Between Precedent and Possibility: Liminality, Historicity, and Narrative in Chaucer's *The Franklin's Tale*

by Steele Nowlin

THE Franklin interrupts the Squire's exotic romance only to offer a romance of his own. Not as temporally or spatially distant as the realm of Ghengis Khan, though clearly separate from that of the Canterbury pilgrims, the world the Franklin evokes is at once distant and reachable: the coast of Brittany and the city of Orleans were most likely known to the Canterbury pilgrims, the Breton lay possessed literary capital in fourteenth-century England, and most significant, the questions of *trouthe*, fidelity, patience, and *gentilesse* tested in the tale were cultural paradigms present in the minds of Chaucer's readers. Although critics have long since moved away from G. L. Kittredge's assertion that the tale is an idealistic conclusion to the marriage group, many have nevertheless offered readings of the tale that argue for thematic marriages between key conceptual binaries, including social and moral *gentilesse*, earnest and play, word and deed, and reality and illusion.[1] But if the *Franklin's Tale* is an investigation of these concepts, then it is also about how one investigates them.

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[1] Any discussion of the *Franklin's Tale* must take up these issues to some extent. For recent discussions on the relationship between words and deeds in the tale, see Michaela Paasche Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), and Paul Beekman Taylor, *Chaucer's Chain of Love* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1996). For a discussion of *gentilesse* and its transformation in the tale, see Lindsay A. Mann, "'Gentilesse' and the Franklin's Tale," *Studies in Philology* 63 (1966): 10–29. For a discussion of the promises in the tale, see Alan T. Gaylord, "The Promises in *The Franklin's Tale*," *ELH* 31 (1964): 331–65. For a discussion on reality and illusion, see Carolyn Collette, "Seeing and Believing in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 26 (1992): 395–410. For "reality" in its Boethian context, see W. Bryant Bachman Jr., "'To

Movement between any of these poles relies on a middle space created by the tale itself. Beginning with the Franklin's invocation of the Breton lay, continuing through the tale in the interactions between Dorigen, Arveragus, Aurelius, and the clerk, and intensifying with textual impositions by the narrator, Chaucer carefully and consciously creates a liminal space in which characters test out particular cultural paradigms in order to imagine and construct alternative possibilities from existing precedents. In examining the relationship between the world of the tale and its characters, I shall argue first that the Franklin's invocation of the Breton lay genre frames what follows within the confines of a liminally-charged space. Second, I shall track the unfolding of narrative events that follow the clerk's illusion, arguing that the characters cumulatively move toward the realization of new possibilities. Third, I shall demonstrate how the narrator's textual impositions, when combined with the actions of the characters, fashion a new world around the characters and literally change the space of the tale. Finally, I shall show that each of these three devices is linked together by a careful process of narrative exchange. Examining this processional construction shows the *Franklin's Tale* to be not only a site in which the imagination and realization of new alternatives is possible, but also an articulation of how one conceives this possibility.

Critical concepts of liminality draw mainly from the anthropological work of Victor Turner who envisions liminality as a kind of stepping aside from political and social position; this liminal space is charged with the myths and metaphors that shape a culture.[2] Turner's theory is an ultimately essentializing and structuralist mode of cultural criticism and as a result has come under some fire in recent years by both cultural and literary critics.[3] Kathleen Biddick rightly points out that

Maken Illusioun': The Philosophy of Magic and the Magic of Philosophy in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 12 (1977): 55–67. For discussions of the "morality" of the tale, see Gerald Morgan's series of articles, including "A Defence of Dorigen's Complaint," *Medium Aevum* 46 (1977): 77–97; "Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and the Moral Argument of the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 20 (1986): 285–306; and "Experience and the Judgment of Poetry: A Reconsideration of the Franklin's Tale," *Medium Aevum* 70 (2002): 204–25. Critics also see many of these issues ultimately leading to Dorigen's silence. For a discussion of the critical tradition of Dorigen in the tale, see Francine McGreggor, "What of Dorigen? Agency and Ambivalence in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 31 (1997): 365–67.

[2] In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Victor Turner argues that in the realm of liminality, "the possibility exists of standing aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements" ([Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974], 14).

[3] For a brief critical summary, see Kathleen Biddick, *The Shock of Medievalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 138–39.

by mystifying the cultural process it seeks to elucidate, Turner's writing itself postures as a liminal, magical creation.[4] In spite of Biddick's criticisms and others, the idea of liminality is itself extremely useful for investigating a literary work like the *Franklin's Tale* that consciously engages an in-between space to illustrate larger cultural and ideological paradigms. Liminality is a space in which cultural paradigms can be engaged, explained, and re-conceived.

While one critic has recently argued that the *Franklin's Tale* essentially "undoes" itself, ending exactly where it begins, in the perfect marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus, the world at the end of the tale is instead very different from the world at the start, largely as a result of parallel changes in the characters and the Breton environment.[5] It is through these changes and their negotiation by the exchange of narratives that the tale is able to articulate the conception of alternative possibility that marks what Turner would call "reaggregation," the reentry of the tale and its fictional agents into the established social structure via the Franklin's concluding *demande*. Consequently, the idea of liminality is useful not for its essentializing tendencies, nor for its ability to abstract in terms of a mystical, "other" world, but rather because it allows one to imagine alternatives under cultural and political pressures. In what follows, I do not intend to argue how individual characters in the tale move in or out of liminality and toward archetypal or idealistic concepts of *trouthe* or *gentilesse*; rather, I shall use the vocabulary of liminality as a starting point for investigating how the rendered world of the tale is transformed in order to offer its readers paths for locating themselves among the pervasive metaphors of culture and thus to conceive new possibilities.

