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Advice of Friends and the Emergence of Right Judgement in Three of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "The Franklin's Tale", "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Tale of Melibee"

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Les relations d'amitié sont au cœur de l'œuvre de Chaucer, et dans *Les Contes de Cantorbéry* ce sont surtout les conseils des amis qui intéressent le poète. Nous examinons ainsi ce qui permet de distinguer les bons conseils des moins bons, ou des franchement mauvais, à travers les démonstrations narratives des dires et des comportements des vrais ou soi-disant amis, dans trois contes : « Conte du Franklin », « Conte du Marchand » et « Conte de Mélibée ». Le premier présente des conseils d'amis bien intentionnés mais superficiels ; le deuxième des conseils de deux amis intimes, où la flatterie gagne sur la vérité ; le troisième des conseils d'amis trop hétéroclites pour apporter une aide véritable. Finalement Chaucer nous démontre comment les conseils d'amis, quoique justes et souhaitables en eux-mêmes, peuvent être cependant une manipulation par laquelle le conseiller domine le conseillé.

Introduction

The medieval meaning of "friends" stemming from Aristotle,¹ designates those who provide not only affection and support, but also direction to an individual by their considered advice. Unlike their vaguer modern meaning of companions, "friends" in the medieval sense covers various relationships, from one-to-one partnerships to general public support. In three of *The Canterbury Tales*: "The Franklin's Tale", "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Tale of Melibee",² the advice of friends becomes a leading theme. By presenting dramatically different types of friendship Chaucer in effect advises his readers on the dangers as well as the values of friendship. He himself becomes a friend addressing friends, teaching them how to recognize true friends from false, good advice

¹ Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics.

² All quotations and references from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edition, Larry D. Benson, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1990).

from bad, and the limits of friendship as compared to the bonds of kinship, marriage or love, or to the benevolence of strangers. Following the ideas on friendship elaborated by recognized authorities, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Boethius, or of recognized contemporaries like Deschamps or Gower, and even of unacknowledged contemporaries, Boccaccio or Langland, Chaucer's handling is, as usual, an original addition to existing ideas. The old authors stressed the positive aspects of friendship and of friends' advice, both as to form (advice to individual friends), and as to matter (how to use one's judgement and lead the good life), while Chaucer shares the more critical attitudes of his contemporaries, but conveys them in the less explicit, more intriguing ways not of analysis but of narrative.

By his demonstration of the workings of friends' advice in the three tales, Chaucer invites reflection on three points: firstly, i) the friends' motivation, (how sincerely helpful?) and involvement (how profoundly caring?); ii) their critical attitudes (how could projects fail?) and their suggested alternatives (any on offer?); iii) their reliance on rational arguments or on emotional dominance (how deliberate or unthinking is their advice, how open or secretive, how free or full of hidden agendas?). This third point is crucial, since the advice given should profit the advised rather than the adviser (who gains status if his advice is followed, loses it if rejected, independently of whether the advice is good or bad). Raised in all three tales, these questions are also examined in relation to the main themes of each: the advice of friends is shown under its social aspect in "The Franklin's Tale", under its moral aspect in "The Merchant's Tale", under its political and spiritual aspects in "The Tale of Melibee".

"The Franklin's Tale"

In "The Franklin's Tale" the sort of friendship shown is the one considered the least respectable by the ancients (Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca), as based mainly on pleasure. The friends' advice is not sought but occurs within a casual social network of young companions who try to cheer Dorigen in her husband's absence by persuading her to stop repining and join them in their recreations. As to i) their motivation and involvement, they appear as concerned and caring friends who even get down on their knees to beg her to agree to their advice. They are prompted to pleading by ii) a healthy critical attitude, and are capable of

suggesting better alternatives to sorrowing, such as out-door walks on the cliff-tops. From their own point of view, the friends are acting not only with affection, but in a way conducive to virtue, since the wise human being's first duty is, according to both Seneca¹ and Boethius,² to cease complaining under the blows of fortune and to regain rational control.

