# WHAT IS THIS LIFE?

## *Responses to Contingency in Chaucer's Pagan Romances*

Luke Landtroop
Advisor: Dr. Marc Guidry

Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400)

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims' host Harry Bailey invites the Monk to "quyte" or "repay" the Knight's tale. Intrigued by various thematic and verbal connections between *The Knight's Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale*, and informed by critical opinions which identify the former as the "other" against which the remainder of the *Canterbury Tales* is arrayed, I set out to examine the ways in which *The Franklin's Tale* "quytes" or responds to the issues raised in *The Knight's Tale*. Not only are both tales chivalric romances set in the pagan past, but both also address the question of how human happiness can be maintained in a world in which humans can at best partially control the effects of external forces and the deficiencies of their own natures on the felicity of human life. My thesis is that *The Franklin's Tale* implicitly proposes solutions to philosophical and social problems left unresolved in *The Knight's Tale* and presents a more positive vision of social possibilities than *The Knight's Tale*. In the course of this comparison, I argue that the tales' treatments of philosophical issues reflect the social concerns and positions of their respective tellers, and I see this connection of the universal and the particular as an important contribution to Chaucer criticism.

*"A Frankeleyn was in his companye.*
*Whyt was his berd as is the dayesye;*
*Of his complexioun he was sangwyn.*
*Wel loved he by the morwe a sop in wyn."*

The Franklin is a prosperous and jovial landowner, but, significantly, not an aristocrat. Though his tale, like the Knight's, is a chivalric romance with a pagan setting, it can be seen as a "transitional" tale situated between pagan and Christian values. The problem of contingency is raised in Dorigen's complaint against the black rocks, and in the squire Aurelius we see the same attempt to manage reality in order to produce the desired result as exhibited by Theseus in *The Knight's Tale*. However, through a subtle employment of seasonal imagery, the tale evokes both the hope of redemption provided by Christianity and a sense of convivial enjoyment of life that is lacking in *The Knight's Tale*. The social implications of these new values are explicitly enacted at the end of *The Franklin's Tale*, where resolution is achieved through mutual exercises of charity among the characters. *The Franklin's Tale* champions "grace" and "gentilesse" as the basis for social order, and challenges the Knight's assumption that only the hereditary nobility can possess these virtues.

The Knight is an experienced fighter of noble birth whose tale glorifies the values of feudal chivalry. However, *The Knight's Tale* is also concerned with man's inability to avoid the negative effects of fate and fortune, including, ultimately, his own mortality. At the end of the tale, Theseus delivers a philosophical speech which is meant to resolve this problem. I argue that Theseus not only fails to do so, but that the real purpose of his speech is to solidify and justify his own autocratic rule. While Theseus ostensibly advocates a philosophy of resigned tranquility in the face of adversity, he is constantly seeking to manage matters to his own political advantage through such measures as the tournament he arranges between Palamon and Arcite. While the Knight seems to portray Theseus as a source of order, the central conflict of the tale is only resolved by the death of Arcite due to the intervention of Saturn, the god of chaos.

*"A Knight there was, and that a worthy man,*
*That fro the tyme that he first bigan*
*To ryden out, he loved chivalrye,*
*Trouth and honour, fredom and curteisye."*