Even when the faithless wife occupies the centre of attention, it is the cleverness of her intrigue, and the sublime audacity of her inspired self-vindication, rather than her sensual desires which interest us; while the delicate conceit of an overruling providence in the persons of Pluto and Proserpine, king and queen of faery, who sagely debate the wisdom of King Solomon and of Jesus *filius Syrak*, relieves the essential coarseness of the tale. Even in the realm of faery, a wife will have her way: Pluto may espouse the cause of the injured husband, but the queen knows a subtler magic than his own.

It would have been easy, had Chaucer so wished, to give the tale a tragic ending; but it is conceived from beginning to end in the spirit of a 'humor' comedy of Ben Jonson. The tragedy is there, to be sure, but it is concealed so successfully from its victim that he ends his days, for aught we know, in the paradise of fools whose bliss is their ignorance.

The *Merchant's Tale* was written when Chaucer was at the height of his power, after he had already achieved one masterpiece of the same general character in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*.[1] Immoral the tale certainly is; but its immorality is not insidious, and the spirit of broad comedy which pervades the piece is all but sufficient to sweeten the unwholesomeness of it.

THE SQUIRE'S TALE

When Milton in *Il Penseroso* wished to summon up the memory of Chaucer, he did so by an allusion to the *Squire's Tale*: —

> Or call up him that left half-told
> The story of Cambuscan bold,
> Of Camball, and of Algarsife,

[1] That the *Merchant's Tale* is later than the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* is shown by the direct allusion to the latter at line 1685.

to its Study + Appreciation (Gloucester MA: Peter Sm 1957 [ori publicati 1900])

> And who had Canace to wife,
> That owned the virtuous ring and glass,
> And of the wondrous horse of brass
> On which the Tartar King did ride.

Another of England's greater poets, the author of the *Faerie Queene*, took upon himself the task of completing the half-told story, after addressing 'Dan Chaucer' in terms of deepest reverence and love.[1] A lesser poet, Leigh Hunt, who made a modernization of the *Squire's Tale*, entertained the idea of writing a conclusion to it, but wisely refrained.[2] The critic, Warton, placed the tale next after that of the Knight as 'written in the higher strain of poetry.'

A considerable part of the attention which this tale has received is due, I fancy, to the very fact that it was left half told. I am inclined to suspect that Chaucer abandoned the work because he did not know how to conclude it; and if this is so, any attempt on our part to guess its conclusion must be futile. The Tartar King is provided with a wondrous horse of brass, on which he can fly 'as hye in the air as doth an egle,' and in the space of four and twenty hours arrive in whatsoever land he will. To his daughter, Canace, is given a magic ring, whose virtue is such that with it on her finger she shall understand the voices of all the birds of heaven and converse with them in their own tongue, and a mirror in which all the deeds of men are revealed as if face to face. There is a magic sword, too, which will pierce the strongest armor, and like Achilles' spear 'is able with the change to kill and cure.' In the second part, Canace, by virtue of her

[1] *Faerie Queene*, Book 4, Cantos 2 and 3.

[2] See Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, 3. 211–212. One John Lane, a friend of Milton's father, produced in 1630 a long continuation of the tale, which has been published by the Chaucer Society. It is miserable nonsense.

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ring, learns a tale of unhappy love from a falcon, who is, we must suppose, some princess laboring under an enchanter's spell. There are great wars toward. With such a beginning, what is not possible? The imagination roams through limitless fields of pleasing conjecture. The very name of magic has its fascination for our poor race of mortals, shut in as we are by the relentless barrier of the possible and the actual. Any conclusion which Chaucer, or any other poet, could have written would be barren and commonplace compared with our vague imaginings. And this is inevitable in the very nature of the case. Let the magic horse, the ring, the sword, and mirror be put to practical use, let their use result in any definite achievements or events, and they are immediately vulgarized. Once more the tyranny of the actual, if not the possible, shuts us in; and the boundless scope of the imagination is narrowed to nothing. An exactly similar case is presented by Coleridge's wonderful fragment, *Kubla Khan*, which deals, be it noticed, with the same Oriental dynasty as Chaucer's tale, Kubla Khan being a grandson of Gengis Khan, whose name becomes the Cambinskan of Chaucer. This poem is unfinished for the good reason that it could not be finished; it is essentially a fragment; and so great is Coleridge's art that the fragment may be said to constitute a distinct literary form. Much might be said of the beauty of the incomplete, of the desirability of leaving things half finished. The beauty of a spring day is in large measure the promise of summer days to come, which, when they come, fall often below our expectation. The unequaled charm of a noble youth rests on the unlimited possibility of noble action which lies before him. The early death of Keats has served to magnify fourfold the estimate set upon his work. We have no proof

that he would ever have surpassed the actual achievements he has left to us. Indeed, there are indications that he would not have done so. Yet such is the power of the incomplete, that we hear critics speak of him as one who might have been a second Shakespeare. Or, to take an example from what might have been, suppose that Milton had been cut off after he had completed only the first two books of *Paradise Lost*. What should we not have expected of the ten remaining books of a poem which opens so magnificently? But we have the poem entire, and know that the level of the first two books was higher than Milton could consistently maintain. The more one considers the keenness of Chaucer's critical insight and the strange 'elvishness' of his character, the more strongly one suspects that Chaucer recognized this power of the incomplete, and deliberately left his tale half told.

