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George Eliot's treatment and development of the feminine character in her novels

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Thesis

THE BEHAVIOR OF THE WOMEN IN THE MARRIAGE GROUP OF
GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES.

by

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Chapter 1

Introduction

At the Tabard Inn in London there gathered a group of people who were planning to make a pilgrimage to Canterbury. These men and women came from all classes of society and occupations, representing a fair cross section of the social life of England at this time. Such pilgrimages to religious shrines were common in England during the life of Geoffrey Chaucer. The shrine to which this group was journeying, that of Thomas à Beckett, was located in Kent, a section well known to Chaucer. Thus, Chaucer has assembled his characters for The Canterbury Tales in a natural setting. It is not certain that this work of Chaucer was a true pilgrimage or a composite of several pilgrimages about which he knew. It is even probable that it was a work of the imagination.

On the evening before the pilgrimage took place a plan was devised whereby each pilgrim would tell two tales on the way out and two more on the return journey for the entertainment of the travelers. As governor of the group the innkeeper, Harry Bailey, was chosen. Although the plan was never completed Chaucer has given us the tales of many of the pilgrims.
With a gathering of men and women it was a natural reaction that some stories would discuss marriage. There was such a group of tales which were definitely linked together by a dominant thought. This dominant thought discussed the question -- in whom did the sovereignty in the marriage state rest? Professor Kittredge has designated these tales as "The Marriage Group." He felt Chaucer consciously intended to treat a series on marriage. Whether Chaucer, consciously or otherwise, wrote on the marriage state, this group has the single theme of dominance in marriage. Starting with the Wife of Bath's Prologue and her Tale in Fragment D and continuing through seven tales to the Franklin's Tale in Fragment F we have four main tales, each defending a different phase of sovereignty in the marriage state. The remaining three tales will not be discussed because we may dismiss two, the Friar's and the Summoner's Tales, as interruptions to the topic, and the third, the Squire's Tale, is unfinished.

There are three possible phases of the question of sovereignty in the marriage state which are presented:

1. Sovereignty in the hands of the woman as seen in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale where she openly declares and tries to prove sovereignty is definitely the woman's prerogative.
2. Sovereignty in the hands of the man as the Clerk cites it in the story of the patient and cruelly tested Griselda.

3. Sovereignty as a partnership as the Franklin outlines in his tale of Arviragus and Dorigen.

In addition, marriage between old age and youth, January and May, is analyzed in the Merchant's Tale.

I intended to show that Chaucer, a keen observer of human nature, has chosen typical characters to present the above theories. It is assumed Chaucer brought together people with whom he was associated. This does not mean, necessarily, that he had in mind a definite living person as a model for each character but rather that he assembled abstract qualities of a type and then fitted these qualities to a certain pilgrim in his tales. The treatment will consist of the behavior of the women toward marriage in the four tales of this "Marriage Group." The analysis of each tale will deal with:

1. The narrator's character.
2. The character of the principal of the tale.
3. The relation of such behavior to human life.

Chaucer's interest in human nature has made him treat love from all possible angles. His outstanding qualities as a writer, namely, his sense of humor, his tolerance, and his
clarity, have permitted him to handle this subject of the behavior of women toward sovereignty in the marriage state with an open mind. Definitely Chaucer knew life, and even now six hundred years later we see these abstract qualities of Chaucer's typical characters displayed in the men and women of today. Chaucer's wisdom made him a philosopher of marriage.
Chapter 2

WOMAN'S SOVEREIGNTY

"A good Wif was ther of biside Bathe,
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
In felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe.
Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce,
For she koude of that art the olde daunce." 1

The fourteenth century marked the change which was taking place in the world from the old thoughts and ideas to more modern trends. Uneven distribution of wealth coupled with personal extravagance and worldly spirit caused unrest and resulted in the peasant revolt. The common people rose up against the unlawful and unfair treatment accorded them by the upper class.

One phase of the change noticed at this period concerned the life of the women. From antiquity man had dominated women. The middle ages began the time whereby woman has taken her rightful place in the universe. The Wife of Bath, Dame Alice, was typical of this change. She represented

the common or low country folk and trade in Chaucer's scheme of the Canterbury Tales. When called upon for her contribution to the Canterbury plan she was ready. She started the controversy of supremacy in the marriage state. Decisively she stated that woman should dominate in marriage.

"Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
To speke of wo that is in marriage;" 1

With her weapon of experience she started her discourse and boldly narrated the events of her life with her five husbands. Self-confidence and self-importance created through her own efforts in life added the assurance which permitted her to speak openly. She rejoiced in the fact that she had gained supremacy over five husbands by bullying and brow-beating,

"For, God it woot, I chidde hem spitously." 2

She showed, however, a momentary weakness when she admitted she respected but one of her husbands, the one who had beaten her and who had given sparingly of his love, but reverted to her point when she proved she was victorious in conquering even this one,


2 Ibid., Line 223.
"He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
   To han the governance of hous and lond," 1

Her prologue was a confession of her success at supremacy. At the same time it was an organized program of reform for woman to gain sovereignty because only when woman has her own way and man is obedient can marriage be happy. Her four point plan was simple -- get everything, nag continually, pretend injured pride, and follow your own inclinations. Her arguments were fortified with shrewdness and wit. She did not hesitate to interpret the Bible to her own satisfaction,

"God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse,
   And everich hath of God a propre yifte,
   Som this, som that, as hym liketh shifte." 2

It was true that her speech was coarse and violent, but she was not lacking in earnestness and courage. Much common sense was in her lengthy harangue,

"They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;
   Me neded nat do lenger diligence
   To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence." 3

Whereas we may be amused with this interesting character and her views on sovereignty in the marriage state, ethically we

1 Robinson, F. N. THE COMPLETE WORKS OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE
   Lines 813 and 814.

2 Ibid., Lines 102 to 104.

3 Ibid., Lines 204 to 206.
can not countenance the methods she recommended for the supremacy —to conquer by fair or foul means, to use any method that worked to gain the point.

