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Noble Groping: The Franklin's Characterization in *The Canterbury Tales*

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Chaucer's characterization of the Franklin is quite complex and multifaceted, seeming to contradict itself. In the General Prologue (GP) the Franklin's presentation is lovable, the perfect drinking buddy, but during the interlude between his own tale and the Squire's Tale (SqT) his presentation is negative. The Franklin appears subservient, groping at nobility. The contradiction would appear to be another casualty of Chaucer's unfinished masterpiece. I believe, however, the contradiction does not exist, that we are too far removed from Chaucer's time and his academic studies to realize what he is doing from the start. There are no incongruities in the Franklin's character if we look at the subtle details.

In the General Prologue, Chaucer purposely juxtaposes the Franklin's gleeful and insatiable life with that of the stoic Sergeant of the Law, who is clouded in a fog of reticence. For the reader, the Franklin is presented as the better of the two; the Franklin is relaxed, willing to share; he's friendly and open. The descriptions of the Sergeant keep the reader out: the Sergeant is an impenetrable and flawless character:

His purchasyng myghte nat been infect. Nowher so bisy a man as he
ther nas, And yet he semed bisier than he was. n termes hadde he caas
and doomes alle That from the tyme of Kyng William were yfalle.
Therto he koude endite and make a thyng, Ther koude no wight pynche
at his writyng. (Chaucer GP ll.320 - 326)

These lines lock us out of the Sergeant's true character. We know solely that he is knowledgeable of the cases and judgments of England since William the First, that his contracts are unbreakable, and that his dress is simple and unassuming: "medlee cote,/Girt with a ceint of silk"(GP ll.328-29).

Therefore when we read the Franklin's description, it's as if the carnival has come to a factory town: the drab of the Sergeant succumbs to the Franklin's ruddy visage. The first and second lines of the Franklin's introduction commence this feeling of warmth and good times: "Whit was his berd as is the dayesye;/ Of his complexioun he was sangwyn" (GP II. 332-33). If there are more important lines of the Franklin's character, I do not recall them. For modern readers, especially Americans, these two lines are reminiscent of Santa Claus, which creates nostalgia of jolliness and giving (Donaldson 87). The educated medieval reader would have received a similar, yet slightly different reading. According to Muriel Bowden, in her book *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, the educated medieval audience would have been familiar with the *Secreta Secretorum*, a primitive, medieval medical text used during Chaucer's day. The book details, among other things, descriptions of a person with a 'sangwyn' disposition:

The sangywe by kynde should lowe Ioye and laughynge, and company of woman and moche slepe and syngynge: he shal be hardy y-nowe, of good will and wythout malice: he shalbe flesshy, his complexcion shalbe light to hurte and to empeyre for his tendyrnesse, he shall have a good stomake, good dygescion, and good delyverance... he shall be fre and lyberall, of farye semblaunt. (174)

Also Walter Curry in his book, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, defines a man controlled by blood as "hot and moist, after the nature of air" (10). These descriptions, then, help to explain the rest of the Franklin's preliminary characterization in the General Prologue. That is to say, the medieval reader, or listener, understood why the Franklin was presented as such a "good times fellow," why he required "the morwe...sop in wyn" (GP I. 334), and why he was so hospitable, compared to *Seint Julian*, the patron saint of hospitality, and had "ful many a fat partrich... in muwe" (GP I.349).

I go through this comparison to show why we latch on to the Franklin. Not since the Friar's description, in the General Prologue, have we had such a tantalizing character; we feel a closeness to him, as he has a warmth and charm not presented in any other character. He is a human character. But Chaucer says something subtle during the introductory block of the Franklin's characterization: "For he was Epicurus owene sone" (GP I. 336). This brief descriptive statement may have, for many medieval scholars with a devotion to Boethius, stopped the Franklin's party.

Epicurus, an infamous Athenian philosopher, taught that man's natural aim was pleasure, sought through philosophical discussion and reasoning. But where things get confused is Epicurus' belief that all wisdom and culture has its roots in the "pleasure of the stomach" (Russell 243). He maintained

that the pleasures of the mind are the contemplation of the pleasures of the body, mainly seeking the absence of pain. Epicurus went further by developing a dichotomy of pleasure: *dynamic* pleasure was the achievement of an "desired end," but had pain involved; *static* pleasure existed on a plane of "equilibrium," resulting in the desired end, but without pain (Russell 244). Epicurus preached the second type of pleasure, which sought a middle ground of existence, advocating, therefore, moderation in its truest sense. This philosophy, however, has been viewed as hedonistic, misconstrued as gluttonous and foul, a philosophical disaster and seen by many as contradictory to Aristotelian 'moderation.' The misconception that Epicurianism sought only secular pleasures (especially food) wears well on the Franklin, given his characterization. Therefore, when Chaucer says the Franklin "was Epicurus ownene sone," we don't even raise an eyebrow--but we should.