"OLDE GENTIL BRITOUNS IN HIR DAYES": THE BRETON LAY GENRE

The Franklin's invocation of the Breton lay initiates the relocation of the tale into a liminal space in three distinct ways: it distances the location of the tale in both time and space; it introduces a genre and thus an ethos that is in part defined by its concern with the interaction of two worlds, the supernatural and the human; and it calls attention to the self-conscious nature of the second world in which the tale takes place. While it is clear that the source for the *Franklin's Tale* is Boccaccio, Chaucer was nevertheless aware of the Breton lay, as well as of Marie

[4] Ibid., 139.
[5] R. D. Eaton, "Narrative Closure in Chaucer's Franklin's Tale," *Neophilologus* 84 (2000): 310.

de France, whose twelve lays, written in the mid to late twelfth century, are its earliest extant examples. Laura Hibbard Loomis notes that while it is doubtful Chaucer actually read Marie, his knowledge of the lays can be traced through specific thematic and structural characteristics to the Middle English lays of the Auchinleck manuscript.[6] Kathryn Hume distills these into three typical lay features which include a focus on love and *gentilesse*, the use of magic, and "an a-Christian ethic" that allows Chaucer to address more freely the moral and ethical problems inherent in the plot of the tale.[7]

It is by such thematic characteristics, as opposed to those of "form," that the Breton lay genre can perhaps best be identified, and these characteristics allow the Franklin's Prologue to deliver the sense of liminality crucial to the work of the tale.[8] The Franklin's invocation distances the tale temporally and spatially from the world of the Canterbury pilgrims. His prologue describes how

> Thise old gentil Britouns in hir dayes
> Of diverse aventures maden layes,
> Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge,
> Whiche layes with hir instrumentz they songe,
> Or elles redden hem for hir plesaunce;
> And oon of hem have I in remembraunce,
> Which I shal seyn with good wyl as I kan.[9]

The Franklin's words combine ethnography with nostalgia. Describing what the Bretons did in their lays and labeling their makers as "old" and "gentil," his lines provide a narrative vocabulary for the imagined agents of the remote past. The prologue, however, does more than merely introduce a confused liminal world vaguely located at the intersection of the realms of human and faerie, as we see in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, or in the unreachably remote historical Orient of the *Squire's*

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[6] Loomis, "Chaucer and the Breton Lays of the Auchinleck MS," *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941): 18. Loomis's nine characteristics include: "No. 1, the lays were made by *Britouns*; No. 2, the *Britouns* were *gentil*; No. 3, they lived in old days; No. 4, they composed in their own language; No. 5, the lays were in rime; No. 6, the lays were sung; No. 7, they were accompanied by musical instruments; No. 8, they were written down; No. 9, they were on diverse subjects" (ibid.).

[7] Hume, "Why Chaucer Calls the *Franklin's Tale* a Breton Lai," *Philological Quarterly* 51 (1972): 374.

[8] See Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury's introduction to *The Middle English Breton Lay*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1995), 4.

[9] *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), V.709–15. All quotations from Chaucer's works are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text.

Tale. His words are more deliberate and more conscious of the act of constructing this world. The Franklin has one of the lays "in remem-braunce," and he calls the pilgrims not into the ancient world of Brittany but into his textual reconstruction of that world. If the Franklin's Prologue summons a second world into existence, then it simultaneously foregrounds the act of summoning in itself.

The prologue also follows a formal tradition among extant Breton lays whose prologues perform similar work. Despite their diversity of thematic subjects, English and French Breton lays share a form characterized by a brief prologue and epilogue which surround the body of the tale.[10] While obviously not unique to Breton lays, these prologues and epilogues are distinctive in their description not only of plot elements but also of the genre itself. The prologue to the English *Sir Orfeo*, for example, outlines the topics addressed by the genre as a whole:

> We redeth oft & findeþ [y-write,]
> & this clerkes wele it wite,
> Layes þat ben in harping
> Ben y-founde of ferli þing:
> Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo,
> & sum of ioie & mirþe al-so,
> & sum of trecherie & of gile,
> Of old aventours þat fel while;
> & sum of bourdes & ribaudy,
> & mani þer beþ of fairy.
> Of al þinges that men seþ,
> Mest o loue, for-soþe, þey beþ.
> In Breteyne this layes were wrouȝt,
> [First y-founde & forþ y-brouȝt,
> Of aventours þat fel bi dayes,
> Wher-of Bretouns maked her layes.]
> When kinges miȝt our y-here
> Of ani mervailes þat þer were,
> Þai token an harp in gle & game
> & maked a lay & ȝaf it name.[11]

Like the Franklin's, this prologue also formalizes nostalgia, relating the subject matter of the poem to the "good old days" of a Breton past, telling "Of aventours that fel bi dayes, / Wherof Bretouns maked her

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[10] Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 7.

[11] *Sir Orfeo*, ed. A. J. Bliss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), lines 1–20. This is the text of the Auchinleck manuscript.

layes" (15–16). These prologues establish a dialectic between the present and an imagined past, one that is continued in the Franklin's prologue. Chaucer compounds the sense of liminality by applying this loaded Breton frame to a tale that itself has never existed unframed: in the earliest Oriental precursors to the *Franklin's Tale* through to Boccaccio's versions in the *Filocolo* and *Decameron*, the story of the rash promise and test of marriage is always embedded within a larger narrative structure.[12] Chaucer's complex invocation of a history of distancing narrative frames, an imagined past, a formalized nostalgia, and a tradition of previous invocations thus inaugurates and intensifies liminality in the *Franklin's Tale*.[13] The prologue establishes the writer as one who, like Janus in the "colde, frost seson of Decembre" (1244), looks backwards and forwards at the same time and draws from a classical past from the standpoint of Christian modernity.[14] Like the lays of Marie and the Auchinleck manuscript, it self-consciously remembers a past that never was, makes that memory textual, and positions itself to look both to the past and to the future.

''EVERICH OF YOW'': THE CHARACTERS AS A DISCURSIVE UNIT

If Marie de France imagines the liminality of the Breton lay as an opportunity to move beyond the limited world of pagan antiquity,[15] Chaucer takes this generic characteristic one step further in the *Franklin's Tale* by imagining the lay as a site in which to enact that moving beyond. In the

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[12] Robert R. Edwards, "The Franklin's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues of the "Canterbury Tales*,*"* ed. Robert M. Correale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 212.