An original and unique person created by Chaucer, the Wife of Bath was one of the author's most outstanding characters. Vivid, alert, and accustomed to traveling, she made an amusing and talkative companion. Dame Alice was a red-faced, big, and good-looking woman, who ambled along on her mount. She wore a kerchief under her broad hat, scarlet hose, new shoes, and spurs. Her generosity and charity were contingent on the fact that she must contribute first. She was a capable woman and a good weaver.

The Wife of Bath told her tale of the loathly lady to prove her views on sovereignty in the marriage state which she had so cleverly and clearly pronounced,

"That it is fair to have a wyf in pees.  
On of us two moste bowen, doutelees;  
And sith a man is moore resonable  
Then womman is, ye moste been suffrable." 1

and

"Whoso that first to mille comth, first grynt;  
I pleyned first, so wasoure werre ystytnt.  
They were ful glade to excuse hem blyve  
Of thyng of which they nevere agilte hir lyve." 2


2 Ibid., Lines 389 to 392.
The tale was a familiar one belonging to the Arthurian cycle. A bachelor knight returning from hunting met a maiden whom he wronged. Popular mandate demanded the knight be put to death. The queen pleaded his cause to the king and succeeded in having the knight placed in her care. She proposed under pain of death that he tell her what women most desire, and granted him one year to find the answer. In his year's roaming he failed to find the single correct answer. Returning to the queen as he had promised, he met the loathly lady who volunteered to help him if he granted her request. The knight agreed and returned with the hag to the queen's court where before the assembled ladies he stated that the thing women most desire was sovereignty,

"Wommen desiren have sovereignty
As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
And for to been in maistrie hym above.
This is youre mooste desir," 1

All agreed that this was the correct answer. As the knight was freed the loathly lady reminded him of his promise and requested the knight to marry her,

"Bifore the court thanne preye I thee, sir knyght,
... that thou me take unto thy wyf;
For wel thou woost that I have kept thy lyf." 2

2 Ibid., Lines 1054 to 1056.
Astounded the knight protested in vain and the marriage was performed. The hag asked the cause of her husband's distress and found it was her loathsomeness, age, and poverty. She delivered a lecture on these points, showing gentility comes from God alone and not from ancestors, for "he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis," ¹ She maintained that God lived in poverty; therefore it could not be vile. It was the eye glass in which to see one's self and friends. Lastly, her age demanded favor. She now gave the knight his choice between having her foul, old, and true or having her young, fair, and unfaithful. The knight left the decision for his wife to make saying he would abide by her choice, and thus gave her mastery. Sealing the bargain with a kiss the knight found he released the spell upon the old hag and his wife was young and fair. Her promise to be both good and faithful assured them of a happy life.

The coarseness and vulgarity of the Wife of Bath's character were lacking in the character of the loathly lady. The tale expertly defended the Wife's contention that woman should be the dominating influence in the marriage state and

even promoted her theory that women should grasp the authority in any way possible. The hag who had her freedom and release at stake was much more gentle in her method. Forward in her purpose she displayed a determination worthy of the Wife of Bath in speaking up at the knight’s grant of freedom by the queen for fulfilling his assignment of finding what women most desire. The loathly lady, as befitted her real self, displayed delicacy and grace,

"What is my gilt? For Goddes love, tel me it.
And it shall be amended, if I may." 1

Her arguments for poverty, age, and gentility were profound and weighty. No objection to her sincerity could be raised. Her success in gaining the sovereignty was delightfully welcome and her final promise of faithfulness left the reader with a keen sense of satisfaction.

Many years have elapsed since Chaucer introduced us to the Wife of Bath. Many years had elapsed before Chaucer’s unique character was brought to life. During all the years before and after Chaucer’s interpretation of woman as seen in Dame Alice there have been “Wives of Bath.” Chaucer centered in the Wife of Bath all the bitterness and sarcasm

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of woman and marriage of the centuries and he made her react like an exhibitionist who boastfully flaunted her success,

"And thus of o thyng I avsunte me,
Atte ende I hadde the bettre in ech degree,
By sleighte, or force, or by som maner thyng,
As by continueel murmur or grucchyng." 1

Such behavior will always be part of human nature. That "it takes all kinds to make up the universe" is not enough to dismiss the subject. Each generation has seen the unscrupulous, unprincipled women grasp for her selfish desires, not the least of which is to get and dominate a man. There is nothing new even in the method. The Wife of Bath's formula--to use any available means which will work--is the code even today.

The age of Chaucer was much like our own age in that restlessness was prevalent. Uprisings were common. The poor demanded reforms. Labor defied authorized leaders. Just so is our own era. Now, too, we have the woman seeking dominance not only in marriage, but in general. The Wife of Bath lived and enjoyed life by her wit. That she was equipped to live a normal, profitable life we know because Chaucer had told us

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she was a good weaver,

"Of clooth-makyng she hadde swich an haunt,  
    She passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt." 1

That she had preferred to grasp everything she told us herself in her formula for gaining supremacy,

"Wynne whoso may, for al is for to selle." 2

and

"I broghte it so aboute by my wit  
    That they moste yeve it up, as for the beste,  
    Or elles hadde we nevere been in reste." 3

Her behavior, then, we must concede, followed the pattern we so often see today where woman, by selfish means or foul, expends her whole effort to be supreme.

The Wife of Bath revealed her personality best by her words and actions. Throughout her tale, however, we sensed her spirit of restlessness. We detected a sense of unhappiness gleaned from her garrulity. She lacked satisfaction even in her victory. She told us she did not wish to know her vices,


3 Ibid., Lines 426 to 428.
"Ne I wolde nat of hym corrected be.  
I hate hym that my vices telleth me," 1

Is all this not typical of human nature and behavior? Success based on a faulty foundation is no success at all. Her chief faults were her lack of morals and ideals and her sport of delight in making a fool of man, her fellow-being. The delicacy and gentleness of the hag in the tale she used to illustrate her point was more in keeping with a sense of fellowship. Her arguments were sound and well worth noting.

