‘Ysworn… Withoute gilt:’
Lais of Illusion-Making Language in the Canterbury Tales

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Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales is, among other things, a compendium of genres. Among the pilgrims’ various tales we find many with French sources – romances, fabliaux, moral exempla, penitential materials, and, of course, Breton lais. Telling a version of the story of the damsel’s rash promise, the Franklin’s Tale is the only one to announce itself specifically as a Breton lai. In her husband’s absence, Dorigen promises her love to another man if he can remove all the rocks off the coast of Brittany, an act she believes to be impossible and one that she mentally connects with her husband’s safety.

While explicit, the Franklin’s Tale’s relation to the Breton lai remains much less clear than it might seem from the tale’s Prologue, where the Franklin foregrounds its genre and the literary history it invokes right from the start:

Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes
Of diverse aventure 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.¹

Despite the seemingly specific context the Franklin offers, the tale is, in the words of Claire Vial, an ‘excellent forgery.’² Scholars long ago established that its inheritances run toward Boccaccio’s Italian novelle (primarily in Il Filocolo and, more recently, the Decameron).³ The Franklin’s Tale relates to no known ‘Breton’, Anglo-Norman, or French source. When scholars have considered why the Franklin calls his tale a Breton lai, the results have devolved on the Franklin as a narrator and the performance he

¹ All quotations from the Canterbury Tales are taken from The Canterbury Tales, Complete, ed. Larry D. Benson, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2000, and are referenced by fragment and line number throughout; here, V.709-15.
³ The history of the development of the Breton lai is elusive. The first lais are Marie’s twelfth-century Anglo-Norman poems, which she says are translations of the old oral tales of ‘li Bretuns.’ No earlier version of the Breton tradition survives. After Marie, both French and Middle English ‘Breton’ lays were composed, some of which translate or retell Marie’s. The Franklin’s Tale relates to none of these sources. I consider the situation further in the paragraphs that follow. For a recent treatment of the Franklin’s Italian sources see John Finlayson, ‘Invention and Disjunction: Chaucer’s Rewriting of Boccaccio in the Franklin’s Tale’, English Studies, 89, 2008, p. 385-402.
stages through this historically distanced and idealistic tale. And the connections make
sense – the Franklin’s interests remain directed toward the aristocrats who share,
supposedly, his admiration for ‘gentilesse’, particularly as they are dramatized in his
interaction with the Squire, whose noble behavior he wishes his own son followed
more closely (V.682-694). Such conclusions make the Franklin’s invocation of the
Breton lai into an idiosyncracy, part of the Franklin’s characterization, perhaps one of
his excessive rhetorical flourishes. Despite claims of modesty and simplicity to ‘have
[him] excused of [his] rude speche’ (V.718), the Franklin’s florid style appears even in
the act of denying it:

Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede,
But swiche colours as growen in the mede,
Or elles swiche as men dye or peyne.
Colours of rethoryk been to me queynte (V.723-726).

So too his seemingly simple invocation of the Breton lai, which attempts to show an
awareness of a particular genre, perhaps out of fashion in France yet still popular in
England, but nothing we would characterize as the ‘rude speche’ he claims (V.719). In
fact, the Franklin’s Breton lai is about nothing so much as excessively polite and
powerfully compelling language. The Franklin is never quite doing what he seems – a
situation that has too often been read as irony rather than narrative sophistication.

While these considerations have surely moved us away from the fantasy of a real
French lai or Middle English redaction that might exist outside and beyond the text, I
would suggest less a turn away from the lai form so much as a look elsewhere in the
Canterbury Tales. Another story of magic makes an unspoken claim to the lai, without
specifically naming itself as such in the Franklin’s overt manner. The Wife of Bath
tells a story that shares with the Franklin’s a magical denouement as well as a concern
with the performance of ‘gentilesse’. Even more particularly, her narrative also
contains a prologue locating its origins in a form of the Breton past, ‘In th’olde days of
the Kyng Arthour’ (III.857). While Arthur signals to modern readers a distinctly
English identity, he was then a more ambiguously ‘Briton’ figure. Invoking the Celtic
origins connecting Britain and Brittany, or Great and Lesser Britain, the term ‘Briton’
here is closely affiliated with the ‘Breton’ sources under discussion.