[13] The similarity between "Bretaine" and "Bretayne," referring to Brittany and Britain, illustrates a further level of liminality with which Chaucer may be working. A. C. Spearing notes that the English translator of *Le Fresne* translates "En Bretaine" as "in Bretayne," meaning Britain (not Brittany), specifically "In þe west cuntre," which Spearing argues is most likely Cornwall or some other Celtic area ("Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 [1990]: 127). Emily Yoder argues that the "Bretons" of the *Franklin's Tale* could likewise refer to Celtic peoples ("Chaucer and the 'Breton' Lay," *Chaucer Review* 12 [1977]: 7). Laskaya and Salisbury argue that the similarity in name is not the result of translational confusion but a nationalistic move to reclaim romance narratives from the French (*Middle English Breton Lay*, 7).

[14] The Christian-pagan tension is also characteristic of the genre. As Donovan illustrates, Marie's reference to Priscian in her general prologue is intended to suggest not that the ancients wrote obscurely on purpose, but rather that their positions as ancients prevented them from seeing the fulfillment of the truths their writings attempted to illuminate. According to Donovan, Marie's prologue "fixed . . . the position of the modern surveying his relations with the ancients, on whom he depended for matter which he proceeded to develop as he saw fit" (*Breton Lay*, 24).

[15] For an analysis of this aspect of Marie's project, see Donovan, *Breton Lay*, 13–25.

Franklin's Tale, part of that look forward is manifested in the characters'
cumulative movement toward the conception and eventual realization
of alternatives or possibilities beyond those defined through precedent.
While the characters and the world are changed by the time the Franklin
proposes his *demande*, only by reading the changes in the protagonists as
a group does the interpretive work of the tale become evident. The char-
acters' cumulative articulations of possibility in no way demonstrate
individual characters going through each of Turner's stages or even
necessarily undergoing substantive changes on their own. Rather, they
demonstrate that the characters of the tale operate as a sort of discursive
unit. The work of this unit is to create a different kind of exemplum, one
that presents a model not for patience, *trouthe*, or *gentilesse* but rather
for the conception of alternatives and possibilities. Movement toward
this conception is figured at the narrative level in the form of forgive-
ness. Tracking this movement shows the characters testing out cultural
paradigms and struggling to conceive new alternatives in the face of
precedent.

Foregrounded in the Franklin's own praise of patience in marriage
(761–86), this accumulation of forgiveness—what A. J. Minnis suc-
cinctly calls "a sort of chain reaction of *gentilesse*"—begins in the plot
of the tale with the complaint Dorigen voices after seeing the rocks re-
moved from the Breton coast.[16] Her catalogue of classical women textu-
alizes her anxiety over having to choose between fidelity to her husband
and fidelity to her word. Her choice of how to articulate this anxiety
testifies to the limited range of alternatives she perceives as available
to her. Dorigen cites only two possible escapes from her dilemma, dis-
honor or death:

> t'escape woot I no socour,
> Save oonly deeth or elles dishonour;
> Oon of thise two bihoveth me to chese.
> But nathelees, yet have I levere to lese
> My lif than of my body to have a shame,
> Or knowe myselven fals, or lese my name;
> And with my deth I may be quyt, ywis.
>
> (1357–63)

Her limited range of choices is further articulated in her examples,
which are confined solely to the women of pagan antiquity, "stories

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[16] Minnis, "From Medieval to Renaissance? Chaucer's Position on Past Gentility," *Pro-
ceedings of the British Academy* 72 (1986): 227.

[that] beren witnesse" to her own plight (1367). To track the development and organization of this catalogue and the response it provokes from Arveragus is to track Dorigen's movement from perceiving only two choices to beginning to consider a third. Despite its limitations, Dorigen's catalogue of classical women is not a haphazard list of pagan exemplars organized only by Dorigen's hysteria, as James Sledd has argued, but a carefully arranged distillation of her central concerns. Responding to Sledd's reading of the complaint, Donald C. Baker contends that Dorigen's complaint breaks down into three distinct sections: women who kill themselves before being raped, women who do so after being raped, and women who remain completely loyal to their husbands.[17] Gerald Morgan also sees in the complaint a rational order organized to illustrate chastity, fidelity, and honor.[18] Both critics argue that through her catalogue, Dorigen exemplifies the values of the gentle marriage she shares with Arveragus.[19] But even the section of the catalogue devoted to showing suicide as a means of avoiding dishonor demonstrates Dorigen's gesture toward a different alternative. As Baker points out, the shifts in the categories of suicides—particularly the move from "Hasdrubales wyf," who killed herself when she saw the Romans take her city (1399–1404) to Lucresse who kills herself *after* being "oppressed . . . Of Tarquyn" (1406–7)—suggests a "delay of suicide among those urging it at once," and thus, at least on some level, Dorigen's catalogue can be read as an attempt to test the narratives of antiquity and to look for a window of possibility, however narrow it may be.[20]

This window, to be sure, provides her with little solace, for she continues to wrestle with her limited alternatives for "a day or tweye, / Purposynge evere that she wolde deye" (1457–58). It is not until Arveragus speaks that she is presented with a truly different third option. "Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?" he forgivingly asks, sweeping away in a single question the weight of antiquity that had burdened Dorigen and limited her choices (1469).[21] Arveragus offers an option not available

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[17] Baker, "A Crux in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*: Dorigen's Complaint," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 60 (1961): 62.

[18] Morgan, "A Defence of Dorigen's Complaint," 85.

[19] According to Baker, the third group of loyal, subservient wives illustrates a decision by Dorigen, not indecision: "Dorigen's lack of decision . . . will leave the matter ultimately to her husband; the decision of the husband that his wife's word is more important than any consideration touching him; and the decision of the courtly lover, Aurelius, that such nobility forbids any further trespassing on his part" ("A Crux," 63).