However, the young friends' advice is not effective in lifting Dorigen's spirits since the sea-views remind her, the more poignantly, of her husband absent at sea, and she reverts to panicking about the danger to him of the black rocks along the coast of Brittany. The young friends next suggest garden-parties, advice less thoughtful, as it puts Dorigen in the way of temptations to infidelity, which is, profoundly, not what she wishes. Her friends, perhaps judging Dorigen by themselves, may well desire this solution for her without admitting it, and in their youthful, carefree manner may be hiding their own lower standards of fidelity where an older, more prudent adviser might have counseled piety and good works rather than parties. The friends' advice therefore lacks prudent wisdom, but since the young friends are hardly trying to gain much rational or emotional dominance over her beyond the claims of social exchange, Dorigen follows it the more easily, trusting her peer group and their common social codes.

Yet it is the friends' encouragement to "play" which, at first innocent enough (outings, games of chess), finally leads to a day-long party of dancing and Dorigen's playful promise to Aurelius to return his love when he has made the black rocks of Brittany disappear. For the friends' attempts to soothe Dorigen's distress expose her to more distress, and the young friends' advice is too lightly given and taken to consider Dorigen's desires in depth. In this it contrasts with the later advice of kin (the brother who helps Aurelius), and with the advice, or rather, the commands of a husband (Averagus, who insists Dorigen keep her promise, even as to adultery). Paradoxically, the more profound concern of brother and husband makes them give more dangerous advice, with possibly more disastrous consequences than the rather superficial goodwill of the peer-group friends.

¹ Seneca claims that any activity that perturbs the individual's control of his inner life is considered as not really living.

² Boethius announces by his book's very title that the wise man will not allow himself to repine even in the worst of circumstances.

It appears then that both the social amiability of friends and the passionate attachments of kin are inadequate aids to the emergence of right judgement, since neither quite find the balance between rational thinking and emotional impetus. In the end, "The Franklin's Tale" shows that the highest reaches of friendship, i.e. wholly disinterested help, may be attained not so much through those that have existing social bonds which they try to honour, but through those who can exercise free judgment in the unique situation which confronts them: as is the case with the unexpected benevolence of strangers (here, the magician-illusionist who lets Aurelius off his debt). After the affability of Dorigen's young friends at the start of the tale, the mounting degrees of nobly unselfish concern of the brother, the husband, the wife and the lover culminate in this merchant-magician who arguably outdoes all the others in spontaneous generosity. Yet by not being bound by a friendship which is already established, the benevolent merchant-magician is particularly responsive to a precise situation which moves him to sacrifice his own interests freely, but which he will never be called upon to repeat or to see as an obligation.

"The Merchant's Tale"

Since the theme of freedom, or generosity in moral conduct, is the most important in "The Franklin's Tale", the role of the young friends' advice is subsidiary, but in "The Merchant's Tale", the goodness or badness of friends and of their advice is in the foreground and adds the moral ballast, necessary for serious interest, to the rather routine *fabliau* of mis-matched Youth and Age and inevitable adultery.¹ The importance of friends' advice is made starkly clear by the allegorical naming of the two persons called upon to counsel the central character. As in Deschamps's *Le Miroir de mariage*, they represent the false flatterer and the true adviser. An old knight (January) proposes to marry a young wife (May) and of two of his friends (or brothers), Placebo is shown up as a mendacious and self-interested yes-sayer, and the other, Justinus, as an honest well-wisher with the moral courage to oppose the project. Placebo, quoting Solomon as the authority for wise advice,² flatters January's sufficiency of wisdom as actually not needing advice, and

¹ V. J. Scattergood, (1974) p. 128.

² *Riverside*, lines 1485-6.

cleverly opts out of giving any. Justinus, truly concerned for January's welfare, quotes Seneca as to the strong necessity of advice when contemplating any practical change in one's life-style, particularly marriage. Furthermore he warns him that a youthful bride of good public repute may deceive in private, as he knows from his own painful experience. January, irritated at the very thought, shouting "Straw for your Senek"¹ and outraged at not being agreed with, breaks with Justinus and promotes Placebo to the position of best friend and chief helper. Here i) the motivation and the involvement of each adviser is evident: Placebo soothing his patron to curry favour, Justinus thwarting him for his own good. Their positions as to ii) critical attitudes and alternative suggestions are the clearer in that January's plea for advice was purely conventional since, swept along by lusting fantasy, his mind was already set to marry. As for iii), rational or emotional dominance, Placebo's pretended humility gains him power over January, while Justinus loses all influence.