4 Despite the fact that the Franklin’s Tale traces to Italian sources, Chaucer’s knowledge of the Breton lai
suggested to Laura Hibbard Loomis a familiarity with the Auchinleck Manuscript and its lays. See
5 Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury fully consider the Wife of Bath’s Tale a Breton lai for the affinities it
has to other Middle English examples of the genre. Their edition excludes both Franklin’s and Wife’s
Tales because of their wide availability elsewhere. See the preface to The Middle English Breton Lays, ed.
Rumple’s previous edition, The Breton Lays in Middle English (Detroit, Wayne State University Press,
1965), contains the Franklin’s Tale and offers a long discussion of its ironic relation to the lai tradition but
makes no mention of the Wife of Bath’s Tale whatsoever.
The Franklin distinguishes his Breton lai by physically locating his story in Brittany and on its coast, naming places ‘Armorik’ (V.729), ‘Pedmark’ (V.801), and ‘Kayruud’ (V.808) in a more emphatic manner than the French lais of Marie de France. Writing for a twelfth-century Norman court in England, Marie claims to translate and transcribe a set of Breton tales that were originally oral productions, often with musical accompaniment. Only two of her lais are securely set in Brittany. They are instead witnesses to ‘a lot of coming and going between France and Anglo-Norman England’, as Elizabeth Archibald shows, in the way nine of Marie’s lais also refer to locations specifically in Brittany itself. Rather, Marie’s lais are ‘Breton’ because they were transmitted by the Bretons and not because of where the events occurred or even originated. A Breton lai is a short romance that typically takes a view of love in some contradistinction to strictly Christian values and often features a magical object or component. As Kinoshita and McCracken put it in their Critical Companion, ‘The world of the Lais is resolutely secular’ (51). Investigating the use of terms ‘Bretun’ and ‘Bretayne’ in Marie and ‘Britoun’ and ‘Britaine’ in Chaucer and Sir Orfeo, Emily Yoder presents a ‘predominantly British, rather than Armorician’ [i.e. continental] origin of the ‘Breton’ lai, by showing that these terms do not refer to French Brittany but to the old (Welsh) musical poetry of Britain, Marie’s adopted land. The conflation of Britain and Brittany, Briton and Breton, beneath Yoder’s investigations is important because it not only throws into relief Chaucer’s rather spectacular attempt to authenticate the Franklin’s lai as a Breton original, it connects his tale more firmly to the similarly themed Wife of Bath’s. Obscured by their relation to each other as part of the so-called ‘marriage group’, and what they do with the ideas of mastery and sovereignty, the Wife’s and Franklin’s Tales may offer more in conversation about the lai form, both its expectations and the possibilities it offers for reimagining the terms of romance, at least as it was invoked in English in the late fourteenth century.

Often compared with Marie de France’s Lanval as a tale of a fairy bride who tests a mortal lover, the Wife’s story situates itself ‘In th’olde dayes of the King Arthour, / Of which that Britouns spoken greet honour’ (III.857-58), invoking the Breton lai in what seems its written Anglo-Norman form. But more important than any setting or tradition, the tale’s subject (as it is outlined by the Wife’s opening) makes its strongest

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6 Five of Marie’s lais are ‘en Bretayne’, either in Britain or Brittany. One, Chaitivel, is located specifically at Nantes, another, Laustic at St. Malo; both are in Northwest France.


claims on the lai as a tale ‘fulfild of fairye’, much like the landscape itself, where ‘The elf queene with hir joly compaignye / Daunced ful ofte in many a greene mede’ (III.860-61). This description augurs the eventual magical turn of the story, as its recreant knight (who is searching for an answer to the question of what women most desire in punishment for his rape of a maiden) encounters an inverted version of this elf queen in the knowledgeable yet unattractive old woman who magically appears before him just as he is about to give up on his quest and return to Arthur’s court:

It happed him to ryde
In al his care under a forest syde,
Wheras he sawgh upon a daunce go
Of ladies foure and twenty, and yet mo;
Toward the which daunce he drow ful yerne,
In hope that som wisdom shold he lerne.
But certainly, er he cam fully there,
Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where.
No creature sawgh he that bar lyf,
Save on the grene he sawgh sittynge a wyf—
A fouler wight ther may no man devyse (III.989-999).

As in the Wife’s opening description of the fairyland that has been blessed away by the Christian Friars, the ‘daunce’ of these feminine figures captures the knight’s attention. She mentions it three times in this one short passage, and it is what ‘drogh’ (drew) the knight to them and thus to the ‘fouler wight’ who inexplicably appears in their place. The beauty of these dancing figures seems a mere generic feature of the faerie tale form, but we see here the important shift (from beauty to ‘fouler wight’) to be magically inverted at the tale’s end. A vision of dancing maidens suddenly and inexplicably appears, catching the knight’s attention and perhaps his desire, only to be abruptly transformed into a repulsive old woman sitting on the green. What do these figurations have to do with each other? Seeking an answer to his quest, the knight encounters a double marvel, an attractive vision that proves to be more than he bargains for. Indeed, it proves to be the answer to his prayers in drastically disguised form. Magic may catch the knight unawares at the story’s end, but given this initial scene of shape-shifting before his ‘hope that som wisdom shold he lerne’, we ought to be unsurprised by the tale’s radical, magical transformations.