[20] Ibid.

[21] For a less sympathetic reading, see Derek Pearsall, "*The Franklin's Tale*, Line 1469:

to the women of pagan antiquity: forgiveness. But Arveragus immedi-
ately shows himself to be bound by ideological restraints of his own
that limit his options. For all his talk of *trouthe*, and because of it, he puts
a gag order on Dorigen and sends her to fulfill the promise she made
to Aurelius. In fact, his decision resorts to the same limited vocabulary
of Dorigen's complaint: now Dorigen will be *sleen* if she refuses to ad-
here to her *trouthe* and keep silent about it. Concerned for his reputation
and the public face of the *trouthe* of his marriage, Arveragus struggles
between forgiveness and the *trouthe* and *worshipe* he must maintain as
a knight, so much so that "he brast anon to wepe" (1480).[22] While it
appears to silence Dorigen, Arveragus's decree nevertheless gestures
toward a more productive solution than Dorigen's conclusions. This
is most powerfully demonstrated in Chaucer's careful word choice.
Forms of the verb *slen*, which appear sixteen times before Arveragus's
decision—thirteen of which occur in Dorigen's complaint—afterward
disappear entirely from the poem.[23] At this narrative nexus, in distinct
contrast to Boccaccio's versions in which the wives initially resist up-
holding their pledges,[24] we begin to see Dorigen and Arveragus working
to conceive and articulate a useable alternative.

If in the exchange between Dorigen and Arveragus there exists the
tentative presentation of a third possibility, then in Aurelius's forgive-
ness of Dorigen's problematic debt to him we see a fuller expression of
it. Meeting Aurelius in the busiest street in the city, halfway between

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Forms of Address in Chaucer," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 69–78. Pearsall ar-
gues that the tone of Arveragus's address to Dorigen in line 1469 is one of patient superi-
ority, not one of generosity or forgiveness; Arveragus needs to know this information in
order to take appropriate action.

[22] In "Experience and the Judgment of Poetry," Morgan illustrates the specific con-
cerns Arveragus weighs as a knight and the obedience he and Dorigen owe one another
(209–11).

[23] Forms of the verb appear in lines 825, 893, 1318, 1365, 1383, 1394, 1397, 1405, 1410,
1414, 1420, 1423, 1425, 1430, 1433, and 1446.

[24] In Menedon's story, the lady hopes to escape her promise: "E pensando in qual
maniera tornare potesse adietro ciò che promesso avea, e non trovando licita scusa, in più
dolore cresceva" (403). [Wondering how she might renege on what she had promised and
finding no acceptable excuse, she felt more sorrow] (Edwards, "The Franklin's Tale," 228).
Similarly, in *Decameron* 10.5, Madonna Dianora voices her disagreement with her hus-
band Gilberto's command to fulfill her promise: "La donna, udendo il marito, piagneva
e negava sè cotal grazia voler da lui. A Gilberto, quantunque la donna il negasse molto,
piacque che così fosse" (880). [When she heard her husband, the lady wept and refused
to accept such a favor from him] (Edwards, "The Franklin's Tale," 242). Menedon's story
appears in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Filocolo*, ed. Antonio Enzo Quaglio, vol. 1, *Tutte le opere de
Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca (Verona, 1967), bk. 4, chaps. 31–34. All quotations
from Boccacccio's *Decameron* will be from *Decameron*, ed. Arnoldo Mondadori, vol. 4, of
Tutte le opere de Giovanni Boccaccio, ed. Vittore Branca (Verona, 1976).

the rocks and the garden, Dorigen tells him, "half as she were mad" (1511)—and thus without yet comprehending the third alternative partially formulated by Arveragus—that she has come to fulfill her promise, "'as myn housbonde bad'" (1512). Amazed at her intention to follow through,

> Aurelius gan wondren on this cas,
> And in his herte hadde greet compassioun
> Of hire and of hire lamentacioun,
> And of Arveragus, the worthy knyght,
> That bad hir holden al that she had hight,
> So looth hym was his wyf sholde breke her trouthe;
> And in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe,
> Considerynge the beste on every syde,
> That fro his lust yet were hym levere abyde
> Than doon so heigh a cheerlyssh wrecchednesse
> Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse.
>
> (1514–24)

As he works out the cause of Dorigen's arrival, Aurelius sees "hire," Dorigen, as well as two narrative tracts operating within her: the "lamentacioun" she carefully expressed in her catalogue of classical women, and the "trouthe" of her husband. Essentially, he sees in Dorigen the tensions that liminality allows to be worked out, and, "Considerynge the beste on every side," he ultimately abandons his lust and decides to "relesse" her from "every serement and every bond" (1533–34). Furthermore, the range of possibilities produced in this exchange marks a key difference from Chaucer's Boccaccian sources in which resolution occurs as the result of male identification and not the more inclusive consideration of "the beste on every side."[25] This forging of the second link in the tale's chain reaction of *gentilesse* is not caused by some

[25] In Menedon's story, Tarolfo changes his mind only after recognizing in the lady's arrival the generosity of her husband who sent her: "La qual cosa udendo, Tarolfo più che prima s'incominciò a maravigliare e a pensare forte, e a conoscere cominciò la gran liberalità del marito di lei che mandata a lui l'avea" (404). [When he heard this, Tarolfo began to marvel more than before and to ponder, and he began to realize the great generosity shown to him by the husband who had commanded her to go to him] (Edwards, "The Franklin's Tale," 230). A similar male-to-male connection is made in *Decameron* 10.5, when Ansaldo sees in Madonna Dianora the generosity of Gilberto: "Messere Ansaldo, se prima si maravigliava, udendo la donna molto più s'incominciò a maravigliare: e dalla liberalità di Giliberto commosso il suo fervore in compassione cominciò a cambiare" (881). [Messer Ansaldo at first marveled when he heard the lady, and then he begin [sic] to marvel even more. Moved by Gilberto's generosity, his desire began to change to compassion] (Edwards, "The Franklin's Tale," 242).

idealistic contagion imposed by the narrator, but rather by the genera-tion of "greet routhe" from Aurelius's careful observation of these nar-rative tracts.

