

## *Aventure or grace: Lucky in Love in the Franklin's Tale?*

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The end of the *Franklin's Tale* is undoubtedly satisfactory to all the parties in the action. Everyone gains something, intangible though the gains of the warm inner glow may be: such rewards are, if less than anticipated, perhaps more than deserved.

This general satisfaction has not extended to all readers of the tale. The capacity of the characters to experience and practise true love, Christian marriage, *gentillesse*, *trouthe*, self-control, and self-abnegation has been examined and explained in a large critical literature, and the challenge of the teasing final question has been exhaustively answered. Whether or not the tale was intended to address itself to such serious matters when it was written, the last eighty years of Chaucerian criticism have determined that it does so now; and once the proposition is assumed that the tale is seriously concerned with difficult issues of right conduct and divine guidance, the ending cannot but fail to resolve its complexity.

Yet, if the *Franklin's Tale* is read as a series of events rather than as a series of dilemmas, nothing ever actually happens to the characters which is as threatening as their perceptions of what might happen. In this, it differs from the *Knight's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*, both of which deal with the preoccupations of characters of similar social standing.

At every point in the *Franklin's Tale* where the apprehensions of the characters might be expected to indicate that they were about to suffer harm, Chaucer moves to cut the connexion between the characters' perception of events and the reader's. At line 817,<sup>1</sup> it is made clear that Dorigen's lamentations over Arveragus' departure for the wars are premature in their intensity. At lines 1085–86, Aurelius, 'woful creature' that he is, is nevertheless in no real danger of dying. At lines 1265–68, the reader is assured that the rocks, despite 'appareance of jogelrye', are still there, and that the threat of their removal will be enacted only in the eye of the beholder, in what people 'wene and seye'. At lines 1457–58, Dorigen's imminent death, whether by suicide or rape, is indefinitely postponed. Finally, at lines 1493–98, the crisis of the tale, the reader is warned against assuming that Arveragus is the author of his own, or Dorigen's, fate. His sufferings at lines 1480–86 have, as yet, no basis in fact: Dorigen's *jupartie* is, after all, an each-way chance; and whether or

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<sup>1</sup>Line references and quotations are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. Robinson, second edition (Boston, 1957).

not his display of weeping demonstrates a more elevated sensibility than anyone else's is a matter of taste rather than judgment.

The events which occur before each of these interpolations are, successively: Arveragus marries Dorigen and goes to England; Dorigen tells Aurelius to get rid of the rocks; the rocks are apparently removed; Arveragus tells Dorigen that she has to meet Aurelius in the garden. The arguments on faith, love, honour, and integrity which accompany the characters' expressions of misery or elation do not follow inevitably from the nature of the events in themselves. On the contrary, the topics raised demonstrate how the characters in the narrative construct a meaning for the action which is not necessarily relevant to its resolution.

This disjunction is confirmed at lines 1499–510, where the final movement of the tale begins, and the action might be expected to encompass the serious issues which Dorigen, Arveragus, and Aurelius find so important. Instead, the passage begins with the assertion that Aurelius has at last got lucky; Arveragus has made his honourable sacrifice, Dorigen is about to make hers, and Aurelius of '*aventure happed* hire to meete / amydde the toun, right in the quykkest strete' (ll. 1501–02).<sup>2</sup> This stroke of luck is almost immediately shown, in lines 1506–07, to be the sort of luck that one makes for oneself, and it is difficult to see how these lines could be read any other way than as a joke: '*For wel he spyed* whan she wolde go / Out of hir hous to *any maner* place'. A nice symmetry of events confirms the supposition of humour here, since Aurelius' first encounter with Dorigen in the garden was the result of exactly the same combination of opportunism and inadvertence. Originally, in dances in the garden, '*It may wel be* he looked on hir face / In swich a wyse as man that asketh grace' (ll. 957–58), and after an unspecified period of such strategic yearning, '*it happed* er they thennes wente . . . they fille in speche' (ll. 960–64). At both the beginning and end of his acquaintance with Dorigen, Aurelius has taken some trouble to be in the right place at the right time to take advantage of whatever might 'happen' to come his way.

The part played by luck in securing a happy outcome to Aurelius' endeavours is indicative of its operation in resolving Dorigen's fate also. The reader has already been told that, '*She may haue better fortune than yow semeth; / And whan that ye han herd the tale, demeth*' (ll. 1497–98). Now, as she leaves for the garden, luck, with a little help from Aurelius, ensures their meeting: '*But thus they mette, of aventure or grace, / And he saleweth hire with glad entente*' (ll. 1508–09). There has been some discussion about why *grace* is introduced here, and some speculation that the theological sense could be appropriate — perhaps to restore to the tale the

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<sup>2</sup>My italics in all quotations from the *Franklin's Tale*.

seriousness which it seems to be losing.<sup>3</sup> While the collocation *aventure or grace* occurs only twice in Chaucer,<sup>4</sup> both words are found in comparable collocations which indicate that the sudden introduction of a theological context here is an extremely improbable usage.