In both the Wife’s and Franklin’s stories, the magic that enables each narrative is carefully prepared for and focalized by an emphasis on language. The wife’s visual transformation from old woman to young beauty with the turn of a question is foreshadowed for in a number of scenes in which linguistic facility is prized – and nowhere more so than in the knight’s judgment before the queen at King Arthur’s court. Condemned to death, the knight becomes the queen’s pawn when Arthur ‘yaf’

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10 When Lanval encounters his fairy mistress during his exile from Arthur’s court, it is in direct response to the neglect and disdain he has received from it.
hym to the queene, al at hir wille, / To chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille’ (III. 897-898). But her power to choose life of death is turned back upon him via his ability to answer a different question. Emphasizing the linguistic nature of power at stake in the tale, the old woman promises him ‘the queen wol seye as I’ when she offers Guenevere ‘an aswere suffisaunt’ to her nearly unanswerable question: ‘What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren’ (III.1016; my emphasis; 910; 905). The Wife of Bath turns much of the truth about wives, women, and the ’wo that is in marriage’ (III.3) that her Prologue explained in cold economic terms into the knight’s conundrum and penitential quest. Echoing her own Prologue, the Wife confuses the knight with the answers he receives:

But he ne koude arryven in no coost
Wher as he myght fynde in this mateere
Two creatures accordynge in -feere.
Somme seyde wommen loven best richesse,
Somme seyde honour, somme seyde jolynesse,
Somme riche array, somme seyden lust abedde,
And oftentyme to be wydwe and wedde.
Somme seyde that our hertes been moost esed
Whan that we been yflatered and yplese.
[...]
And some seyen that we loven beste
For to be free and do right as us lest,
And that no man repreve us of oure vice,
But seye that we be wise and no thyng nyce.
For, be we never so vicious withinne
We wol be holden wise and elene of synne (III.922-942).

The difficulty of the question lies in the variable ways it can be answered, and that is because no two women agree about anything. The Wife uses this fickleness as well as the variety of things she knows about ’we women’ for her own purposes, and therein lies the nature of the knight’s punishment. He may be seeking an answer that does not exist in the singular ‘maugree [his] heed’ (III.887) – despite what he thinks or can discover about it – until the old woman takes the question in hand. Rather than knowing something unique and different from what the knight has already heard, she knows how to reframe that knowledge in terms that satisfy the queen’s demand. If the Queen’s feminine power lies in the articulation of the question, the old woman’s lies in a similar manipulation of terms that counters hers – and these are perhaps set in some contradistinction to the maiden’s protestations, ‘maugree hir heed’, in the opening of the story.11 The Wife offers her tale, among other things, as a linguistic drama in which one’s terms catch one out.

11 The gloss for this line, ‘against her will’, plays upon the thought and speech issuing from the maiden’s head (‘heed’), according to the MED, ‘the seat of mind’ and, as such, the will.
But this power of language not only saves the knight’s life, it must ultimately transform him into a better man. As many have recognized, the central scene of the old woman’s linguistic prowess comes through her ‘pillow lecture’ in which she shifts the very terms of the knight’s complaints about poverty, age, and social status to concepts of virtue, wisdom, and the spiritual lineage of ‘richesse’. We wonder if the queen’s punishment by confusion and anxiety is surmounted or merely replaced in the tale’s economy of suffering and delight by the hag’s punishment by marriage. Their wedding night amounts to a particular torment as she comically chides him for his standoffishness: ‘Is the the lawe of kyng Arthures hous? / Is every knyght of his so dangerous?’ (III.1089-1090). Punning on the lack of manhood shown in his bedroom manner, she asks what threat such a ‘dangerous’ knight can pose to his opponents.12 But her real purpose, as we know, is to put him under her own control rather than the queen’s. Making a bargain with the old woman, the Knight learns how to evade (or to satisfy) Guenevere’s punishing demand, only to fall under another woman’s jurisdiction and her analogous claims upon his body. The queen gives him a year and a day to find the answer to her question before he has to yield himself to her (‘And surettee wol I han, er that thou pace, / Thy body for to yelden in this place’ [III.911-912]); the hag threatens to take from him both more and less in wedlock, to which he woefully responds: ‘Taak al my good, and lat my body go’ (III.1061). Both women require him to yield his body in different ways in the contractual scenarios they design. This connection structurally links the two halves of the tale in each other’s image and words. Without full realization, the knight begins his quest anew after being freed by the queen, only to end by rendering another ‘answere suffisant’, this time in the form of his own action. His sufficient answer to the old woman’s question is sufficiency itself. He responds in such a way, literally, when he answers her demand: ‘For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me’ (III.1235; my emphasis). The repetition of ‘sufficient’ transformed into a verb pertaining to himself (‘suffices’, ‘is sufficient to’) makes the connection all the more explicit. One action repeats the other, as does the knight more affectively. In both instances he ‘siketh’ (sighs) in advance of rendering his response, ‘sorwefully’ before he gives his decision to ride out and try to answer the queen’s question (III.913), and ‘sore’ before he decides to let the hag choose her own appearance and behavior in marriage (III.1228).