The third link presents itself in the clerk's forgiving Aurelius of his own debt. The cumulative progression is illustrated by the fact that now it is Aurelius himself who articulates a new alternative to the clerk. Rather than sell his "heritage," an option that would turn him into "a beggere" and bring shame to all his family (1563–64), or "lye" by run-ning away from the payment of his debt (1570), Aurelius formulates a usable third option: the negotiation of credit. Explaining his predica-ment to the clerk and what paying the one thousand pounds at once will mean, Aurelius suggests the option of a payment plan: "But wolde ye vouches sauf," he asks, "upon seuretee, / Two yeer or thre for to respiten me, / Thanne were I wel" (1581–83). Aurelius's version of the third option is a re-articulation of the forgiveness with which Arvera-gus initially dismisses Dorigen's pagan complaint, and its cause is a combination of the narratives Aurelius sees in Dorigen. Credit allows Aurelius to pay the clerk and keep his *trouthe*, thus enacting the values of Arveragus. It also allows him to avoid shaming all his *kynrede*, a con-cern parallel to Dorigen's worry over dishonor and death. Credit is for-giveness forecasted and defined, and forgiveness is how progression toward possibility is figured in the tale.

The clerk's decision to release Aurelius of his thousand pound debt is thus the fullest articulation of a new alternative. His claim to payment is sounder than Aurelius's, since, unlike the squire, the clerk is owed the money for performing actual work, his "craft" and "travaille" (1617).[26] But he also cites the *gentilesse* operating among the exchanges between Dorigen, Arveragus, and Aurelius: "Everich of yow dide gentilly til oother," he tells Aurelius (1608). The language of his release forecloses any further talk of debt:

> Sire, I releese thee thy thousand pound,
> As thou right now were cropen out of the ground,

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[26] Several critics have seen the clerk as nothing more than a second-rate conjurer who performs no real work. Chauncey Wood argues that the clerk only predicts high tide rather than conjure one and believes the clerk to be "markedly lacking in 'gentilesse'" ("Of Time and Tide in the 'Franklin's Tale,'" *Philological Quarterly* 45 [1966]: 691). Anthony E. Luengo sees the clerk's conjuring as mere "stage magic" ("Magic and Illusion in the Franklin's Tale," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 77 [1978]: 1). The description of the clerk's actions before the rocks and the fact of his travel from Orleans to the shore of Brittany, however, demonstrate that at the very least he has completed some sort of labor that warrants compensation.

> Ne nevere er now ne haddest knowen me.
> For, sire, I wol not taken a peny of thee
> For al my craft, ne noght for my travaille.
> Thou hast ypayed wel for my vitaille.
>
>   (1613–18)

His "releese" parallels Aurelius's release of Dorigen, but it also casts that release in rebirth imagery: Aurelius can function as if he were born again, "cropen out of the ground." Furthermore, the clerk asserts that Aurelius, by his actions, has in fact already repaid him. The clerk's response, then, completes the chain by linking the release of this last debt back to those of the other characters. In doing so, he listens to the stories of how each of the characters "dide gentilly til oother" and then dispels those stories to offer Aurelius a new and different alternative.

Despite the Franklin's *demande*, no one character is more "fre" than another simply because none of the characters can be "fre" on his or her own: it is only through the cumulative articulations of possibility that the kind of idealistic *gentilesse* the tale strives to represent can be voiced. This is, indeed, the best example of the liminal space of the tale being used to test out various narrative possibilities. What it ultimately demonstrates is that only through the interaction of the characters can this third possibility be conceived. While Dorigen finds herself in a liminal space between the rocks and the garden, Arveragus between private love and public reputation, Aurelius between "lust" and "grete gentillesse," and the Breton clerk between reality and illusion, no one of these characters actually moves through a Turner-like structuralist procession. Rather, it is through the discursive unit formed by the characters and their actions that Chaucer represents this conception. Akin in some respects to the political "affinity group" described by Paul Strohm and "associational forms" by David Wallace, the discursive unit illustrates at the level of narrative that no one character alone can function as an exemplum for virtuous behavior.[27] Similarly, the marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus is not meant to be a solitary exemplum to be emulated; it too exists as an element of that discursive unit. For Anne Middleton, the *Franklin's Tale* is a sort of "speculative anecdote" rather than an exemplum, and the marriage a "speculative instance" rather than a model for imitation. The tale thus encourages a comparative rather than absolutist

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[27] See Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 24–25, and Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), xiv–xv.

reading, one that rewards "practical ethical improvisation" rather than slavery to "heroic paradigms."[28] To be understood ethically through an aesthetic lens, the *Franklin's Tale* functions as a sort of liminal crucible which encourages readers to imagine rather than imitate.

"THIS WYDE WORLD": SHAPING THE WORLD OF THE TALE

The benefit of this imagination—and the means by which alternatives can be conjured up—is a sense of location derived from the testing-out of cultural narratives and paradigms. One can only imagine a third alternative when one is able to see one's self in relation to the surrounding social and cultural paradigms. In fact, alternatives imagined by the characters—variously articulated in the tale as aspects of forgiveness, both moral and monetary—display a sort of historicity, the sense of position in a larger landscape. Because historicity implies recognition of the world as a determinate and intelligible point in time, it also means being able to look back at that point and conceive moving beyond it. Historicity in the *Franklin's Tale* is not a list of topical references that locate the characters reacting to localized historical events, nor is it a mimetic representation referring to external events. Rather, it is a way of articulating the act of conceiving possibility within a cultural discourse. If the tale's presentation of a fully articulated third alternative depends upon the progressive dialogue between each subsequent pair of characters, so too is it shaped by a change in the Breton world itself. The tale articulates this change in the environment through textual impositions by the narrator that work to render the pagan world of Brittany potentially—though not actually—Christian.