The Wife of Bath was right when she said woman should hold sovereignty in the marriage state but she was wrong in her interpretation of sovereignty. Woman's place is to guide and lead through the marriage state not to boss and dominate. She should gain her authority by her noble gentility, her wise understanding, and her patient sharing of responsibility.

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Chapter 3

MAN'S SOVEREIGNTY

"A Clerk ther was of Oxenford also,
That unto logyk hadde longe ygo.

Noght o word spak he moore than was neede,
And that was seyd in forme and reverence,
And short and quyk and ful of hy sentence;
Sownyng in moral vertu was his speche,
And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche." 1

In Chaucer's era the church, which maintained a powerful influence, was a prominent and dominant factor in the life of England. A great percentage of the men of the country were in some way connected with it. Chaucer recognized this and so in choosing his cross section of the life of England for the Canterbury Tales he included many persons connected with the church. All types of church people passed through the pages of this great work. Accurately reporting his age, Chaucer gave both sides to the church situation during his century. He recognized the need for reform in this great institution and did not hesitate to depict and to censure

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by his treatment those who represented the decaying element. Chaucer had a deep respect for the proper functions of the church. He derided only those whom he knew to be deserving of such treatment.

It was consistent with Chaucer's thoroughness to include among his pilgrims the Clerk of Oxford. The middle ages interpreted many words differently from what we do today. One of these words was clerk. In Chaucer's time clerk was applied to young men studying for the church. It did not necessarily follow that a clerk would continue his studying and enter the priesthood, but it did mean the clerk was a scholar or a man highly educated. The unassuming and modest pilgrim from Oxford whom Chaucer selected for his scheme of the Canterbury Tales was a typical candidate for the church. His studies had progressed sufficiently far as to be close to the end of his preparation. The characterization of the Clerk showed the reverence Chaucer had for the functions of the church, because it was a serious and important part of the church to prepare properly those who would carry on its life. The Clerk of Oxford represented the church members who are in preparation to take their places in the life of the church and also the typical scholar of the times, for much of the education of the day was under the jurisdiction of the church.
The Clerk was a quiet, retiring, and serious man. The purpose of his pilgrimage to Canterbury may be assumed with a sense of accuracy to be of a religious nature rather than a social one. Poorly dressed and on a lean horse he kept much to himself and his thoughts. He was a righteous man with honorable and adherent ideals. He was not willing to take office other than in the church proper despite his poverty,

"For he hadde geten hym yet no benefice,
Ne was so worldly for to have office." 1

His great interest was in books. His preference was for a library by his bedside rather than for the lighter and more amusing trifles of life as musical instruments and rich array. His desire for books and knowledge caused him to borrow to obtain these desires and the reimbursement was prayers for the souls of his benefactors,

"For hym was levere have at his beddes heed
Twenty bookes, clad in blak or reed,

Than robes riche, or fithele, or gay sautrie.

But al that he myghte of his freendes hente,
On bookes and on lernynge he it spente,
And bisily gan for the soules preye
Of hem that yaf hym wherwith to scoleye." 2


2 Ibid., Lines 293, 294, 296, 299, 300, 301, and 302.


This one adverse trait which Chaucer assigned to the Clerk was probably intentional as he had in mind the more perfect and outstanding character of the church, the Parson, whom he intended to be the epitome of the ideal churchman.

The advantages the Clerk derived from his industriousness enabled him to be precise and intelligent in his speech. Not a word more than he needed did he speak and what he said was full of meaning and to the point. His thoughts expressed moral virtue and when he talked, he spoke to teach. He might be voted a tiresome, dull, and unpleasant traveling companion because of his constant moral teaching and unconversational manner, but his presence was not as objectionable as that of other pilgrims such as the inebriated Miller or the quarrelling Summoner and Friar. With all his learning, he was humble because he still sought for more knowledge — "gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche."

The Host called the Clerk to fulfill his bargain made at the beginning of the journey with a merry story putting aside his "figures" for a more propitious occasion and to speak now that all might understand. Humbly the Clerk

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showed his obedience to his agreement. A wise choice was made by Chaucer when he selected the Clerk to present the second part of the marriage argument. Cleverly he answered the Wife of Bath's statement,

"For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves," 1

by telling the story of the patient and obedient wife whose fulfillment of her vow to her husband survived all suffering. Professor Kittredge tells us that by his shrewdness the Clerk left no opening for refutation from Dame Alice without her backing down on her previous points of woman's superiority. The Clerk even finished his tale with a song in which he gave women advice on treating men,

"Ye archewyves, stondeth at defense,
 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offense.
And skilendre wyves, fieble as in bataille,
Beth egre as is a tygre. . . . . . . .
 . . . . . . . . . I yow consaille.
Ne dreed hem nat, doth hem no reverence
 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
And thou shalt make hym couche as doth a quaille." 2

The tale of the Clerk told of the Marquis, Walter,

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who lived in Saluzza. He was much beloved by his people whose only regret was that their lord was unmarried and there would be no heir. Their petition to Walter to remedy this situation was well received by their lord who promised to wed. Great preparations were made for the wedding day. In the nearby village Griselda, the daughter of a poor man, resided. She was fair and virtuous and famed for her reverence and obedience to her father. Walter had decided to make Griselda his wife but revealed his intention to no one.

On the day appointed Walter rode forth with his retinue to the village and asked for Griselda in marriage, demanding only that she obey him in all things. Griselda complied with his wishes and vowed obedience at all times,

"And heere I swere that nevere willyglyly,
In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,
For to be deed, though me were looth to deye." 1

When she was clad in the beautiful array Walter had provided for her, the marriage was solemnized. Griselda fitted so well into her new surroundings, she seemed to have been born to this high station. She endeared herself to all that "ech hire lovede that looked in hir face." 2 So loved did she become that


2 Ibid., Line 413.
there were no disorders that she could not appease. Their happiness was blessed with the birth of a daughter.