The contrast between friends and kin is not made in "The Merchant's Tale". The two advisers are first introduced in a group of friends and only later said to be January's brethren.² Nor does the brotherly bond seem to be strong between them. They address each other as "brother" only occasionally, and as "my lord" or "Sire" more frequently, and the term "my brother" only gains poignancy when used by Justinus in his last words on leaving. But as these have been preceded by a sarcastic speech or "japery" by Justinus (wishing January that his marriage would turn out no worse than a purgatory), it is difficult to tell how much affection there remains between them after the wise advice has been rejected, or if they had ever had genuinely warm feelings for one another.

There are also, as in "The Franklin's Tale", the figures of benevolent strangers who give help of a practical kind rather than advice. Here however, they are the divinities of the underworld, Pluto and Proserpine, and their aid is hardly beneficial on a moral level (bringing cuckoldry to January, effrontery and adultery to May). Indeed, all the friendliness and friendly advice in "The Merchant's Tale", apart from that of the rejected Justinus, is shown to be immoral: self-centered, illusory, deceptive, false and even cruel. It is indeed the role of Justinus to point the moral of the

¹ *Riverside*, line 1567.

² *Riverside*, line 1475.

tale not by moralising but by speaking the truth about his own unhappy experience (which mirrors that of the Merchant, as expressed in his Prologue), but not necessarily that of the author, Chaucer who, characteristically, hides behind the multiplicity of his demonstrations.

“The Tale of Melibee”

Meanwhile, Chaucer the pilgrim seems to be putting forward his personal views on the advice of friends in the long and elaborate treatment he gives it in “The Tale of Melibee”, although here the advice is not about marriage but about aggression and going to war, and therefore the themes are no longer simply those of the social and moral relations of individuals, but of the political and spiritual groupings of a whole community. Here it is the wife, Lady Prudence, who advises the main character, Melibee, to summon a council of his numerous friends to suggest how he should react to the aggression of three enemies that have injured his status, his house and his family.

Lady Prudence insists on the necessity of seeking advice and of choosing only true friends to give it. With much quotation from Solomon and “Senek”,¹ she delivers a homily on the advice of friends who are true, wise, experienced and, necessarily, old. Yet the council includes different age groups and professions and is eager for action rather than deliberation. By announcing his projected war of vengeance, Melibee reveals his outraged anger while ostensibly asking for advice, so that most of the assembled friends lose objectivity and realize (as does Placebo in “The Merchant’s Tale”), that it is not advice but support that is called for. So without enquiring into the causes or the nature of the aggression, or the degree of harm done, with little explanation of the issues at stake, they focus on Melibee’s hurt pride and instinctive calls for war. The friends here are more a political party than a group of intimates, so have little flexibility or objectivity. An unstated party line (or a set of basic assumptions which could be loosely termed either “ideology” or “self-interest”) emerges from their various expressions of opinion.

The i) motivation and involvement of these advisers is limited to the part they themselves expect to play in the projected warfare and is fundamentally self-regarding. Differences emerge among different

¹ *Riverside*, lines 1126, 1157, 1172, 1184, 1185.

groups according to professional bias: thus the surgeons and the physicians hold off from the debate on war and express concern only for Melibee's daughter, the wounded Sophie, although the physicians, by quibbling, end by encouraging violence. The lawyers hold back, advise legal procedures and pronounce private war illicit. These professionals show some degree of ii) critical attitude to Melibee's proposals, make professional alternative suggestions and attempt to exercise some measure at least of iii) rational rather than emotional dominance over Melibee. But their aloofness and their lack of emotion in fact distances them from the rest of the council and loses them favour. Their abstaining from involvement is resented as a lack of commitment (unlike Placebo's similar abstention which was seen as flatteringly warm).

The audience, true to the psychology of groups, finds it easier to feel than to think, and a great show of sympathy for Melibee is put up by the next speakers (the neighbours, the pretense friends, the reconciled former enemies, the flatterers, the young) who encourage his plans with enthusiasm. Their i) motivation and involvement are wholly, if secretly, self-centered, while their ii) critical attitudes and alternative suggestions are non-existent. Through flattery they exaggerate his power, and clamour so for war that further deliberation becomes almost impossible and Melibee is swayed by their iii) emotional, not rational, insistence. The debate then develops the opposed sides typical of political groupings with some of the rational thinkers becoming more involved emotionally. An advocate advises defense and delay, but the young, excited, shout him down, as they do the next speaker, a wise old man who stresses the deadliness of war. Finally the hotheads pressurize Melibee to opt for war. The last advisers give the worst advice, since they say one thing in private and the opposite in public.

