the Tartar king 'Cambyuskan' a world of elaborate love-trials and unbridled fantasy (with many magic 'props' in evidence); the Franklin, whose tale follows the Squire's, strives to attain similar perspectives on an alien culture, but his presentation of pagan character suffers by comparison with what the high-ranking aristocrats have already achieved. His bathetic insistence on specifying the length of time occupied by major events has already been commented on, as has his inability to realize fully the potential for pathos which his tale indubitably possesses. But at this point one may emphasize his rather nervous affirmation of the superiority of Christian truth to pagan folly (v. 1131-4, 1292-3), and his reductive treatment of pagan magic, which he puts on a par with those illusions which conjurers create at banquets (and compare the account of the magician's display at his own banquet), a view already identified by the Squire as one of the things which 'lewed' (i.e. untutored, uncomprehending) people say when they are confronted with something too subtle for their wit, in this case a mysterious horse of brass:

Another rownded to his felawe lowe,
 And seyde, 'He lyeth, for it is rather lyk
 An apparence ymaad by som magyk,
 As jogelours pleyen at thise feestes grete'.
 Of sondry doutes thus they jangle and trete,
 As lewed peple demeth comunly
 Of thynges that been maad moore subtilly
 Than they kan in hir lewednesse comprehende;
 They demen gladly to the badder ende.

(v. 216-24)

By contrast, Chaucer's Knight, with that total self-assurance

which befits his rank, had allowed his 'good pagans' to speak for themselves and to act as Gentiles were expected to act (cursed rites and all), and the Squire had felt no compunction about treating magic as a fact of heathen life, and praising the good king Cambyuskan for acting in accordance with the best law which was available to him:

Hym lakked noght that longeth to a kyng.
 As of the secte of which that he was born
 He kepte his lay, to which that he was sworn;
 And therto he was hardy, wys and riche,
 And pitous and just, alwey yliche;
 Sooth of his word, benigne, and honourable;
 Of his corage as any centre stable;
 Yong, fressh, and strong, in armes desirous
 As any bachelor of al his hous.

(v. 16-24)

The Franklin, however much he tries to emulate these models of historical reconstruction and cultural relativity, allows his limitations of character and status to affect his presentation of the past. The inherent values of the Franklin's tale are, therefore, to some extent at variance with the values of its teller.

All that has just been said about *The Franklin's Tale* differentiates it from the treatises *de vera nobilitate* composed by the fifteenth-century Italian humanists. As far as the tale itself is concerned, Chaucer's depiction of pagan antiquity functions in terms which are consonant with the classicizers' notions of virtuous heathen; it is simply not necessary to postulate Renaissance elements and influence. Influences must not be postulated beyond necessity, if I may brandish Ockham's razor for a moment. Chaucer conceives of universal human behaviour and experience in recognizably medieval (indeed Boethian) terms: man is most truly man by virtue of his soul, to use Trevet's idiom, and three men and one woman from long ago have proved themselves to be essentially, and impressively, 'human' in that sense; in each character the 'seed of nobility' comes to flourish. As far as the teller is concerned, the social distinctions and tensions on which we have touched above are very different from those appertaining in the Italian city-states. If Lauro Martines is right, the treatises on nobility by humanists like Poggio, Platina, and Landino were 'tailored for an upper-class audience', the typical form being a debate wherein a 'virtuous genius of humble birth' is opposed to the nobleman of prestigious social rank. 'If we take the arguments for the idealized sage and put them into the real historical world', he argues,

then the plea made to the ruling classes has this ring about it: take us in too; we are deserving; we would bring wisdom and virtue to the tasks of government; we would bring conscience to politics. At the same time, the humanists frequently expressed contempt for the multitude, the vulgar herd. Hence the imagined sage stood at a long distance from the populace, increasingly so in the course of the century, as humanists inclined more and more to equating virtue with learning, moral worth with intellectual activity. Neoplatonism crowned this trend.¹

But the humanist emphasis on the unity of learning and virtue was not a matter of mere self-promotion, Martines emphasizes; the humanists, who could be either 'professionals' (of relatively low origins) or noblemen born, were attempting to make power and politics more moral, 'to turn political men into better statesmen and statesmen into more moral men'.² The debates on nobility, therefore, cannot be regarded simply as the literature of the 'upwardly mobile'.³ In so far as the authorial stance adopted in these dialogues is that of the outsider, it is of the outsider who has much to offer those whose situation is secure and long-established. Chaucer's Franklin, by contrast, diminishes rather than augments the ideals and imaginings of his aristocratic fellow-travellers; whereas the Italian humanists sought to educate and influence the rich and powerful, the Franklin can only follow, falteringly, in the footsteps of the great.