In no case has Chaucer more happily suited the tale to the character of the teller than in the case of the Squire. As the Knight, his father, tells a noble tale of tournament and knightly love, so his son, the Squire, turns naturally to a theme of chivalry. But there is a difference. Warton says that 'the imagination of this story consists in Arabian fiction engrafted on Gothic chivalry.' It is in the days of our youth that the fiction of the *Arabian Nights* appeals most strongly to us. Before the 'shadows of our prison house' close about us, we are all impatient of the actual, and dream of the infinite possibilities that might follow on the impossible. The Knight has lived his life and worked his work, and so his story, however ideal in its spirit, is of things accomplished, of deeds already done. The Squire, though

> He had been somtyme in chivachye,
> In Flaundres, in Artoys, and Picardye,
> And born him wel, as of so litel space,

is living mainly in the infinite future, where all things are possible. All that his father has accomplished is as nothing beside what he intends to do. His charm, like that of the tale he tells, is in large measure the charm of incompleteness.

There is hardly a feature of the *Squire's Tale* which does not find its parallel in the Oriental literature of magic. A reader whose acquaintance with this literature is confined to the *Arabian Nights* will find such parallels in abundance.[1] But no single narrative which Chaucer might have used has yet been discovered. Whether any such narrative existed, or whether Chaucer merely allowed his imagination to play freely with the familiar themes of Arabian magic, filling in his background with such scraps of knowledge about Tartary and the Far East as he had picked up in reading or conversation, we cannot say. The general character of the tale, and in particular its unfinished state, would favor the latter theory.

Sources.

Professor Skeat tried hard to prove that Chaucer's acquaintance with Gengis Khan, and with such features of local color as his story presents, was derived from the famous book of the travels of Marco Polo; but this theory has been shown to be absolutely without foundation.[2] Such are Chaucer's mistakes and confusions that it is hard to believe that he could have had any connected account of the Tartars before him.[3]

[1] The whole subject has been investigated with great thoroughness by Mr. W. A. Clouston, in an article entitled *On the Magical Elements in Chaucer's Squire's Tale*, appended to the Chaucer Society's edition of John Lane's continuation of the *Squire's Tale*.

[2] J. M. Manley, 'Marco Polo and the Squire's Tale,' *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 11. 349–362.

[3] Perhaps this is the best place to notice another exploded theory, that of Professor Brandl, who with characteristic German ingenuity has found in the *Squire's Tale* an elaborate allegory of the English court, Cambinskan representing Edward III, and Canace his daughter-in-law Constance, second wife of John of Gaunt (*Englische Studien*, 12. 161). This fanciful theory has been demolished by Professor Kittredge, in *Englische Studien*, 13. 1–25.

THE FRANKLIN'S TALE

The portrait of the Franklin in the General Prologue, though an attractive one, hardly does full justice to this 'worthy vavasour.' We are shown a prosperous country land-holder, a man of sixty or over, we may suppose, with beard as white as the daisies which stud his spacious meadows, and with countenance as ruddy as the wine which lies in his well-stocked cellar. It takes no extraordinary power of clairvoyance to know that his table must be loaded with 'alle deyntees that men coude thinke,' while the general kindliness and good-nature of his bearing tell us that there is always room at his board for another guest. We like the good man, and should be glad enough to receive an invitation to spend a week-end in a house where it 'snows meat and drink.' But we dismiss him from our thought as 'Epicurus owne sone' for his good living, and as the Saint Julian of his country for generous hospitality. It is only after we have traveled a day or two with him on the Canterbury road, and heard him tell his noble tale, that we see more intimately into his life and aspirations.

The Franklin has much in common with the better type of the 'self-made man.' He has at his disposal all that money can buy, and he has held office in his own county; but he is uncomfortably conscious of a certain lack of 'gentility,'—betrayed by his fondness for the words 'gentil' and 'gentilesse,'—and of the full education which would adorn his prosperous estate.

'But, sires, bycause I am a burel man,
At my biginning first I yow biseche
Have me excused of my rude speche;
I learned never rethoryk certeyn.'