Students often wonder as to what can really have happened to the knight in so short a time frame. Does he ‘learn’ from his experience or does he render his answer in complete confusion or frustration – as if he had finally given up? Not only do they miss the parallels in the scenes described above, but the hag’s pillow lecture also suggests a symbolic transformation that occurs in and through language. A long speech on the spiritual source of gentility (‘Crist wol we clayme of hym oure gentilesse’,

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III.1117) and the virtue of poverty (‘Glad poverté is an honest thyng, certeyn’, III.1183) leads her to the practical virtue of a wife who is ‘foul and old / Than drede you noght to been a cokewold’ (III.1213-1214), before she issues yet another life-
determining question:

‘Chese now’, quod she, ‘oon of thys thynges tweye:
To han me foul and old til that I deye,
And be to yow a trewe, humble wyf,
And nevere yow displese in al my lyf,
Or elles ye wol han me yong and fair,
And take youre aventure of the repair
That shal be to youre hous by cause of me,
Or in som oother place, may wel be.
Now chese yourselfen, wheither that yow liketh’ (III.1219-1227).

As with the narrator, so too with her characters. If the Wife of Bath’s practical wisdom
and shrewd economic knowledge give way to a surprising philosophic and orthodox reasoning in her tale, the knight magically changes as well, sounding much more like
the courtly knight of Arthur’s house he was supposed to be all along:

My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governaunce;
Cheeseth youreselwe which may be moost plesaunce
And moost honour to yow and me also.
I do no fors the wheither of the two,
For as yow liketh, it suiffiseth me (III.1230-1235).

Performing the answer that he gives and that she has otherwise taught him in the
course of the story, the knight is rewarded with what she knows he desires: ‘Cast up
the curtyn, looke how that it is’ (1249). There is little to convince skeptics of a ‘real’
change in the knight in such short order, but perhaps we ought to think more in terms
of a transformation back to what he used to be. The fact that he redeployes the old
woman’s language, ‘suffisant’ / ‘suffiseth’, suggests some intent on the Wife’s part to
represent a change of heart. Transforming the way one speaks is so centrally important
to the Wife’s story because the answer one gives and the way one speaks is crucial to
determining if one’s life is worth saving.13 Language is the realm of social relations,
not merely a representation of it. It would seem that the knight learns more in the short
span of time he spends with the old woman on their wedding night than the entire year
he spent searching for the answer to the queen’s question. And most importantly he
seems to have learned who he was.