Chaucer commonly uses *aventure* in adverbial constructions to indicate the operation of chance. The adverbial senses listed in the *Middle English Dictionary*<sup>5</sup> are 'as chance directs, at random, haphazardly; by chance, fate or coincidence, accidentally; without conscious design, unintentionally'. The adverbial phrase is usually *by aventure*; the adverbial with preposition *of* at lines 1501 and 1508, is peculiar, in 'Chaucer, to the *Franklin's Tale*. The only other use of *aventure* in collocation with *grace* occurs at line 60 of the *Complaint of Mars*. In this line, 'My lyf stant ther in aventure and grace', both words have a similar meaning: 'at risk', or 'in peril';<sup>6</sup> neither sense is applicable in line 1508. There are twelve instances of *aventure* in collocation with words other than *grace*. In ten of these, both words in the collocation refer to the operations of chance and fortune. *Aventure or cas* occurs six times;<sup>7</sup> *or fortune* twice;<sup>8</sup> *or sort*<sup>9</sup> and *or hap*<sup>10</sup> once each. In these combinations, the conjunction *or* is used without any contrastive force; it merely extends the phrase by adding a term of similar meaning to *aventure*. There are, however, two instances where the second word is *destinee*,<sup>11</sup> and the collocation resembles line 1508 more closely. The conjunction in *aventure or destinee* is used with alternative force, expressing a contrast between chance, and fate or providence as an inexorable force.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>P. Hodgson, in her edition, *The Franklin's Tale* (London, 1960), p. 104, suggests that 'the alteration of the common phrase by the introduction of "grace" is deliberately made to be in keeping with the Franklin, a professed son of the church'. G. Joseph, in 'The *Franklin's Tale*: Chaucer's Theodicy', *Chaucer Review*, 1 (1966-67), 30, goes much further: 'The immanence of a Providential "grace" asserts itself in a fully comprehensible way for the first time. The verbal drift from "aventure" to "grace" captures in small the moral of the tale.'

<sup>4</sup>The Chaucerian usages have been compiled from J. S. P. Tatlock, *A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Washington, D.C., 1927; reprinted, 1963), (*Concordance*). The abbreviations for the names of poems are as used in the *Concordance*; where necessary, the line references to the 'Globe' edition there used have been changed to those in Robinson. *Aventure* is found at *Concordance*, pp. 9-10, and *grace* at pp. 390-92.

<sup>5</sup>*Middle English Dictionary (MED)*, edited by Hans Kurath, et al. (Ann Arbor, 1954-), Part B1, p. 547, sense 1 (c).

<sup>6</sup>*MED*, Part B1, p. 548. sense 3(a)-(e) *aventure*; *MED*, Part G3, pp. 285-86, sense 3(e) *grace*.

<sup>7</sup>*Concordance*, Prol. 844, Kn. 1074, Pars. 570-75, TC. 1. 568, 4. 388, and HF. 2. 544.

<sup>8</sup>NP. 2999, Cl. 812.

<sup>9</sup>Prol. 844.

<sup>10</sup>Bo. 5., p. 1., 59.

<sup>11</sup>Kn. 1465, Mch. 1967.

<sup>12</sup>*MED*, Part D3, pp. 1033-34.

Chaucer uses *grace* extensively, in all the senses cited in the *Middle English Dictionary* except sense 7.<sup>13</sup> The theological senses of *grace*,<sup>14</sup> involving the operation of God's favour in either material or spiritual contexts, occur in collocation with the divine attributes of power, forgiveness, and mercy.<sup>15</sup> There is no instance of the ideas associated with God's gifts of *grace* being used in collocation with chance. The secular gifts of *grace* spring from goodwill and patronage,<sup>16</sup> either of the lady in *fin'amor*, or of a lord. The most usual collocation for this secular sense of *grace* is with *merci*, occurring five times.<sup>17</sup> It occurs once with *favour*,<sup>18</sup> and once with *largesse*.<sup>19</sup> While it is remotely possible that Dorigen's *grace* is being referred to in line 1508, as is the case at lines 958, 999, and 1325 of the tale, the absence of any other usage where this sense is associated with chance makes such a meaning rather strained. Two further collocations occur, in which *grace* is found not with *aventure* but with the similar *hap*. They are 'Shal I clepe hyt hap other grace',<sup>20</sup> and 'The oughte nat to clepe it hap, but grace'.<sup>21</sup> The most likely meaning of *grace* here, as at line 1508, is that of Providence, lot, or fortune. The *Middle English Dictionary*, in its entry under this sense,<sup>22</sup> differentiates between examples where 'grace' indicates the operation of God's providence, and those indicating the more worldly operations of fate or fortune (senses 3(a)–(c)).