Walter decided to test his wife's promise of obedience to him; so he commanded the child be taken from her. Griselda, mindful of her vow to her husband, gave up her child believing it was to be slain. The child, unknown to her, was sent to relatives to be reared according to the ways of nobility. A few years later Griselda bore another child, a boy. Again her husband thought to test her. Again she gave up her child without protest believing it her duty according to her vow to her husband. The final test of fidelity came when Walter announced to Griselda before an assembly of his people that he wanted her no more because he was taking another wife of noble birth. Meekly receiving this news, she prepared to return to her father where she dwelt without sign of resentment toward her husband,

"For I wol gladly yelden hire my place,
In which that I was blissful wont to bee.
For sith it liketh yow, my lord, . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
That I shal goon, I wol goon when yow leste."

When it came time for the new bride to arrive, Walter

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sent for Griselda and ordered her to perform the household duties necessary for the arrival of the guest. Meekly Griselda obeyed. She greeted the new bride with no sign of bitterness,

"But with glad cheere to the yate is went
With oother folk, to greete the markysesse," 1

When asked about her successor she humbly said, "I prey to God yeve hire prosperitee;" 2 At last Walter felt he had tested her sufficiently. He called Griselda before him and announced the apparent new bride was her daughter and the brother who accompanied her was Griselda's son. Great indeed was her joy and profound was her gratitude to her lord and husband for this happy reunion.

The patient and obedient Griselda! From the beginning of the story these traits of Griselda have been emphasized. First in humble and poor surroundings,

"And in greet reverence and charitee
Hir olde povre fader fostred shee." 3

and then in the higher station to which her marriage brought her, "In pacience suffre al this array;" 4 her patience and

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2 Ibid., Line 1034.

3 Ibid., Lines 221 and 222.

4 Ibid., Line 670.
obedience endeared her to all. The worthy Clerk had probably well learned the church principle that charity was the greatest of virtues. To him charity meant Christian love and readiness to forgive. This love and readiness to forgive, with which Griselda was enriched, he made the key note of his story. His story was told for two reasons, namely: to redeem his oath sworn at the Tabard Inn; and, to answer the slanderous accusations of the Wife of Bath against women.

We may assume the Clerk to be of a more traditional nature than the modern Wife of Bath. Despite her accusation that no clerk spoke well of wives, he would maintain more respect for women. Besides he wished to refute her contention that women must gain supremacy in the marriage state by whatever means they can accomplish it. To him all women had not yet descended to the levels of the scheming lady from Bath. He chose to place women on a higher level. The principal of his story, Griselda, was noble. She had a blind sense of devotion to duty. She placed first her service to her vow. She was instilled with the idea that her self-sacrifice was natural. No suffering was too great to bear in order to keep her vow.

The change in her manner of living from adversity to prosperity caused no change in the character of Griselda, unless we may say it gave her wider opportunity to exercise
her gentleness,

"Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse
In al that land, that she ne koude apese,
And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ose."  1

Perhaps we should say the change in her manner of living was from tranquility to constant suffering. She met this fate with a serenity and courage that was manifested in her steadfastness, fidelity, and fortitude. Poverty had been her teacher and she had been well trained in its school,

"A greet amendere eek of sapience
To hym that taketh it in pacience."  1

Her directness and honesty of mind was revealed in her frank responses to her husband's commands. Throughout the cruel and severe tests to which she was subjected her nobility of character was remarkably consistent. There was just one instant where she reproached her husband. She begged Walter not to inflict on his new wife the severe sufferings she had undergone because, being of noble birth, the new wife may not be able to withstand hardship to which she was unaccustomed,

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"O thyng biseke I yow, and warne also, 
That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge
This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo;
For she is fostred in hire norissynge
Moore tendrelly, and, to my supposynge,
She koude nat adversee endure
As koude a povre fostred creature." 1

The reproach was not for her own treatment, nor was it a
complaint. It was thoughtfulness to spare another pain. This
woman schooled in self-control, humility, and faithfulness
was a rare character indeed.

It would be hard to pick out a Griselda in life today.
The Clerk warned the pilgrims not to expect to find Griseldas,

"Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience,
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
No wedded man so hardy be t'assaille
His wyves pacience in trust to fynde
Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille." 2

In analyzing Griselda's behavior in the light of human nature
we were not surprised to see the blind devotion to what she
believed was duty. Often we see this at the present time.
When it is motivated by patriotism or other qualities of a
like nature, we see it highly praised. Honor and fame descends
upon the perpetrator. In the case of Griselda we feel such

1 Robinson, F. N. THE COMPLETE WORKS OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER.
Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. THE CLERK'S TALE.
Lines 1037 to 1043.
2 Ibid., Lines 1177 and 1180 to 1182.
devotion to fringe on stupidity. Her stepping down for another wife was within the bounds of comprehension, but the giving up of her children without a protest was not natural for a mother. From the beginning of time the natural mother has faced and fought even the impossible to defend and to protect her children. We even look for and expect a mother to do this.

The Clerk, however, was noted for his moral teaching. Behind his tale he had a lesson. He wished to prepare man to receive adversity from the hands of God with true patience and resignation to His will. He reminded his audience that the Bible warns,

"He preeveth folk el day, it is no drede,
And suffreth us, as for our exercise,
With sharpe scourges of adversitee
Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise:" 1

In this light Griselda's behavior is to be interpreted differently. There are Griseldas or near Griseldas today, who humbly submit to God's will in the adversities He sees fit to inflict. Patient resignation to God's will gives the strength to bear the suffering. We know and believe that if God sends the suffering it is also accompanied with the fortitude to endure it, even though we are crushed by its

severity, until such time as we realize there is a reward which far outdoes the burden we have born. The story that Chaucer assigned to the Clerk illustrated this point. Griselda suffered the loss of her children and her husband only to be rewarded with far greater happiness in their return.