13 We might also consider what the Wife says of her own husbands in the Prologue in these same terms.
She is quite outraged at the way some of them speak to her (and it is often what prompts her stereotypic
forms of retaliation): ‘Thou seist to me it is a greet mischief / To wedde a povre womman for costage’
(III.248-249; my emphasis). The section following (248-320) contains at least 14 occurrences of ‘thou
seist’ and ‘seisto’ before she concludes ‘Thou sholdest seye, “Wyf, go wher theee liste / Taak youre
disport; I wol at leve no talys. / I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alys”’.
Though often read within the debate on marriage and, therefore, focused on the arrangement between spouses in the story, the Franklin’s Tale too is obsessively concerned with speech, both the form in which things get said and the consequences of speaking in such a way. Naturally, Dorigen’s (in)famous words ‘in pleye’ are at the heart of the matter: the story’s fantastic plot and its manner of allowing us to ponder the vagaries of human speech and ‘entente’, reveal both the way her words work and the way they escape her control. Her challenge to Aurelius (the squire who pursues her) to ‘remoeve alle the rokkes stoon by stoon’ (V.993) has registered both as taunting provocation and courtly deferral, affecting the way many readers have considered Dorigen’s status in the tale.\textsuperscript{14} An adamant refusal that also attempts to soften the force of her more abruptly worded blow, this hyperbolic offer means to negate any possibility of occurrence, as she says explicitly: ‘For wel I woot that it shal never bityte’ (V.1001). But it also speaks beyond her intention as ‘an impossible’ (V.1009) to Dorigen’s obsessive concerns and deepest desire for a clean coast and the speedy return of her husband.\textsuperscript{15} The nature of Dorigen’s words has been the subject of much critical debate in which varying contexts place more and less weight on her culpability and callousness in the situation. But the Franklin’s Tale itself, and the ‘Breton lai’ context Chaucer invokes, perhaps suggests the most important framework for her words. Couched in a tale acutely aware of and careful about the ways its figures speak, Dorigen’s doubled words figure not so much some kind of sin or constraint as a kind of ‘magyk naturel’ much like that which the Clerk of Orleans will perform in order to make the rocks disappear – an illusion-making that is associated with the images provoked by words, books, and stories. Given the situation of the lais as originally oral performances set to music, as well as tales ‘redden […] for plesaunce’ (V.714), as the Franklin himself emphasizes in his Prologue, this natural magic operates as a figure of the Breton lai itself – a powerful literary form from the past that itself captures as it manipulates the ‘magical’ power of words. The Franklin’s inheritance from and attraction to the Breton lai appears in the tale as a conflation of illusion and reading; speaking, seeing, and fantasy, not as any reference to a particular story or plot.

From its very beginning, the Franklin’s Tale has set about trying to construct a guiltless narrative, a tale of accidental utterances and unintended effects, ‘ysworn […] withoute gilt’ (V.1038-1039), of which the damsel’s rash promise is but one spectacular example. In his description of the courtly and idealized marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus, the Franklin attends to the ways they speak, the language of

\textsuperscript{14}Susan Crane discusses Dorigen’s answer to Aurelius’ declaration and the way in which culture and genre script the response she is allowed to offer in ‘courtly discourses that do not admit a language of refusal’ (65) in Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 61-66.

courtly love in which they construct their marriage vows: ‘He swoor hire as a knyght / That evere in al his lyf, day ne nyght, / Ne sholde upon hym tke no maistrie […]’ Save that the name of soveraynetee, / That wolde he have for shame of his degree’ (V.745-751). In this courtly contract, private action and public ‘name’ seem at odds because they do not reflect the hierarchy typical of the social world these figures inhabit. Both their union and the general principles behind it that the Franklin addresses are centrally concerned with speech – a powerful force difficult to control. The virtues of patience and the admonition against ‘maistrie’ that he urges are bolstered by a recognition of the fallibility of human utterances: ‘For in this world, certein, ther no wight is / That he ne dooth or seith somtyme amys’ (V.779-780).

As in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the emphasis on language lends clarity and complexity to the Franklin’s story. For one thing, it makes it difficult to lay blame for any of the story’s events – any of which might be considered a misstep or mistake – upon the figures in the story. Aurelius, for example, is introduced supremely carefully and so is his fateful meeting with Dorigen, as if the Franklin were afraid of misspeaking himself. Indeed, we have already seen him open the tale with an exaggerated performance of rhetorical modesty and concern for his own language. When Arveragus leaves to pursue knightly honor in England, Dorigen is brought to a garden party by her friends (who have already made the mistake of trying to distract her from her grief with long walks by the coast, only to have her fixate on the black rocks below) in an effort to save her from her ‘derke fantasye’ (V.844), an obsession with the danger posed by the rocks that she erects as the impediment to her husband’s safe return. Even there she ‘made alwey hir compleint and hir moone’ (V.920), refusing to dance with her companions. Her solitude leaves her open to the approach of squire Aurelius, but even this event is coded by the Franklin’s careful description as perfectly fitting and polite.

The terms of his condition as love-struck are important (‘withouten coppe he drank al his penaunce’, V.942; my emphasis). The sacramental terms describing the way Aurelius dare not tell Dorigen of his suffering catch our attention in this pagan story. Only to himself does he ever make such complaint, turning it into poetry and song: ‘Of swich matere made he manye layes, / Songses, compleintes, roundels, virelayes, / How that he dorste nat his sorwe telle’ (III.944-949). If lays and songs are about feelings that one dares not speak, then the Franklin’s Tale works analogously as it tries to conceal and exalt the courtly marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus, as well as to cover and expose the conflicting desires at the heart of their situation. At this chance meeting they fall into conversation naturally and perhaps even by necessity: ‘By cause that he was hire neighebour, / And was a man of worshipe and honour / And hadde yknowen hym of tyme yoore / They fille in speche’ (V.961-64). The Franklin is careful to defend their propriety. And when Aurelius blurs out his feelings, as a mere

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16 Here we see the Franklin making explicit his story’s relation to the Clerk’s and Merchant’s *Tales* from fragment IV when he quotes the Merchant directly and removes its ironic context: ‘Who koude telle, but he had wedded be, / The joye, the ese, and the prosperitee / That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf?’ (V.803-805).
consequence of trying to assuage her grief for her absent husband, ‘unwitting of this Dorigen at al’ (V.936), she is utterly surprised.