In this type of articulation, the tale demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of formulating new alternatives while at the same time expressing their liberating potential. The historical limit pagans like those of the *Franklin's Tale* face is the lack of salvation: pagans are esteemed by Christian thinkers for their virtue, not for their spirituality, and writers like Dante and Langland must struggle to rescue these pagans from their closed world through the literary expression of those virtues. For

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[28] Middleton, "War by Other Means: Marriage and Chivalry in Chaucer," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Proceedings* 1 (1984): 130–31. Middleton links the *Franklin's Tale* to similar "speculative" tales of "a literary form newly prominent in the age of Chaucer; the type is well illustrated by the stories in Boccaccio's frame-tale structures. For nearly three hundred years such tales were to be the social currency of those who counsel rather than command."

Robert R. Edwards, it is precisely because of its nature as a site closed to salvation that the classical world becomes the perfect field for the investigation of governing social and philosophical ideas.[29] Moreover, as Minnis argues, Chaucer, in his own investigations and representations of people of pagan antiquity, deals with pagans as historical subjects; in the *Franklin's Tale*, the virtue of these pagans is shown to be "as universal and far-reaching as their culture is limited and circumscribed."[30] When cast against classical antiquity, a Christian sense of historicity, then, is always in part defined by the limited cosmos of the pagans that it opened up and replaced. The *Franklin's Tale* is infused with this kind of liberating historicity through the Christian symbolism imposed by the narrator. Its distribution does more than merely frame the progression of the characters in images of rebirth and renewal; it also shows the world of the tale to be changing along with the characters who inhabit it. It is through examining the dialectic between the changes of the characters and the world that we are able to understand fully how the tale exploits the liminal space it creates.

The historical setting of the world, imagined as it is, is pagan, but its pagan institutions and entities have been evacuated of their power to govern.[31] Aurelius's prayer in the temple of Apollo, for example, is a clear indication of this. As he asks Apollo "to synken every rok adoun" (1073), he carefully enunciates the pagan power structure that presides over the sea:

[29] Edwards, *Chaucer and Boccaccio: Antiquity and Modernity* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), 4. Edwards argues that "separated from Christian revelation, the classical world is contained in a secular history it cannot escape and a salvation history it can never significantly enter. It thus holds open an alternative realm of philosophical speculation and exploration about selfhood, experience, behavior, community, and institutions." The realm is also useful for "interrogating the nature of secular virtue, for examining desire, choice, and predicaments under the constraints of history" (4).

[30] Minnis, "From Medieval to Renaissance," 219. See also Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), 30.

[31] For discussions of the pagan characteristics of the world of the tale, see J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Scene of the Franklin's Tale Visited* (London: Chaucer Society, 1914), 17–37; Kathryn Hume, "The Pagan Setting of the *Franklin's Tale* and the Sources of Dorigen's Cosmology," *Studia Neophilologica* 44 (1972): 289–94; Minnis, "From Medieval to Renaissance"; and A. C. Spearing, "Classical Antiquity in Chaucer's Chivalric Romances," in *Chivalry, Knighthood, and War in the Middle Ages* (Sewanee, Tennessee: University of the South Press. 1999), 53–73. Lindsay Mann sees *gentilesse* as moving from "a purely secular, courtly inspiration . . . [to] a purely moral, religious one" ("'Gentilesse' and the Franklin's Tale," 20), and Gerhard Joseph argues that the Christian symbolism demonstrates the transformation of the secular grace of gentility into Christian grace ("The *Franklin's Tale*: Chaucer's Theodicy," *Chaucer Review* 1 [1966]: 20–32).

> Youre blissful suster, Lucina the sheene,
> That of the see is chief goddesse and queene
> (Though Neptunus have deitee in the see,
> Yet emperisse aboven hym is she).
> (1045–48)

Aurelius's description of the relationship between Lucina and Neptunus in some ways parallels the mutual sovereignty of Dorigen and Arveragus, as does his request to have the full moon match the velocity of the sun in order to maintain high tide for two years and hide the rocks for just as long (1065–68). His appeals to the very type of structure he is in fact setting out to disrupt do not indicate the presence of Apollo, but only call attention to the tensions that will play out in the liminal space of the tale. The only ears that Aurelius's prayers fall on are those of his brother whose sympathy for the young squire and "his penaunce" causes him to carry Aurelius out of the temple and put him to bed at home (1082).

A Christian God is not shown to govern the world either, at least not before the day of the clerk's illusion. The "Eterne God" (865) to whom Dorigen addresses her lament at the rocks and who fashioned "mankynde" after his "owene merk" (879–80) can be read to imply either the God of Genesis or classical ideas of creation. Furthermore, as W. Bryant Bachman demonstrates, Dorigen's complaint on the cliff is replete with Boethian elements and thus with the philosophical matrix Chaucer uses when his pagan characters contemplate universal questions.[32] Likewise, the garden to which Dorigen's friends escort her in order to end her "disconfort" is described liminally despite the use of biblical imagery (896). Second only in beauty to "the verray paradys" of Genesis (912) and to the site in which Aurelius later attempts to woo Dorigen, it never becomes the location for a fully developed temptation scene since Dorigen makes it clear that she wants nothing to do with him:

> By thilke God tha yaf me soule and lyf,
> Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf
> In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;
> I wyl been his to whom that I am knyt.
> (983–86)

The rocks and their apparently aberrant existence cause Dorigen to make her promise "in pley" (988), and even this "promise" seems sound

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[32] Bachman, "'To Maken Illusioun,'" 56–57.

at first: it is unlikely to assume that the rocks that caused her so much anguish can easily be removed by the likes of Aurelius.