One of these humanistic debates, Buanoccorso da Montemagno's *Controversia de nobilitate* (1428), is of special interest to us because of its ancient location (it is set in pagan Rome) and because the question with which it ends, namely, who was the most noble of the characters? is similar to the one posed at the end of *The Franklin's Tale*. The choice is between the high-born Publius Cornelius, who argues that he is the most noble because of his ancestry, and the virtuous plebeian Gaius Flaminius, who puts the case for the nobility of merit. Both are suitors for Lucrece, daughter to the Roman senator Fulgens, an enlightened pagan who allows the lady to choose whomever she wishes; she, in her turn, wisely refers the matter to the judgement of the Senate. Here is how the

¹ L. Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York, 1979), p. 213.

² *Ibid.*, p. 210.

³ This is how Charles Trinkaus tends to regard them, in *Adversity's Noblemen: The Italian Humanists on Happiness* (New York, 1940), pp. 49-50, 53, 56-7. But he does emphasize their social context and ramifications, and declares that the humanists' 'identification of their own ideal of life with nobility reveals the aristocratic character of their attitude'.

work ends in the translation of that Italianate Englishman, John Tiptoft, the Earl of Worcester (1427-70):

We stryue for noblesse, and whiche of vs two shold be reputed more noble; and in that byhalue our lyf, our fortune, our studye, and maners, how be it they were wel knownen to youre noble aduertences, yet now they be in bryef remembred. Neuirtheles, thysse of this contrauerseye is this: This day honeste stryueth with vnshamefastnes, contynence with luste, Magnanymyte with Cowardyse, lectrure with Inscience, and vertue with neglygence. And whether of these partyes is the better, I leue it to your dome and sentence.¹

This question is put more sharply in Caxton's 1481 printed edition of Tiptoft's version:

As touchyng the sentence dyffynytyf gyuen by the Senate . . . I fynde none as yet pronounced ne gyuen of whiche myn auctour maketh ony mencion of in his book / Thenne I wolde demaunde of theym that shal rede or here this book. whiche of thies tweyne that is to saye CORNELIUS SCIPIO AND GAYUS FLAMMYNEUS was moost noble' And in whiche of theym bothe. aftir the contente of theyr oracions that noblesse resteth²

But in fact there is no doubt concerning the winner of the debate—the inevitable happens in Henry Medwall's play *Fulgens and Luces* (c.1497), and the virtuous plebeian gets the girl. Luces (rather than the Senate) chooses Flaminius on the grounds that, as she puts it,

a man of excellent vertuouse condicions,
Although he be of a pore stoke bore,
yet I wyll honour and commende hym more
Than one that is descendide of ryght noble kyn
whose lyffe is all dissolute and rotyde in syn.

(789-93)³

By contrast, the question asked at the end of *The Franklin's Tale*, 'Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?' (v. 1622), does not admit of such a specific answer, because each of the major characters has acted in a way which was liberal and noble.

¹ R. J. Mitchell, *John Tiptoft (1427-1470)* (London, 1938), p. 241; cf. Douglas Gray (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose* (Oxford, 1985), p. 275.

² *Prologues and Epilogues of Caxton*, ed. Crotch, p. 46.

³ F. S. Boas and A. W. Reed (eds.), *Fulgens & Luces. A Fifteenth-Century Secular Play by Henry Medwall* (Oxford, 1926), p. 82.

What, then, of the Chaucer tale in which there is an explicit distinction between the two kinds of nobility, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, a work indubitably indebted to the fourth book of Dante's *Convivio*? Therein we find, in embryo, the debate form which was to be refined by the later humanists—Dante himself opposes the view of a Roman Emperor, Frederick of Swabia, that nobility consists in 'ancient wealth', with the view that gentility exists wherever there is virtue. But Chaucer was not interested in Dante's political theorizing concerning the Roman Empire (to which we have already referred) nor in the vast range of other matters which his treatise touches on, such as the movements of the heavens and the earth, the angelic hierarchies, the immortality and nature of the soul, the three natures of man, the entire framework of medieval learning, the degrees of love, and the ages of man. What he actually did was to quote, out of context and with minor modifications, Dante's argument that 'gentle is as gentle does':¹

'genterye
 Is nat annexed to possessioun,
 Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun
 Alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kynde.
 For, God it woot, men may wel often fynde
 A lordes sone do shame and vileynye;
 And he that wole han pris of his gentrye,
 For he was boren of a gentil hous,
 And hadde his eldres noble and vertuouus,
 And nel hymselfen do no gentil dedis,
 Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,
 He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl;
 For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl.
 For gentillesse nys but renomee
 Of thyne auncestres, for hire heigh bountee,
 Which is a strange thyng to thy persone.
 Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone.'