Chaucer was a good churchman and like the Clerk who, when he spoke, spoke to teach; so also Chaucer often gave moral advice through his writings.
Chapter 4

OLD AGE AND YOUTH

"A Marchant was ther with a forked berd,
In mottele, and hye on horse he sat;
His resons he spak ful solemnely,
This worthy man ful wel his wit bisette;
Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette,
So estatly was he of his governaunce
With his bargaynes and with his cheyyssauce.
For sothe he was a worthy man with alle,
But, soothe to seyn, I noot how men hym calle." 1

The Merchant was treated by Chaucer in his Prologue to the Canterbury Tales in a serious manner, but with some humor. Such treatment was an indication that Chaucer liked the Merchant because it was his custom to use humor for those he liked and satire for those he disliked. The Merchant was not a particularly important person. Chaucer stated he did not know his name. In this group which was a cross section of society he represented trade.

In the fourteenth century the English of the upper classes of society were against work and trade. Their standard

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of living called for the nobility to be soldiers. Work and trade of all kinds, they believed, should be done by servants. Chaucer, although the son of a wine merchant and a member of the middle class, was associated all his life with members of the court and shared their views about tradesmen. For this reason the Merchant seemed unimportant to Chaucer.

On the other hand, during this century England was controlled by a few wealthy merchants who gave of their private fortunes to protect England and to finance the kings. Their wealth and philanthropies made them important. The Merchant of the pilgrimage was not one of these prominent merchants, but his similar occupation gave him a false sense of self-importance. This he displayed to his associates of a lower social level. His manner showed he believed that he belonged with the more important pilgrims, like the Knight, the Squire, and the Parson, who were treated throughout with great respect.

Chaucer described the Merchant as a large man dressed in the height of fashion, but typical of an importer who had available the opportunity and the wealth to receive the best in goods and clothing from other countries. He wore a Flemish beaver hat, elegantly fastened boots, and a motley gown. He rode well on his mount which was richly arrayed. He was a shrewd and clever man for no one knew of his debts. He
impressed the public that he was a competent manager.

Having heard the Clerk's pitiful story of the patient Griselda, the Merchant, who "his resons he spak ful solemnly," commented upon his own unhappy marriage state of two short months. The open complaint about his own wife,

"I have a wyf, the worste that may be;  
For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,  
She wolde hym overmacche, I dar wel swere."  

had a tinge of crudeness. Women of the fourteenth century were honored and respected by the noble class. This outburst tended to show the Merchant, with his feeling of superiority toward some of his fellow travelers, was not as high-minded socially as he would wish us to believe him. In narrating his tale of the marriage of old age and youth which contained the shameless deceit of a woman to her husband, the theme appeared to be in keeping with the Merchant's character.

His association, through trade, with men of all walks of life explained the crudeness of the tale and at the same time showed the reason for his lofty ideas of the ideal wife. His life was a in-between existence. Through his business he met

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1 Robinson, F. N. THE COMPLETE WORKS OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. GENERAL PROLOGUE. Line 274.

and matched wits with men who lived by their wits and who were not above deceit and dishonor if such was for a personal gain. Socially he aped his superiors of the noble class. This explained, perhaps, the crudeness of the tale and at the same time the high tribute to the ideal wife of which January spoke. One wonders if he was not trying to impress the Knight and perhaps to excuse what he believed was a good story in spite of its crudeness,

"A wyf is Goddes yifte verraily;

That womman is for mannes helpe ywroght." 1

These are lofty ideas of woman's place in this world. They are idealistic and impressive, but I am sure the Merchant does not believe there is such a heaven-sent gift. These thoughts will probably arouse the attention of the Knight, and this is what the crafty Merchant will like.

The Merchant's Tale told of the marriage of January and May. January, a knight of Pavia, had reached old age without marrying. At last the desire to be wed had come to him and dreaming of the bliss of wedded life he intended to

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grant his desire by

"Preyinge oure Lord to greunter him that he
Mighte ones knowe of thilke blisful lyf
That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf."  1

His plan for marriage included a young and beautiful wife. January contemplated the thoughts of marriage as presented by some learned writers. His own thoughts, following his desires, placed a woman as God's own gift, especially created to help man and by her virtuous docility to be his slave. His decision to marry made, he sent for his friends to announce his intention. Advice on both sides was given, but finally all agreed to the decision except his brother who gave warning of the demands women make upon their husbands. The advice was set aside. January prepared to find the woman who fitted his idea of a wife. The woman was chosen and the marriage was solemnized with great feasting. All were happy, save one, Damian, who secretly loved the new bride, May.

Damian languished in the throes of courtly love. He wrote his love complaint to May. At the evening meal, January missed Damian, who was his squire, and on hearing he was ill, suggested May bring cheer to Damian by a visit. During the

visit Damian slipped his complaint into May's hand. May was later able to exchange a letter with him.

As age came on, January became blind. In his great jealousy of his wife he forced her to be constantly within his reach. They spent much time in a walled garden. Secretly May planned to meet her lover there. On the pretense that she craved a special fruit she inveigled January to help her climb the tree in which her lover awaited her. The King and Queen of Fairies, Pluto and Proserpine, saw the deceit of May and Damian, and Pluto restored January's sight so that he might see the deception. The rage of January was quelled when May, through Proserpine's gift to have ready the right answer, satisfied January's anger with soothing explanations.