As if expecting some audience resistance to Dorigen’s attendance at the garden party as well as her fall into conversation with Aurelius, the Franklin carefully constructs a context in which their meeting is both accidental and appropriate. Neither intends to say the things they wind up saying to the other. Dorigen’s complaints had been directed to the creator of the black rocks – what might be considered the talismanic object of this faux Breton lai – in an obsessive meditation on the danger they present – ‘a foul confusioun of werk’ fostering neither ‘man, ne bryd, ne beest’ (V.869-870). Unable to give particular examples, she is certain they have slain ‘An hundred thousand bodies of mankynde’ (V.877). Her mind is clearly multiplying dangers. Aurelius’ suffering is muffled and suppressed, and the way he blurts out his devotion makes for a most unexpected turn:

They fille in speche; and forth, moore and moore,
Unto his purpos drough Aurelius,
And whan he saugh his tyme, he seyde thus (V.963-965).

Aurelius’ declaration to Dorigen is not planned; his ‘purpose’ not part of some scheme. The emphasis, I believe, ought to fall on chance – they ‘fell’ in speech – where the desire he so assiduously works to hide ‘drough’ (drew) Aurelius (similar to the knight in the Wife of Bath’s story who is drawn to the dancing ladies). Both verbs compel him by the chance opportunity they afford. ‘Fell’ and ‘drough’ are actions upon Aurelius’ body over which he has little control. Another force, of course his own desire, acts upon him – not his own will but something other – ‘Love’ – compels his actions. Even his words to her make his revelation of love a secondary consideration of her feelings for her husband. He states:

So that I wiste it myghte youre herte glade,
I wolde that day that youre Arveragus
Wente over the see, that I, Aurelius,
Hadde wente ther never I sholde have come agayn
For wel I woot my servyce is in veyn (V.968-972).

From the very beginning (and recognized in this declaration itself) Aurelius has followed in the steps of Arveragus. Here he places himself hypothetically in Arveragus’ distanced position ‘over the see.’ But Arveragus has been his pursuit all along, both as a squire aspiring to knighthood and as a courtly lover. Arveragus provides the model for both of these occupations: by travelling over the sea to seek honor and by his initial passive pursuit of Dorigen in the opening lines of the tale. Aurelius is described as Dorigen’s secret admirer in terms (‘penance’) that have
offered readers much to discuss in this pagan story, but they most importantly repeat the courtly love gestures of Arveragus from the tale’s opening:

This lusty squier, servant to Venus,
Which that ycleped was Aurelius,
Hadde loved hire best of any creature
Two yeer and moore, as was his aventure,
But nevere dorste he tellen hire his grevaunce.
Withouten coppe he drank al his penaunce (V.937-942).

Compare Arveragus’ courtship of Dorigen:

Wel unnethes dorste this knyght, for drede,
Telle hire his wo, his peyne and his distresse.
But atte laste she, for his worthynesse,
And namely for his meke obeysaunce,
Hath swich a pitee caught of his penaunce
That pryvely she fil o his accord
To take hym for hir housbonde and hir lord (V.736-742).

The pains Aurelius suffers, his infamous ‘penaunce’, is exactly like the ‘penuance’ suffered by Arveragus that moves Dorigen to pity and to marriage. This collocation of terms provokes us to see Aurelius already in imitation of Arveragus from the start, where it naturalizes Aurelius’s claims on Dorigen’s affections and possibly provides the context in which Dorigen must give a suitor an impossible challenge in order to ‘answer’ his devotion. Dorigen’s words ‘in pleye’ perhaps say ‘no’ to Aurelius in ways her more simple and direct refusal cannot in a context of courtly admiration, as Susan Crane has argued.