On the day the clerk works his illusion, however, the tone describing the governing cosmic system of the world changes significantly. If the above examples demonstrate the coexistence of pagan and Christian systems, the narrator's description of the "colde, frosty seson of Decembre" (1244) emphasizes that liminality and simultaneously tips the balance toward Christianity:

> The bittre frostes, with the sleet and reyn,
> Destroyed hath the grene in every yerd.
> Janus sit by the fyr, with double berd,
> And drynketh of his bugle horn the wyn;
> Biforn hym stant brawen of the tusked swyn,
> And "Nowel" crieth every lusty man.
>
> (1250–55)

If Janus looking both backwards and forwards is to be read as a symbol for potential rebirth, then the Christmas imagery—Janus, the "bugle horn," the "tusked swyn," and the cry of "Nowel"—implied in this passage initiates that rebirth. Because Janus looks simultaneously to the past and to the future, the Christian symbolism in the tale works at a temporal level. Citing J. S. P. Tatlocks's calculations that date the clerk's illusion as occurring on January third and fourth, Russell A. Peck notes that Dorigen's dilemma occurs on January fifth and sixth, thus coinciding exactly with the celebration of the eve of the Epiphany and the celebrations of Christ's birth.[33] Because of this temporal link, the passage does more than merely imply rebirth: it suggests the imposition of a Christian time-frame onto the pagan world of the tale.

This change is ventriloquized by the narrator and the characters in their references to temporal markers. Until the Janus passage, lengths of time in the *Franklin's Tale* are given only in "twos": Arveragus dwells in England for "two yeer" (813); Aurelius loves Dorigen "best of any creature / Two yeer and moore" (939–40); he then lays "In languor and in torment furyus / Two yeer and moore" (1101–2); he asks Apollo to keep the tide high for "thise yeres two" (1068); his brother observes that the clerk's illusion need only "enduren a wowke or two" (1161); and in its last occurrence, Dorigen's "purposynge . . . that she wolde deye" lasts "a day or tweye" (1457–58). This repetition of duality articulates the lim-

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[33] Peck, "Sovereignty and the Two Worlds of the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 1 (1967): 270.

ited choices of the characters in terms of the limited temporality of the world. Thus, Arveragus's return "upon the thridde nyght" (1459) just after Dorigen's two-day-long "purposynge" over two options not only immediately precedes and foreshadows the unfolding of the narrative, but also opens up the temporal frame of the world. Moreover, when Aurelius negotiates his credit at the end of the tale and asks the clerk for "Two yeer or thre for to respiten me" (1582), he himself articulates the change in the world around him. Similarly, after meeting Dorigen in the busy city street either by "aventure or grace" (1508), Aurelius later assimilates the temporal change in the world into his own thoughts when he hopes that by explaining to the Breton clerk his inability to pay, he "may gete bettre grace" (1566).

The description of movement from pagan antiquity to Christian modernity is the figurative matrix Chaucer uses to show the world of the tale transforming along with the characters. The careful transformation of Brittany from one described in pagan terms to one described in Christian terms, however, does not result in the conversions of any of the characters, unlike the conclusion of Boccaccio's *Filocolo*. The historical restraint under which they operate as pagans prevents this contingency. The presentation of the transformation of the world, however, is a way of simulating the potential for salvation and thus of granting the tale, if not each of the characters individually, the sense of historicity required fully to conceive and articulate possibility. The subtle interaction between the changing characters, the changing world, and the movement of both toward this conception and articulation is realized by the tale's own focus on narrative transmission.

''AS YE HAN HERD BIFOORE'': NARRATIVES AND HISTORICITY

If the tale's function as a liminal space created to test out cultural paradigms requires an initial distance and discontinuity to separate it from the world of its readers, then the narratives and narrative exchanges embedded throughout the tale facilitate its entry into a kind of "reaggregation."[34] That moment of reaggregation comes not in the resto-

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[34] Several critics have seen the tale as a commentary on narrative. See Dominique Battles, "Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* and Boccaccio's *Filocolo* Reconsidered," *Chaucer Review* 34 (1999): 38–59; Sandra J. McEntire, "Illusions and Interpretation in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 31 (1996): 145–63; R. A. Shoaf, "The *Franklin's Tale*: Chaucer and Medusa," *Chaucer Review* 21 (1986): 274–90; Eaton, "Narrative Closure"; V. A. Kolve, "Rocky Shores and Pleasure Gardens: Poetry vs. Magic in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," in *Poetics: Theory and*

ration of the blissful marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus nor even in the clerk's forgiveness of Aurelius and his description of the squire as if he were one "'right now . . . cropen out of the ground'" (1614). A sense of historicity comes only through the interaction of the discursive unit of the characters and the liminality of the Breton world; thus, resolution only comes in the Franklin's final *demande*. Because it recalls the framed tradition of the story as well as the generic form of the Breton lay which traditionally includes a brief but self-reflexive epilogue,[35] the Franklin's question calls for a value judgment which cannot be offered without some consideration of the place of narratives in the tale. While the Canterbury pilgrims are asked to determine which out of Arveragus, Aurelius, and the Breton clerk "was the mooste fre" based on his actions in the tale, Chaucer's readers are asked not only to locate their own views among the various loci offered in the tale, but also to recognize that the self-conscious nature of the tale as a narrative construct is what facilitates that act of location.[36]

The *Franklin's Tale* itself is steeped in internal references to texts, stories, and tales. When he parts from Dorigen, Arveragus, "in al this care," sends her "letters hoom of his welfare" (837–38), and Aurelius voices his unrequited love for Dorigen in ways that demonstrate a keen awareness of generic distinctions, including "layes, / Songes, compleintes, roundels, [and] virelayes" (947–48). More significant, in a move no doubt inspired by Boccaccio, who in both Menedon's Story and *Decameron* 10.5 shows the wives recounting the events of the narrative to their husbands *in ordine*, from beginning to end, Chaucer strongly im-

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Practice in Medieval English Literature, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 165–95; and Linda Charnes, "'This Werk Unresonable': Narrative Frustration and Generic Redistribution in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 23 (1989): 301–15.