Our first sketch of May's character came from her husband, January. We saw her as a young and beautiful girl of serious nature, but womanly in her gentleness,

"He purtreseyd in his herte and in his thoght
Hir fresche beautee and hir age tendre,

Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse,
Hir wommanly berynge, and hire sadnesse." 1

January could not understand why some younger knight had not

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seen her and sought her for himself. Although warned by his brother that she might be his purgatory, January's build-up of May was one of great joy, typical of Chaucer's words that "love is blynd alday, and may nat see." 1

At the wedding we read of her docility and meekness which so impressed and endeared her to all. Her strict adherence to custom was worthy of note. Her perfect obedience to her husband was a source of great pleasure. Next came the visit to Damian, an act of obedience to her husband, but performed graciously and with great gentleness and pity,

"This fresshe May hath straignt hir wey yholde,
With alle hir wommen, unto Damyan.
Doun by his beddes syde sit she then,
Confortynge hym as goodly as she may." 2

This was the turning point. The lovesick Damian impressed her to such a degree that he was constantly in her mind,

"But sooth is this, how that this fresshe May
Hath take swich impression that day,
For pitee of this sike Damyan,
That from hire herte she ne dryve kan
The remembrance for to doon hym ese." 3

Nothing can be so disturbing as a man in such dire distress


2 Ibid., Lines 1932 to 1935.

as she found Damian. When the visitor realized that she herself was the cause of the distress, we concluded that she succumbed and became flattered that this young squire loved her.

From this time on we met nothing but deceit. Crafty in her forbidden intercourse, deceitful in her false statements of fidelity to her marriage vow, and despicable in her device to reach her lover, May became the wicked, sly, and justly despised character. Defense of her action on the grounds that her husband was repulsive, possessive, and senile can bear little weight.

May's behavior in her marriage state was not unique nor uncommon. All ages can produce the individual who solemnly takes a vow, as a marriage vow, and who has no understanding of its depth or meaning. Even a woman is blessed with intellect and must know the honor and bondage of a sacred oath, such as a marriage vow. Another's action or defects can not be seized upon as the excuse for our own acts. May's unfaithfulness was common in Chaucer's time as well as the present time. It has been stated earlier that Chaucer knew human nature and that he wrote accurately of his time. Chaucer's pilgrims and their tales can be adopted to many centuries including our own. Human nature has not changed. Therefore, May's conduct may be said to bear a relation to human life.
The fault can be placed in the union of youth with old age. Each demands a different reaction to circumstances and rarely in marriage can there be a smooth outlook under these conditions. The strong selfishness of the young clashes with the stubborn jealousy of old age,

"And therewithal the fyr of jalousie,
Lest that his wyf sholde falle in som folye,
So brente his herte that he wolde fayn
That som man bothe hire and hym had slayn." 1

We can not say even that May acted naturally, but we can say there is a relation between her actions and the actions of similarly placed human beings in everyday life.

Chapter 5

PARTNERSHIP

"A Frankeleyn was in his compaignye.
Whit was his berd as is the dayesye;
To lyven in delit was evere his wone,
Seint Julian he was in his contree.
At sesiouns ther was he lord and sire;
Ful ofte tyme he was knyght of the shire.
A shirreve hadde he been, and a countour.
Was nowher swich a worthy vavasour." 1

During the fourteenth century travel had become extensive in England. London was a center of commerce and to this city men journeyed from all parts of England. Frequent pilgrimages to religious shrines placed many travelers on the roads. Members of the church moved throughout their provinces in order to perform their duties. All this travel meant that hospitable homes soon became known and visitors stopped frequently to enjoy the generosity of their owners.

Chaucer introduced us in the Canterbury Tales to a

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large land owner who held his land in free tenure. Such an
owner at this time was called a Franklin. He represented agri-
culture in the scheme of the Tales. The typical ambition of the
franklins of this period was to become members of the nobility
either by virtue of their large holdings or by their service
in public office. They were ever ready to extend their hospi-
tality to travelers. Their enormous estates provided ample
room. Since nobles often moved their whole household from one
of their castles to another, there was opportunity to meet
and to place these members of the nobility under obligation
to them.

The Franklin of the Canterbury pilgrimage was a man of
importance within his own district. His means permitted him to
live as an Epicurean and to extend to all who wished to share
his hospitality a hearty welcome. He supplied food and wine
at all hours and insisted on meticulous preparation of his
fare in keeping with the changing seasons,

"It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke,
Of alle deyntees that men koude thynke.
After the sondry sesons of the yeer,
So chaunged he his mete and his soper.

Wo was his cook but if his sauce were
Poynaunt and sharp, and redy al his geere." 1

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1 Robinson, F. N. THE COMPLETE WORKS OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER.
Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. GENERAL PROLOGUE.
Lines 345, 346, 347, 348, 351, and 352.
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His home was a frequent harbor for travelers with his table always ready to refresh them. His hospitality in his own shire had earned for him the name of "St. Julian" of the district.

This worthy Franklin was a venerable, white-bearded man who loved delightful living, wore a dagger, and carried a trinket-bag of silk. His time was occupied with the political duties of his shire having at various periods held the offices of sheriff and auditor. He was responsible for the stewardship of his duties to an officer of the king. The Franklin was a man easy and pleasant to meet, hospitable, public-spirited, and democratic; but always with an eye to his own advancement. He had every means to attain a high place in life, but he was conscious of his lack of gentility. He praised freely the Squire,

"As to my doom, ther is noon that is here
Of eloquence that shall be thy peer,
If that thou lyve; God yeve thee good chance,
And in vertu sende thee continuance." 1

and pathetically lamented the lack of gentle qualities in his own son for whom he hoped to attain what he himself had missed,

"For he (the son) to vertu listeth nat entende;

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And he hath levere talken with a page
Than to comune with any gentil wight
Where he myghte lerne gentillesse aright.\(^1\)

He regretted his won rhetoric could not match the Squire's eloquence which had so appealed to him, but was willing, when his turn came, to contribute his tale as best he could.