The question of whether *grace* in line 1508 refers to religious providence (as in Joseph's account of the line),<sup>23</sup> or to worldly fortune, is to some extent a grammatical problem. If the *or* in the line is additive, as in the examples where *aventure* is collocated with *cas*, *fortune*, *sort*, or *hap*, then senses 3(b)–(c) of *grace* are both grammatically and textually more likely. If, on the other hand, the *or* is alternative, then a contrast exists between *aventure* and *grace*, similar to that already observed between *aventure* and *destinee*, and between *hap* and *grace* in comparable collocations. In this case, either sense 3(a) or senses 3(b)–(c), may be applicable. Aurelius' 'chance' meeting with Dorigen may be the effect of a stroke of Providence, or merely a stroke of luck.

<sup>13</sup>*MED*, Part G3, pp. 283–88.

<sup>14</sup>*MED*, Part G3, pp. 283–85, sense 1 (a)–(g) and sense 2 (a)–(b).

<sup>15</sup>*Mk.* 2182, 2218, *Pars.* 1025–30, *ABC.* 26, 156.

<sup>16</sup>*MED*, Part G3, pp. 286–87, sense 4 (a)–(e).

<sup>17</sup>*Kn.* 1120, *Mel.* 1815–25, 1875–85, *PF.* 421, *Comp. L.* 17.

<sup>18</sup>*Cl.* 102.

<sup>19</sup>*Anel.* 42.

<sup>20</sup>*BD.* 810.

<sup>21</sup>*TC.* 1. 896.

<sup>22</sup>*MED*, Part G3, p. 285, sense 3 (a)–(c).

<sup>23</sup>Joseph, 'The *Franklin's Tale*: Chaucer's Theodicy', p. 30.

The matter can be resolved by examining the contexts in which the four comparable collocations occur.<sup>24</sup> *Aventure or destinee* occurs at line 1465 in the *Knight's Tale* in reference to Palamon's escape from prison on the third of May in the seventh year of his imprisonment. The 'unlucky' or 'dismal' May 3rd used here fits more comfortably with the fatalism associated with the Theban lot in the tale than with a Christian providence, especially since line 1466 glosses the meaning of *destinee*: 'as, when a thyng is shapen, it shal be'. *Destyne or aventure* occurs at line 1967 of the *Merchant's Tale* in an even less Christian context, in reference to the arrangements for Damyan's and May's adultery:

Were it by destyne or aventure,  
Were it by influence or by nature,  
Or constellacioun, that in swich estaat  
The hevene stood that tyme fortunaat  
Was for to putte a bille of Venus werkes. (ll. 1967–71)

If *grace* in line 1508 is a variation of *destinee*, the evidence of the two similar occurrences supports sense 3(b). *Hap or grace* occurs in the *Book of the Duchess* at line 810, and once again the context is clearly secular; the first meeting of the Knight with Blanche:

Shal I clepe hyt hap other grace  
That broght me there? Nay, but Fortune,  
That is to lyen ful commune. (ll. 810–12)

The final instance, in Book I of *Troilus and Criseyde*, is again concerned with the devotion of the lover for the beloved, as Pandarus advises Troilus,

. . . nought but good it is  
To loven wel, and in a worthy place;  
The oughte nat to clepe it hap, but grace. (ll. 894–96)

While the *grace* granted the lover in *fin'amor* has some of the qualities of religious grace, the context remains secular, and nothing in these two occurrences supports a religious interpretation for *grace* in line 1508.

Aurelius' good luck in meeting Dorigen is, of course, a necessary plot mechanism, but all the events of the *Franklin's Tale* are shown to be equally lucky for all the characters by the end of the tale. The final question of the *Franklin's Tale* does not invite the reader to speculate on God's providence, Christian marriage, the difference between *amicitia* and *amor*, or even, very much, on *trouthe* or *gentillesse*.

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<sup>24</sup>The collocation in the *Complaint of Mars*, although using both words, is clearly inapplicable. See note 6.

It asks the reader to decide, considering how things have turned out, who has given up the most. If the ethical agonies of the noble characters are left out of consideration, it is apparent that nobody really gives up anything at all. Noble gestures are made, even by the magician, but neither harm nor disadvantage results for any of those who make them because no sacrifices are, finally, exacted. The tale is comedic in structure from first to last; the seriousness with which each character greets the turn of events that might affect him or her adversely is part of the joke. In comedy, it's not how you play the game that counts, it's whether you win or lose; if nobody loses in the *Franklin's Tale*, what does it matter who ought to have won?