The Franklin’s concern for the way matters are stated, both his own and his fictional figures’, continues beyond this crucial scene. To preserve Aurelius’ innocence the Franklin carefully orchestrates the circumstances by which he seeks the help of a clerk of Orleans whose ‘magic naturel’ brings about the rocks’ disappearance and thus the tale’s crisis. Aurelius fully understands the intent of Dorigen’s playful refusal. ‘Madam […] this were an impossible / Thanne moot I dye of sodeyn deth horrible’ (V.1009-1010). And he goes off to suffer alone. Once again the Franklin carefully attends to the way he speaks and the form of his complaint. Aurelius may pray to the gods for precisely the kind of astrological and meteorological phenomenon the Clerk of Orleans produces with his books, but he does so unknowingly: ‘in his ravynge [he] seyd his orisoun / Ne wiste he what he spak, but thus he seyde […]’ (V.1026-1028), making a


18 S. Crane, *op. cit.*
predictive prayer for the high tide that explains in advance what the magician will later research in his ‘tables Tolletanes’ (V.1273). Much like Dorigen’s own words ‘in pley’, Aurelius’ raving madness ‘knows’ the answer to his prayers.

In a remarkable shift from the attention to language and ‘seying’, the Franklin turns to the visual illusion made possible by the clerk-magician’s work. And he once again turns to the faerie-like dancing of the Wife’s Breton lai that replicates the environment in which Aurelius spoke to Dorigen, as he conjures a vision that convinces the squire to hire him: ‘And yet removed they never out of the house / Whil they saugh all this sighte merveiullous, / But in his studie, ther as his bookes be, / They seten stille, and no wight but they thre’ (V.1205-1209). The emphasis on his study and the books found within it is repeated only seven lines later by the magician himself. Offering Aurelius and his brother a vision of the noble enjoyments the squire seeks, the Clerk’s magical ‘showing’ knows the genre of Aurelius’ desire:

He shewed hym, er he wente to sooper,  
Forestes, parkes ful of wilde deer,  
Ther saugh he hertes with hir hornes hye,  
The gretteste that evere were seyn with ye.  
He saughe of hem an honderd slayn with houndes,  
And somme with arwes blede of bittre woundes.  
He saugh, whan voyded were thise wilde deer,  
This fauconers upon a fair ryver,  
That with hir haukes han the heron slayn.  
Tho saugh he knyghtes justyng in a playn;  
And after this he dide hym swich plesaunce  
That he hym shewed his lady on a daunce,  
On which hymself he daunced, as hym thoughte (V.1189-1202).

Hunting, hawking, jousting, dancing; the images come from a courtly romance tradition where the aggressive passions of love are channeled into the noble pursuit of the h(e)art. But the play of words, hart / heart, makes the real source and goal of this violent and bloody pursuit clear. Little has been written on the magical vision the clerk shows to Aurelius and his brother. An extravagant display of death (‘an honderd slayn;’ ‘with arwes blede’) is refined as the vision progresses to the mock-conflict of the joust and then the co-ordinated movements of the dance, where Aurelius sees himself, opposite his lady, ‘as hym thoughte.’ This vision of the dancing lady the magician offers is different from the deceptive dancing faerie company of the Wife of Bath’s story, but it signals the same fantasy of desire’s fulfillment and its magical satisfaction. The Wife’s knight approaches the ladies in hopes of an answer to his quest: ‘he drow ful yerne, / In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne’ (III.993-994), only to have the vision vanish into thin air. As we have noted earlier, the ladies’ disappearance and replacement by the old woman prefigures the magical transformations at the tale’s end. Similarly, the dancing woman in the Franklin’s lai also figures the magical conclusion to Aurelius’ problem (or so he is led to think). The
vision tells us what Aurelius wants: to enjoy romance, romance pastimes, and the attention of his lady. But it also tells us more – these romance pastimes are aristocratic pursuits ever more sublimating the violence and aggression lying at their core. The Clerk’s magic shows Aurelius a vision of his desire, suggests he can make that desire appear, and perhaps exposes the nature of that desire in ways that we have not yet recognized.

Both the Wife’s and the Franklin’s illusions cannot be explained, and that is what makes them effective transmitters in their Breton lais. The visual spectacle they offer (both times, significantly, dancing women) holds out the fantasy of one’s desire. The knight sees the ladies dancing – ‘the elf-queene, with hir joly companigne’ and their sight triggers a ‘hope’ for the answer to save his life. Aurelius sees what he thinks is his own lady dancing and envisions himself as her partner ‘as him thoughte.’ Not only are the illusions similar in Chaucer’s two lais, both magically disappear once one gets too close. The knight loses sight of the dance ‘er he can fully there’ (III.995). In the Franklin’s Tale, the magician himself famously ends the fantasy with a clap of his hands:

And when this maister that this magyk wroughte
Saugh it was tyme, he clapte his handes two,
And farewel! Al oure revel was ago.
And yet remoeved they nevere out of the hous,
Whil they saugh al this sighte merveillous,
But in his studie, ther as his bookes be (V.1202-1207).