The Franklin's activities brought him in contact with many classes of society. His aspirations to the upper class caused him to train himself in the higher and finer phases of life. He can be imagined as secretly schooling himself for the place he hoped to achieve one day. Chaucer, who liked this modest but ambitious man, and who treated him gently, reserved until this tale the true characterization of the Franklin. He placed in the hands of this likable country gentleman the ideal solution to the question of sovereignty in the marriage state. This choice again reminds us of Chaucer's wisdom and ability to know human nature. The Franklin's diplomatic handling of his own affairs, his contact with many phases of life, and his association with all levels of society, made him the ideal character of the pilgrimage to offer the solution.

The story, which the Franklin related, told of Arviragus, a knight of Amorica, who was in love with Dorigen,

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a lady of high estate. In declaring his love for her he promised never to assume the right of mastery nor to show jealousy, but to obey and to do her will in all things. Dorigen, mindful of such generosity, agreed to be his humble, faithful wife. This happy couple started their married life with the promise that neither would demand sovereignty. Their thorough understanding of the value of partnership in the marriage state was later to save their marriage from unhappiness.

A short time after the marriage, Arviragus left for Britain to seek renown and honor in arms. Dorigen missed her lord and grieved continually at his absence. Her friends tried in vain to comfort her. At last they prevailed upon her to join them. She walked with them on the cliffs near her castle, but was saddened by the passing ships and longed for the one which would bring her husband home to her. Her fears mounted as she watched the large black rocks at the foot of the cliff lest her husband be shipwrecked on his return.

Her friends saw the great distress she suffered by being near the sea and arranged to bring her other places to ease her discomfort. They planned to spend a day of play in a lovely garden. Among the people dancing and playing in the garden was a squire of unusual charm. This squire, Aurelius by name, had secretly loved Dorigen for several years, but had not dared to reveal his love to anyone. In a neighborly spirit
Dorigen spoke to him. Seizing this opportunity Aurelius told Dorigen of his love. She made it clear that she was interested in no one save her husband,

"By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf,
Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf
In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;
I wol been his to whom that I am knyt."

Touched, however, by his complaint and in a spirit of pity and sport, she promised to love him best of all on the day that the black rocks disappeared from the coast of Brittany. Dorigen felt safe in making this promise for she believed it could never happen. Aurelius, too, saw the impossibility of accomplishing this great task. Sadly he returned home feeling he could never survive his anguish. He prayed to Apollo to perform a miracle to help him overcome the condition set upon him for attaining his love. Arviragus returned and in her joy Dorigen forgot the promise she had made to Aurelius.

Meanwhile Aurelius suffered torments because his love was refused. His anguish was noted by his brother who resolved to help him. The brother recalled he had a friend who was versed in magic. He prevailed upon Aurelius to go with him to seek the help of this magician. Together they found a man well

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skilled in magic and told their story. He agreed at a price of a thousand pounds to help Aurelius. He returned with them to Brittany and, at the proper time, caused the stones to disappear from the coast. Delighted Aurelius sought Dorigen at the temple and reminded her of her promise.

Dorigen, in distress, told her husband of her promise. Arviragus was a knight who had sworn he would show no jealousy of his wife. He believed, too, that "Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe." He resolved to suffer his own sorrow so that his wife may live up to her promise and keep her word. He sent her to Aurelius. When Dorigen appeared before Aurelius and he saw her great distress, he asked the reason. Dorigen explained how her husband had sent her to her lover rather than have her break her promise. Aurelius, touched by such generosity, released her from her promise saying,

"Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede
As wel as kan a knyght, withouten drede." 2

When Aurelius explained to the magician who had caused the rocks to disappear from the coast, he was likewise touched by such generosity and forgave the fee which he had been promised so that he, too, might equal both the knight and the squire


2 Ibid., Lines 1543 and 1544.
in generosity.

The noble spirit of Dorigen's character was the underlying theme of the Franklin's Tale. From the beginning of the story to the contest of generosity at the finish, we found that Dorigen dominated the story by her nobility and the correctness of her procedure. First, there was the frankness and directness of her agreement before her marriage to Arviragus. Partnership must be preceded by a thorough understanding of the participants' intentions. Such an understanding was reached by Dorigen and Arviragus. Both, noble in character, agreed to patient forbearance in their married life: Arviragus who swore never to exercise mastery,

"Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a kynght
That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hir jalousie," 1

and Dorigen who promised never to abuse his "gentillesse,"

"., . ., Sire, sith of youre gentillesse
Ye profre me to have so large a reyne,
Ne wolde nevere God bitwixe us tveyne,
As in my gilt, were outher werre or stryf.
Sire, I wol be youre humble trewe wyf." 2

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1 Robinson, F. N. THE COMPLETE WORKS OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. THE FRANKLIN'S TALE. Lines 745 to 748.

2 Ibid., Lines 754 to 758.
Next we saw Dorigen's display of wisdom. Since she had sworn her love to her husband, she had no interest in another lover. As we have seen from the story of the tale, firmly and courageously she told Aurelius her interest was in her husband alone. Being noble and gentle in character Dorigen's pity for her lover's plight was no cause for censure, because there is always pity in a gentle heart. She proposed what she believed to be impossible to ease the suffering of Aurelius. When she had worked her way into the unexpected entanglement, intrepidly and courageously she tried to preserve her honor. With her honesty of mind she met the situation squarely and properly. In telling her husband of her promise to Aurelius she demonstrated faith in his honor and oath of forbearance. Here she showed her deep sincerity and belief in the sacred vow. Meekly and submissively she relied upon her husband's judgment and was led by him to be loyal to her pledge.

Now came her humility and simplicity. When she went to Aurelius at her husband's command, she answered his question of where she was going very simply,

"Unto the gardyn, as myn housbonde bad. My trouthe for to holde, al las! al las!"

Truly was she rewarded when Aurelius matched the generosity of Arviragus and released her from her pledge.

Last came her gratitude to Aurelius for her release, simple but sincere,

"She thonketh hym upon hir knees al bare,  
And hoom unto hir housbonde is she fare."  

and the happiness that she was united with her husband,

"Arveragus and Dorigen his wyf  
In sovereyn blisse leden forth hir lyf,  
Nevere eft ne was ther angre hem bitwene."  