[35] Sir Orfeo's epilogue is one such example:

> Harpours in Bretaine after þan
> Herd hou þis mervaile bigan,
> & made herof a lay of gode likeing,
> & nempned it after þe king.
> Þat lay "Orfeo" is y-hote:
> Gode is þe lay, swete is þe note.
> Þus com Sir Orfeo out of his care:
> God graunt ous alle wele to fare! Amen!
> (597–604)

[36] The *demande* may even be more complicated. Edwards argues that Chaucer may have read a manuscript of the Love Questions that had "liberta" (freedom) in place of "liberalità" (generosity). See Edwards, "Source, Context, and Cultural Translation in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Modern Philology* 94 (1996): 141–62.

plies that the chain reaction of *gentilesse* depends on narrative transmission for its success.[37] Dorigen, after reciting the "stories" of pagan women that "beren witnesse" to her suffering (1367), goes to Arveragus and tells him "al as ye han herd bifore" (1465). Likewise, when the clerk inquires about the "cause" of the failure to secure Dorigen, Aurelius begins "his tale anon" and tells him "al, as ye han herd bifoore" (1592–93). These sub-narratives, which accelerate the tale to its happy resolution, take their cue from Chaucer's larger demonstration, that is, the Franklin's original invocation of the Breton lay. That narrative act, with its ability to create and hold up a distanced, Breton world as something to be understood aesthetically, ethically, and relatively, thus grants readers a sense of position and historicity. And it is through this layered narrative structure that the tale emphasizes and facilitates this sense.

Chaucer further enacts the linking of narrative with historicity within the plot of the tale itself by connecting the Breton clerk's illusion with the memory of Aurelius's brother and the interjections of the Franklin. Aurelius's brother, whose care and concern do more than any prayer to Apollo to ease his brother's suffering, weeps and wails "Til atte laste hym fil in remembraunce" of his days in Orleans where he and his colleagues voraciously searched for books in "every halke and every herne" (1117, 1121). The brother's brief nostalgic episode is refigured with greater intensity through the Breton clerk who, when meeting the brother,

> hym asked of felawes
> The whiche that he had knowe in the olde dawes,
> And he answered hym that they dede were,
> For which he weep ful ofte many a teere.
>
> (1179–82)

In addition to locating this memory in this imagined past, Aurelius's brother mentally locates it in a specific geographic space, "At Orliens in studie" (1124). Furthermore, the illusion that is the culmination of the brother's plan is itself a meticulous act of location. His procedures are not mystical or magical as Boccaccio's Tebano in Menedon's story or coolly professional as the necromancer in *Decameron* 10.5; the Breton

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[37] The gestures of compassion by Tarolfo and Ansaldo are completed by the wives' *in ordine* recitation to their husbands. In the *Filocolo*, the lady tells her husband "dal principio infino alla fine" [from beginning to end why she continued to be sad] (Edwards, "The Franklin's Tale," 230), and in the *Decameron*, "ordinatamente gli aperse ogni cosa" (879) [everything in the way it had happened] (ibid., 240).

clerk carefully works to locate stellar phenomena, and "Whan he hadde
founde his firste mansioun, / He knew the remenaunt by proporcioun"
(1285–86), and "thurgh his magik, for a wyke or tweye, / It semed that
alle the rokkes were aweye" (1295–96). If, as Lee Patterson suggests, as-
trological reckonings are merely additional ways for Chaucer to repre-
sent protagonists' sense of being trapped by history,[38] then the connec-
tion of the Breton clerk's illusion to narrative offers the opposite sense,
one of a historicity that engenders the ability to imagine alternatives.

This sense is emphasized and specifically linked to narrative ex-
change by two similar interruptions of the narrator. The Franklin inter-
jects briefly into the description of the clerk's "conclusioun," labeling
"swiche illusiouns and swiche meschaunces" as the devices of "hethen
folken . . . in thilke dayes" (1292–93). His interruption recalls the dis-
tancing work of his initial invocation of the Breton lay. Moreover, it
recalls a similar interruption in the description of Aurelius's brother's
memory of the book of *magyk natureel*. The book includes such "folye,"
he argues,

> As in our dayes is nat worth a flye—
> For hooly chirches feith in oure bileve
> Ne suffreth noon illusion us to greve.
>   (1131–34)

This interruption is bookended by the "remembraunce" of Aurelius's
brother. Recalling a specific book, the brother's despair at Aurelius's
condition immediately transforms into hope:

> And whan this book was in his remembraunce,
> Anon for joye his herte gan to daunce,
> And to himself he seyde pryvely:
> "My brother shal be warisshed hastily."
>   (1135–38)

The illusion that forms the structural center of the tale is thus informed
by the same memorial, textual, and invocative actions that created the
Franklin's Tale in the first place, and the self-conscious way in which
Chaucer presents the illusion—and the memory of the book that ulti-
mately triggers it—emphasizes the necessity of narrative in facilitating
the conceptual potential of historicity. Like the Franklin, whose text
"in remembraunce" creates the liminal space of the tale, the brother's

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[38] Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 219.

memory of a book brings about the illusion that will trigger the tale's movement out of that liminal space.

At its resolution, the *Franklin's Tale* does not become an exemplum of a perfect marriage, forgiveness, or even *gentilesse*; rather it offers an interpretation of the forces that shape the ability to imagine beyond exempla. In application—in the return to the objective, social, "real" world—Chaucer's project in the *Franklin's Tale* offers at the very least an articulation of how one can acclimate oneself within a specific political, cultural, or social landscape; at the most, it articulates how this can promote the betterment of that landscape. Furthermore, his project shows narrative to be at the heart of this acclimation, in the hearing of tales as well as in their telling. Through the Franklin, who began his tale by interrupting the Squire, Chaucer demonstrates that such an interruption—the creation of an imaginative space between precedent and possibility—is crucial for imagining the world in order to imagine beyond it.[39]

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