(iii. 1146-62)

Thus the loathly damsel replies to the young nobleman who dared to disparage her low birth—along with her ugliness and old age. I cannot accept the (rather attractive) argument that the hag is

¹ See J. L. Lowes, 'Chaucer and Dante's *Convivio*', *Modern Philology*, xiii (1915/16), 19-33, who points out that Chaucer 'reversed the emphasis of Dante's exposition from "once base, always base" to "once gentle, always gentle"—a change which grows out of the requirements of his Tale. But the argument is Dante's argument' (p. 24).

rhetorically amplifying her response to 'the least damaging of the knight's objections in order to dwarf the more pertinent ones concerning her "filthe" and "elde"' with the result that the 'lusty bachelor' is rendered so "'punch drunk"' by the end of her relentlessly protracted diatribe' that he wearily concedes *maistrie* to her.¹ For Chaucer is opposing the nobleman who has performed a churlish deed (rape) with this low-born old woman who is noble of soul (as her sage philosophy indicates) and therefore the moral superior or sovereign to the unnamed knight. The knight's recognition of this moral superiority is expressed in respectful language which betrays no trace of panic, pressure, or fatigue:

'My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governance;
Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance,
And moost honour to yow and me also.
I do no fors the wheither of the two;
For as you liketh, it suffiseth me.'

(iii. 1230-5)

But Chaucer does not hold the ethical note for very long—morality soon gives way to sexuality, as the knight enjoys his now 'fair' and 'yong' wife, and the Wife of Bath voices her own interest in husbands who are 'fressh abedde' (1251-9). The old hag is quite clearly *not* playing the part of humanist to the young knight's statesman. Where one might expect Chaucer to be at his closest to the Italian humanists—because he, like them, followed Dante's method of debating the nature of true nobility—he is in fact at his most distant from them. Or, to put it another way, the world of the Italian debates *de vera nobilitate* is as far removed from that of the Wife's tale as is the egotistical sublime of Dante's *Divine Comedy* from the self-ironic scepticism of *The House of Fame*.

Indeed, it may be pointed out that the 'deep structure' of the Wife's romance is rather resistant to the moral which it is made to bear, as may be inferred from a comparison with John Gower's version of the story, wherein Florent, the truest knight of all, keeps his promise to marry the loathly damsel, thereby enabling her to turn into the beautiful (and doubtless rich) princess that she was before the statutory stepmother cast a spell on her (*Confessio Amantis*, i. 1407-861).² But if Chaucer had allowed someone who

¹ Ian Bishop, 'Chaucer and the Rhetoric of Consolation', *Medium Aevum*, lii. 1 (1983), 48.

² G. C. Macaulay (ed.), *The English Works of John Gower* (Early English Text Society, Extra Series, lxxxi, London, 1900), i. 74-86.

had just preached on the advantages of low birth, poverty, and ugliness to transform into someone who was blatantly aristocratic, rich, and beautiful, this would have come across as some kind of narratorial hypocrisy—and here we may have one of the reasons why he rushed that section of the ending: the morality of the hag's sermon is left more or less intact as we are hurried on to enjoy the Wife's reassertion of her natural vitality. The upshot is that we are not given a clearly focused picture of a reformed aristocratic rake winning the girl who is the reward for his new-found noble disposition. That cannot be, because the question which forms the final part of the damsel's test of her knight's moral mettle (would he rather have her fair and faithless, or foul and faithful?) is too cynical in its tacit antifeminism, and the Wife of Bath's own wish to trap a husband who—like the knight—is highly active sexually, is too amorally sensual. Complexity there certainly is in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, but it is complexity of a kind very different from that found in the Italian debates on true nobility.

The presentation of the loathly damsel, and of the Wife of Bath herself, is also very different from that of the rhetorically fabricated female who features in the early Renaissance treatises in praise of women. This genre was very popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; Conor Fahy has listed no less than forty-one examples which were published in Italy during that period.¹ The *De laudibus mulierum*, which Bartolomeo Gogio addressed to Eleonora de Aragonia, Duchess of Ferrara, in 1487, may be taken as representative. The basic thesis is that woman is the equal of man, or even superior to him.² Gogio begins by arguing that woman is superior to man in terms of place of origin (Eve was created inside the Garden of Eden, whereas Adam was created outside it),³ in beauty and intellect, and in the qualities of constancy and strength, then declares that, in the process of procreation, the part played by the woman is just as active as that of the man. In the second book, it is proved that the discovery of letters, laws, and the arts was in each case due to women. After a digression on the origins of different languages (in Book 3), Guigo asserts that in governance and military matters women are not

¹ 'Three Early Renaissance Treatises on Women', *Italian Studies*, xi (1956), 47-55.

² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³ The same argument is found in, for example, the *Declamatio de nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* which Henricus Cornelius Agrippa wrote in 1509 as part of his attempt to win the favour of Margaret of Austria: see the summary in Charles G. Nauert, *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought* (Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, lv, Urbana, 1965), p. 26.

inferior to men (Book 4). The final books address the difficult subject of Eve's responsibility for the Fall, and here Guigo is at his most controversial—his argument minimizes the evil results of the Fall to such an extent that the clear implication is that the post-lapsarian state of man is his natural condition. In particular, 'the knowledge of good and evil acquired by Adam and Eve on eating the forbidden fruit was beneficial to the human race in that it brought man into his proper intellectual kingdom.'¹

The Chaucer critic's initial suspicion that he is hearing the accents of the Wife of Bath is soon dispelled, and that final argument, the feminist version of the *felix culpa* theory, clearly indicates the distance between Guigo and Chaucer. The loathly damsel's presentation of the female desire for sovereignty never develops into an argument in support of the notion that women are the natural sovereigns of men. As a virtuous woman, she stands in opposition to the vicious man, but no general conclusion is drawn concerning the moral superiority of womankind. Chaucer's humour is inversive rather than subversive, largely a matter of the inversion of antifeminist ideas. The world is turned upside down and the woman is allowed to come out on top for a change, but at the end of the carnival of wit the traditional hierarchies are re-established, as everyone knew they would be. At the end of *The Canterbury Tales* the party is seen to be well and truly over as Chaucer's Parson—a *persona afferens* if ever there was one—affirms the tenet of conventional wisdom. God, he declares, did not make Eve from the head of Adam,

for she sholde nat clayme to greet lordshipe. / For ther as the womman

¹ Fahy, 'Three Early Renaissance Treatises on Women', p. 36. The more usual strategy in the treatises in praise of women is to place the responsibility for the fall of mankind on the shoulders of Adam rather than Eve. Agrippa, as translated by Clapam, argues that 'the fruyte of the tree was forbidden to the man but not to the woman: which was not than created. For god wolde her to be fre from the begynning. Therefore the manne sinned in eatynge, not the woman. The man gaue vs deathe, not the woman. And all we synned in Adam, not in Eua. And we toke orygynalle synne of our father the man, not of our mother the woman.' This is why Christ the redeemer was born a man: He 'toke vpon hym manhode, as the more humble and lower kynde, and not womankynde, the more hygher & noble'. And this is also why priests are male. *A Treatise of the Nobilitie and excellencye of woman kynde, translated out of Latine into englysshe by Dauid Clapam* (Thomae Bertheleti typis impress., London, 1542), unfol. For similar special pleading see Lodovico Domenichi, *La nobilta della donne* (Vinetia, 1551), fols. 12^v-14^r; Domenico Bruni, *Difense delle donne* (Florence, 1552), fols. 22^r, 53^r; and of course the third book of Castiglione's *The Courtier* in W. H. D. Rouse and D. Henderson (eds.), *The Book of the Courtier by Baldassare Castiglione translated by Sir Thomas Hoby* (London, 1948), pp. 185-256.

hath the maistrie, she maketh to muche destray. Ther neden none en-
samples of this; the experience of day by day oghte suffise (x. 926-31).¹

In conclusion, then, it seems that, even when the potential for proto-humanism is at its greatest, Chaucer remains within the parameters of that classicism which was the concomitant of late medieval scholasticism. For him Dante's disquisition on true nobility in the *Convivio* was a 'purple passage', which he felt free to pluck from its original context and place at the service of a thesis which medieval readers could find, fully articulated, in the relevant part of Boethius's *Consolation* and in the discussions which it generated. To call Chaucer 'conservative' in this regard would be misleading and inappropriate, however, for the medieval paradoxes relating to nobility continued to stimulate minds long into the Renaissance.² Medwall's play *Fulgens and Lucrez* has already been mentioned, and one may recall that the inhabitants of Shakespeare's forest of Arden are noble by birth as well as in deed,³ and think of how Perdita, who—incongruously, given her apparently low birth—opposes the principle that 'a bark of baser kind' may be made to 'conceive . . . By bud of nobler race',⁴ turns out to be a princess. And it should be recognized that many of the arguments about true nobility or the status of women which the humanists offered were polemical exaggerations or redeployments of ideas which were current in the later Middle Ages.⁵