Chaucer expressed in Dorigen the great esteem in which he held women. In Dorigen, he assembled the highest traits of human character when he endowed her with nobleness enriched by humility, truth fortified by sincerity, wisdom strengthened by courage, and forbearance supported by patience. Chaucer gave her one more thing which greatly helped her to portray the ideal martial life -- a noble understanding husband.

When Dorigen's behavior is examined in the light of present day criteria we reach the conclusion which Chaucer intended we should find, that Dorigen's behavior in the


2 Ibid., Lines 1551, 1552, and 1553.
marriage state was the ideal solution to the question of sovereignty. The wise person always studies a situation and with foresight makes plans for the emergencies and difficulties that may arise. After planning his course, he develops the strength that will enable him to follow his decision. Thus when faced with a difficult emergency, he has more than upset emotions to guide him to a wise settlement. This was the plan that Arviragus and Dorigen used when they made their promises to each other before their marriage.

Ever the philosopher, Chaucer wisely chose a worthy and respected character to tell the tale which offered the solution to the marriage question and then began the tale with the formula which would insure happiness in marriage. As we followed the story, we saw enfolded in Dorigen and Arviragus, the points of the formula which Chaucer enumerated,

1. "Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye," because, "Love is a thyng as any spirit free." 1

B. "Pacience is an heigh vertu, certeyn, For it venquysseth, as thise clerkes seyn, Thynges that‘rigour sholde nevere atteyne." 2


2 Ibid., Lines 773 to 775.
C. "Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so moot I goon, 
    Ye shul it lerne, wher so ye wole or noon." 1

D. "After the tyme moste be temperaunce 
To every wight that kan on gouvernaunce." 2

This is also the formula for happiness in marriage today. The ideal marriage must have the loving patience of both parties if we are to say, "Hoore may men seen an humble, wys accord." 3

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2 Ibid., Lines 785 and 786.

3 Ibid., Line 791.
In this conclusion the union of old age and youth will be dismissed without discussion as this situation brings to marriage an unfair condition from the start. Both parties enter married life with a difficult handicap, which it seems, is bound to effect unfavorably their behavior. The Merchant, who presented this phase, showed himself to be a man deserving no respect because he no longer respected himself.

Chaucer collected his pilgrims for the Canterbury Tales from a cross section of English society. For the presentation of the "Marriage Group" he selected pilgrims who represented the outstanding factors of English life in the fourteenth century. He included country life in the Franklin, the church in the Clerk, trade in the Wife of Bath, and commerce in the Merchant. Likewise, Chaucer represented many levels of the social life in this group; the Wife of Bath from the peasant life, the Clerk from the middle class, and the Franklin who had contacts with the upper class. All four characters, who form this group, with the possible exception of the Clerk, had one trait in common. All were social climbers. The Wife of Bath had apparently reached her ambition; the Merchant and the
Franklin still hoped to attain theirs. Finally, Chaucer offered both men and women the opportunity to present their views and to be the object of each other's survey of the controversy. All this showed the wide scope Chaucer considered when he undertook the discussion of the "Marriage Group."

The characters of the narrators of the tales were so closely related to the nature of the tales that it was almost impossible to separate them. To discuss the behavior of the women of the tales it was necessary to discuss the character of the narrator. Dame Alice's story of the loathly lady might even be the story of one of her own schemes to gain mastery in any way that worked. The Clerk's story might show us how he would dominate his wife, if he saw fit to enter marriage, and at the same time believe it his duty to exercise moral teaching to the extent that he should cause suffering so that the reward of happiness may be reached. The Franklin's narrative might hint at his own political and business experiences where he believed a thorough understanding and arrangement were essential at the start to insure a sensible working of a plan. His own even, generous good-nature was part of Arviragus.

Each story noticeably centered around a determination to win a point. The difference was the point each wished to achieve. In the Wife of Bath's Tale the determination was that which a woman used to gain sovereignty; in the Clerk's Tale was
the patient determination to suffer for an ideal; and in the
Franklin's Tale was the strong determination to maintain
truth and honor at all cost or to live up to a bargain pre-
viously consummated. In each case determination won the point
desired. Let us look, however, to the advantages derived after
gaining the point. First in Dame Alice's Tale, she concentrated
only on the process of getting what she went after. There was
no joy nor pleasure in its attainment once it was accomplished.
When she gained mastery over one man, her plans seemed to be
formulating for mastery over the next husband after she got
rid of the present one. Such a spirit could never bring hap-
piness. Her only satisfaction was reward to her vanity.
Second in the Clerk's Tale, Griselda combined all her efforts
to fulfill her vow to obey. Here the second participant of
marriage was introduced to a prominent part in the union
when Walter used his effort to test Griselda's strength. Both
parties enjoyed success in their respective roles and each
had the satisfaction of gratifying his ego. However, there
was happiness to be enjoyed because Walter rewarded Griselda
with the return of her children and her position as his wife.
Third in the Franklin's Tale, both husband and wife cooperated
to lay the foundation of true marriage and then respected the
agreement to turn the unpleasant entanglement to a satisfactory
realization of fulfilling their vows. Thus we concluded that
to be successful marriage needs the unstinting loyalty of both members.

Chaucer intended a moral should run through his "Marriage Group." He offered for discussion two sides to the question and then wisely presented the solution, driving home the fact that the corrupt practices of his time needed reform. His advice was that marriage is controlled by loving patience and forbearance. Its success comes through gentleness because we give what we have in us and receive back only of the measure we have given. He admonished all to respect themselves if they wished in turn to demand respect. Success in marriage is based on character. How much would Chaucer have agreed with William Shakespeare when he said,

"... to thine own self be true,  
   And it must follow, as the night the day,  
   Thou canst not then be false to any man."

1 Shakespeare, William, HAMLET. Act I. Scene 3.
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