Chaucer was a great admirer of Boethius, translating his work and placing many of his philosophies in the *Canterbury Tales*. Therefore, if we look in Boethius' work, searching for ideas connected to the Franklin, we find something interesting. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the Muse of Philosophy tells Boethius that soon after the unjust death of Socrates, "the mobs of Epicureans and Stoics and the others each did all they could to seize for themselves the inheritance of wisdom that he left. As part of their plunder they tried to carry me off, but I fought and struggled, and in the fight the robe was torn which I had woven with my own hands" (Boethius 39). According to the Muse, these plunderers believed they had achieved true philosophy, but actually they had only a swatch of her robe (Boethius 39). Chaucer, in his *Boece*, translates the Latin as the Epicureans had "perverted" philosophy (Chaucer 820). Chaucer surreptitiously places the subtle description of Epicurus being the father of the Franklin as foreshadowing, for with this remark, Chaucer brands the Franklin as suspect. From this point we, the readers, should be wary of the Franklin's possible attempt to pervert an established unit, just as the Epicureans attempted destruction of "true" philosophy.

This brings me to the Franklin's second type of characterization: the presentation through narration, beginning at the end of the Squire's Tale. The Franklin praises the Squire on a fine tale, "wel yquit and gentilly" (SqT l. 674). Note the word playing a heavy role in this interlude is *gentilly*, which carries a definition of "noble rank or birth, belonging to the gentry; having the character or manner prescribed by the ideals of chivalry" ("Gentil"). This degree of medieval class, some critics believe, the Franklin does not have (Semblan 136). Some scholars, such as R. H. Hilton, place the Franklin "among the country gentry," while others see the Franklin as insecure of his social position (Smebler 137 & 133). If this reading is true then the Franklin is possibly one step below gentry or perhaps, as R. M. Luminasy paraphrases

Professor Kittredge, "a rich freeholder, not quite within the pale of gentry, [but] the kind of man from whose ranks the English nobility has been constantly recruited" (Lumiansky 184). Therefore, if we take this interpretation, the evidence of his wishing to rise is easily found. The Franklin's high praise of the Squire's disjointed tale, and his comparison between his son and the Squire is one example. The Franklin says of his son,

I have a sone, and by the Trinitee, I hadde levere than
twenty pound worth lond, Though it right now were fallen
in myn hond, He were a man of swich discrecioun
As that ye been. (SqT ll. 682 - 86)

The Franklin, of course, is trying to appeal to the 'yong' Squire, whose father is the worthy 'knyght.' The knight's social ranking could help the Franklin attain the social standing of nobility or gentility, and he continues this flattery until he is reprimanded.

Here begins the problem: the earlier description, excluding the Epicurean subtlety, shows the Franklin as confident, a man who had held many important positions-- "knyght of the shire," and "a shirreve and a contour" (G P ll. 355 & 360). Everything about him seems to point towards gentry, including his dagger and "a gipser al of silk" (Bowden 176). How do we reconcile these powerful positions to the Franklin's later characterization as a man bent on class mobility? To do this, we return to the Muse of Philosophy: the Epicureans thought they had found true philosophy through only a rip of her robe; the Franklin is tearing at the clothes of the nobility, battling for their status of gentry, attempting at what Kittredge calls founding a lineage (Lumiansky 184). Yet the Franklin ostensibly comes up short: "'Straw for youre gentillesse!' quod oure Hoost" (SqT 695). Therefore, we can see the Franklin's portrait as satire: like the Epicureans, the Franklin has not only his literal appetite for food, but also a gluttonous, symbolic appetite for superior social standing. We see this particular Franklin having a strong desire for advancement, unhappy with the respected positions of knight of the shire, sheriff, and contour. The Franklin has swallowed these occupations in hopes of achieving the ranking of a noble title.

On first reading, at a superficial level and without knowledge of Boethius, there seems to be a glaring contradiction in the Franklin's characterization, causing a slight uneasiness in the reader: a great poet such as Chaucer had created this obvious discrepancy. I have tried to show that Chaucer from the start knew what he was doing, selecting the name Epicurus to create a juxtaposition with the Franklin, which erudite readers would identify as a subtle technique used early to present the Franklin as an obvious hypocrite and glutton. Chaucer understood that some of his readers would catch the finespun reference, while others would not, and, therefore, the

contradiction would remain. Through his use of Epicurus, however, he allusively explains the Franklin's character.

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