The parallel scenes are significant for the way they suspend everyday logic and engage the knight / Aurelius in the spectacle of their desire. Little wonder they are so willing to pay whatever is demanded. The old woman exacts the knight’s rash promise in words that might as well come from the Franklin’s Tale: ‘Plight me thy trouthe […]’ The nexte thyng that I requere thee’ (III.1009-10). Aurelius is even more emphatic in his acceptance of the clerk’s exorbitant fee: ‘Fy on a thousand pound!’ (V.1227). Confronted with desire in such a visceral way, neither man can make a smart decision. These illusions are less about what the seer sees – indeed they see the same thing – and far more about the unspoken psychic associations the images ignite.

Has the magician produced a vision or arrested Aurelius with the illustrations in one of his study’s many books? Such a rationalist question perhaps resists the power of the clerk’s magic associated with his books if not explained by them in this way. In a shift to the textual, his books contain his power, and by consulting them and their ‘tables’ he makes his complex calculations so that ‘for a wyke or tweye, / It semed that alle the rokkes were aweye’ (V.1295-1296). The Franklin understands even less than we do how such calculations effect this change, and he attributes much to what ‘hethen folk useden in thilke dayes’ (V.1293) to make the story work. The Franklin, in other words, makes an illusion of this illusion by the descriptive language he uses, always, of course, apologizing for what he really does not understand: ‘I ne kan no termes of
astrologye’ (V.1266). His long description of the ‘apparene or jogelerye’ (V.1265) of this clerk’s calculations details the things he finds in these books: ‘rootes’, ‘geeris’, ‘centirs and his argumentz’, ‘proporciouneles convenientz’, and ‘equacions in every thyng’, ‘ful wel how fer Alnath was shove, / Fro the heed of fixe Aries’, ‘his firste mansioun’ and the ‘remenaunt by proporcioun.’ But these terms make far less sense than mythographic creation of the impossibly high tide by the opposition of Lucina (the moon) and Apollo (the sun) in Leo, dreamed by Aurelius in his madness (1057-1058). Rather than displacing language fully with images as in Aurelius’ dream, the books highlighted here return us to the verbal because we cannot picture anything of the clerk’s confusion of calculating terms.

Analogously, the astonishing ‘monstre or merveille’ – of the clean Breton coast – is one that Dorigen never sees but merely hears about when Aurelius confronts her (V.1306-1310). In a relay of storytelling, in which events and discussions we have just witnessed must be told another person, the Franklin’s Tale turns over its magical events once again ‘as ye han herd bifore’ (V.1593). The latter part of the tale forms a set of retellings that prompt new action, and return us to the realm of powerful, socially significant, magic-producing words. Dorigen tells Arveragus, first of her promise in the garden and next (after he sends her off to the squire, her ‘trouthe for to holde’ V.1513) of Aurelius’ forgiveness of any debt. Aurelius then repeats the entire story once more to the Clerk, who feelingly forgives Aurelius his fee.

These acts of generosity have been questioned, as each may forgive something that was never rightly earned or possessed in the first place. But the problems of the Franklin’s Tale as well as their solutions are squarely located in the language the Franklin has foregrounded from the very start. Arveragus epitomizes that power with his assurance that Dorigen should hold to her word, even if it means doing something that would dishonor him. And it is such adherence to her promise that moves Aurelius: ‘in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe’ (V.1520). Storytelling and its magical effects – the circuit of generosity that moves every class, from knight to squire to clerk – transforms the figures in the story into equals before the Franklin’s closing question: ‘which was the mooste fre, as thinketh yow’ (V.1622). If the Breton lai (or its forgery or mere invocation) allows the Franklin and the Wife to make magic in their tales, it is a power evoked in terms of human speech, the drive of desire and fantasy, and imaginative creation. And that is a power central to the tale-telling competition of the Canterbury Tales in more than fictional terms.

19 On the tale’s textuality and artifice’s illusion and truth, see Sandra McEntire, ‘Illusions and Interpretation in the Franklin’s Tale’, Chaucer Review, 31, 1996, p. 145-163, in which she comments on the invisibility of the final ‘marvel’, which is really ‘nothing more than wordplay’ (p. 153). Pitcher comments on the ‘astonishment’ (turning to stone) that precludes Dorigen’s examination of the coastline (J. Pitcher, op. cit., p. 72 ff).
20 Derek Pearsall nicely summarizes the way no one deserves or earns anything they give up at the end of the tale; The Canterbury Tales, 1985; New York, Routledge, 1994, p. 148.