The very fact of Melibee hearing and needing so much advice introduces the ostensible moral of the tale: his necessary initiation into recognizing how to choose the best on offer: i.e. the advice of his wife, Lady Prudence. She it is who, partly allegorical figure and partly dominating, even domineering wife, will step in and change Melibee's mind to make peace not war. This is achieved by Lady Prudence proving point by point that she is more motivated, more involved, more wisely critical, more capable of suggesting alternatives, and more rationally as well as emotionally convincing than any of his friends. She wins on all the points. She criticizes and assesses the friends' advice carefully, and

points out the weaknesses and dangers of the arguments for war. She cleverly focuses not on Melibee's feelings of outrage or even on an idealized sense of justice, but on his most basic fears of losing face as well as wealth and power. Her clinching argument is not that war, whether just or unjust is terrible, but that it is inordinately expensive. However, her final solution is presented as more ideologically (according to Christianity) correct, in that she proposes and effects tearful repentance from the enemies and magnanimous forgiveness from Melibee.

As well as showing friends' advice as ineffective when compared to that of the married partner, the tale relegates kin, the wounded daughter Sophie (hardly mentioned again after her initial horrendous mutilation) into near insignificance, while suitors or admirers hardly figure, unless one counts the repentant enemies, who agree so readily to Lady Prudence's suggestion of begging Melibee's forgiveness on their knees (an ideal but implausible event which takes the tale into the realm of pious wish-fulfillment fantasy). Realistically speaking, however, the tale's main thrust seems to be that the advice of friends, or speaking out in open assembly (the basis of democratic systems) is not an effective way to arrive at advantageous decisions of policy, and that the intimate advice of the *éminence grise*, in this case of the wife (with her privileged position of private pillow-talk negotiations), gives more certainly desirable results.

Nonetheless; the clash between the idealized Christian message of forgiveness and the hard-headed message of avoiding even a just war for economic reasons is so paradoxically stark that the reader's final assessment of the tale is necessarily tentative, and one may well end by questioning the motives and the involvement of Lady Prudence herself, who has been fleshed out into a fully imagined woman and no longer fits the outlines of pale allegory. How true a friend is she herself, who dismisses her daughter Sophie's, i.e. Wisdom's claims to just retribution, and who finally seems to be advising her husband less in his interests than in her own, since she certainly gains rational and emotional dominance over him, and indeed complete *maistrie*? I believe Chaucer satirizes the whole subject of good advice from friends by distancing Lady Prudence from her literary forebear, Boethius's Lady Philosophy, and bringing her closer to the power-hungry Wife of Bath. Lady Prudence's advice can in the end be seen as consolatory rather than

moral, placatory rather than just, and however admirable in theory, difficult if not impossible in practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion the friends' advice in each tale can be compared on all three points to assess its basic soundness and practical effectiveness. In the "Franklin's Tale" the young friends' advice, while basically sound, was too socially flimsy to be practically effective and only increased Dorigen's inner turmoil. Justinus's advice in the "Merchant's Tale" was sound in itself, but practically ineffective as it aroused antagonism rather than acquiescence, while Placebo's canny choice of turning advice into support immediately won him agreement. The council's advice in the "Tale of Melibee" was contradictory and unsound in leading to war; while Lady Prudence's advice (put with such tact that the advised was but too happy to have the advisor take over), while both admirable in itself and practically effective in promoting peace, is flawed by being self-regarding and accepted for reasons of expediency rather than out of a strict sense of justice. On a spiritual level Lady Prudence's advice is undoubtedly ideal, but Chaucer's comic realism undercuts this idealism. Yet, paradoxically, practical wisdom can still be extracted from Chaucer's poker-faced adaptation of this pious treaty, especially when it comes to such questions as going to war, choosing your friends and recognizing your enemies, as politicians should note. As regards what could be called the private reader, Chaucer's demonstrations of the advice of friends finally vindicates the most telling insights of the ancient authors: that true friendship is in fact impossible between those who are not social equals, that only social equality guarantees the empathy necessary for true friendship and for truly good advice.

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