¹ *Works of Chaucer*, ed. Robinson, p. 259. One may compare the conventional wisdom of William of Aragon's discussion of the nobility of women in his *De nobilitate animi* (op. cit., n. 2, p. 18). In absolute terms the woman is not as noble as the man, for the female sex descends from the masculine sex. Of course, it is obvious that the actions of many women are nobler than the actions of many men, but that is beside the point. Man as such does not have inferior 'operations' whereas woman as such certainly does. According to the proportion of things, however, man and woman can be said to be equally noble. Following Aristotle in the *Ethics*, we can say that the works of men and women are naturally distinct: women are concerned with private, domestic and familial matters, whereas men are involved with 'external' works which require greater foresight and more vigorous labour. In this sense, therefore, the sexes are equally noble, for each has its proper sphere of activity and hence its special nobility (p. 68). The Renaissance treatises in praise of women go far beyond this, of course.

² The widespread nature, and the longevity, of these ideas are well brought out by G. McGill Vogt, 'Gleanings for the History of a Sentiment: Generositas Virtus, Non Sanguis', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, xxiv (1925), 102-24.

³ *As You Like It*, II. vii. esp. 88-135.

⁴ *The Winter's Tale*, IV. iv. 94-5.

⁵ As is made clear in the case of the debates *de vera nobilitate* by Trinkaus, *Adversity's Noblemen*, pp. 37, 52, etc.

This complexity is truly intimidating, but one need not despair. For ideas have their own history, and can be charted as they move from one context to another. If characteristically scholastic and characteristically humanistic contexts can be established as definite reference-points—a task which, in some cases, is very difficult—then Chaucer's position on any relevant issue can be located in relation to them. As far as past gentility is concerned, he seems, as it were, to remain within medieval territorial waters.

But it must be affirmed that for Chaucer there was nothing limiting or constricting about the attitudes to pagan antiquity which he imbibed from late medieval commentaries and compilations and in accordance with which he recast his Italian sources. The past our poet made varies from poem to poem. *Troilus* and *The Knight's Tale* present, with different interests and emphases, pagan worlds which are surprisingly autonomous, self-contained and internally consistent, though of course ultimately limited in comparison with Christianity. One need not doubt that the Boccaccio poems which were the main sources of those works stimulated Chaucer's imagination to explore the distant lands of antiquity, but it must be fully recognized that when he crossed their borders he took with him all the equipment of late medieval classicism and many of the procedures and priorities of scholasticism. Moreover, his main guide to the hearts and minds of the inhabitants—who were ignorant of Christian revelation—was Boethius, an authority who, though supposedly a Christian, had in his *Consolation* chosen to remain within the limits of human reason. *The Franklin's Tale* is different again, for here we have a rather anxious and sometimes unsympathetic imitation of aristocratic antiquarianism,¹ which manages to transcend the limitations of its teller in so far as it shows that nobility in the true

¹ Given that, at present, it is becoming unfashionable to analyse the Canterbury tales as revelations of the psyches of their tellers, it should perhaps be emphasized that these and earlier comments on Chaucer's several images of antiquity are by no means dependent on that kind of approach: my material could be deployed just as effectively within the argument that in different poems (*Troilus* included) Chaucer is exploring and exploiting different personal *realizations* of the past, each with its pros and cons (rather than equipping each narrator with a psychologically appropriate sense of the past). Indeed, it would be interesting to test the notion of an 'antique'/'alternative culture' group of Canterbury tales, including not only *The Knight's Tale*, *The Squire's Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale* but also *The Second Nun's Tale* and *The Man of Law's Tale* as well, wherein Chaucer runs the gamut of responses to pagans and paganism, ranging from approval to disapproval, respect to suspicion, empathy to antipathy, commendation to condemnation, and so forth.

sense of the term (as defined by Boethius and his followers) was possible for pagans as much as it is for Christians. Indeed, the behaviour of the Franklin's gentle Gentiles is, for the most part, so superlatively noble that it should put certain Christians to shame. 'Be thou ashamed, O Sidon: for the sea speaketh.'

We have been offered many images of Chaucer, all of them limited and many of them useful. In that spirit, I would like to offer the image of Chaucer as late medieval 'classicizer' and scholastic intellectual. These terms—which contain no paradox, in my view—indicate at once the true nature of Chaucer's achievement and his careful nurture of a poetic past. Moreover, there are major implications here for our sense of Chaucer as a poet of the past. Surely he should be admired for what he is—a writer of the late fourteenth century, exceptionally but essentially medieval—rather than what we might like him to be. My ultimate plea, therefore, is that we should give Chaucer back his past.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to J. A. Burrow, Derek Brewer, Linda Voigts, and Myra Stokes for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.