PART 3

Bodies, Objects, and Objects in the Shape of Bodies
Of the many recurring themes in *The Canterbury Tales*, how women can or cannot gain access to legal agency is one of the least studied, despite being one that Chaucer investigates at least three times. This theme emerges relatively early on in the Ellesmere order of the *Tales*, in “The Man of Law’s Tale,” in which Custance finds herself in England as the object of a pre-Christian murder trial. Although things look dicey for her, given that a corrupt knight has bloodied her hands with the gore of her ostensible victim, Custance’s status as one of God’s chosen emissaries for Christianity ultimately saves her: no human justice, no mortal mode of evidence, nor any earthly trial proceeding, the tale suggests, could possibly countervail divine justice. Indeed, whizzing into the trial scene come God’s hand, smiting Custance’s slanderous accuser on the neck, and God’s voice, revealing the truth of her innocence in a paradigmatically ungainsayable way. In response to these divine interventions, the local embodiment of earthly justice—King Alla—acquires her of her alleged crime and, moreover, converts himself and his people to Christianity. In this conversion, the law of man is shown to be subordinate to God’s justice, so that a woman can become not a powerless object of the law but rather a de facto agent of the law, an instrument or conduit through which law exerts itself, where that law is dually the law of the English king and the law of God. Custance, indeed, shifts from being an object of man’s law to being the Christianizer of the English law itself. In this shift, the tale makes a positive comment on the moral righteousness of the Christianized English Common Law and on its availability even to relatively disempowered members of the commonwealth, like women.

This idealistic affirmation of the law of man as a system of justice in
which women can function not as objects but as agents is reexplored and, ultimately, undercut in two much later tales from the Ellesmere order—“The Franklin’s Tale” and “The Physician’s Tale”—on which this essay centers. The former tale stages the susceptibility of the law to perversion and miscarriage by first demonstrating the dangerousness of contracts and second showcasing the potential for interpretive error that is encoded into the very logic of case law. The latter takes a yet darker turn, by showing how a state legal system, already vulnerable to corruption and misconstruction, can be turned into a veritable mongrel of injustice when that state legal system comes into conflict with an even more ancient, insidious, and inflexible system of justice. In the end, as I will demonstrate, the Franklin and Physician each offer a sobering corrective to the Man of Law’s optimistic perspective on women’s access to legal agency. The Franklin and Physician each insist that we recognize the law’s dangerous capacity to treat women merely as objects of value, where that value consists in their status as exchangeable sexual objects. Each tale will meditate on whether women can extricate themselves from their objectified status by mobilizing precedents; but each tale will, in its own way, conclude that precedents are not always efficacious in saving women from their objectification.

**DORIGEN’S MANY CONTRACTS AND MANY CASES**

“The Franklin’s Tale” uses legal discourse to enact a multifaceted inquiry into the nature of two kinds of legal interpretation: one, the interpretation of contracts and, two, the interpretation of precedents. This dual inquiry highlights how legal interpretation structures human social relations, particularly for women, in a way that can be objectifying and dehumanizing at worst or, at best, merely coercive. The tale stages the logic of contractual discourse—the language of obligation, debt, promise, and covenant—and shows how that logic can be marshaled in the service of patriarchalism and authoritarianism; it does so by pinning Dorigen between two conflicting contracts with men. Dorigen’s entrapment in multiple overlaid contracts puts her in a position where she seems only to have two options: first, she can allow herself to be a nonagential object of the law of contract; second, she can follow a stream of case precedents for suicide in an effort to circumvent the contractual overlap. It is a grim choice she faces, and one that the tale will stage as painstakingly as possible, deploying an ever-increasing
array of lexemes that—although each on its own can participate in many different lexicons—combine together to signal the tale’s intense interest in problems of agency in the law of contract.

The tale’s fascination with contractual agency appears from the very start, albeit in a romantic context. In the beginning of the tale, we meet a knight named Arveragus who marries a beautiful woman named Dorigen. Their exchanged vows of marital fidelity constitute the primary contract in the tale, in opposition to which the subsequent ones create friction. The Franklin’s account of their marital vows very carefully deploys the language and logic of binding contractual obligation: Arveragus “swoor” (V.745) an oath “of his free wyl” (745) that he would never take mastery over Dorigen “agayn hir wyl” (748). Thus, both parties are shown to engage in their marital obligation through their free will, and the obligation is consecrated with an oath. Of course, these terms and the taking of oaths are part and parcel of standard medieval marriage rites, but as Chaucer’s tale progresses, it will hone in on specific terms that foreground the contractual obligation inherent in marriage—a contractual obligation that will be important to the rest of the tale.

Indeed, Dorigen’s response to Arveragus’s freely willed oath of obligation revolves around the words *trouthe* and *trewe*, which have, as Richard Firth Green has shown, taken on tremendous ideological significance as concepts in the law of contract by the late Ricardian period. Prior to the Ricardian period, these terms seem primarily to have denoted something like interpersonal trust or honor, thus befitting a tale about marriage. But during the Ricardian period, concomitant with the rise of documentarianism in the laws of contract and obligation, the terms come increasingly to signify a more technical legal notion, that of documentary verifiability and the creation of legal contracts. Thus, when Dorigen agrees to marry Arveragus, packing two versions of this emergent legal keyword into her vow, “Sire, I wol be youre humble trewe wyf— / Have heer my trouthe—til that myn herte breste” (758–59), we are urged to think not just about her honesty and trustworthiness but also about the legally binding nature of a marriage vow. Dorigen is wed to Arveragus not only by her honor but by a binding contractual obligation.

Soon thereafter, Arveragus heads out on an adventure voyage for a couple of years without his wife—never a good idea in romance narratives—during which time Dorigen, ever-faithful, pines for him, worrying obsessively over what she calls “the grisly rokkes blake” (859), the seemingly agential
objects on the shore, which she fears might sink his returning ship. In an attempt to protect him from these grisly rocks, she prays for him to return to her safely—exerting what little agency she feels that she has over inanimate objects that seem far more powerful than she. Indeed, Dorigen seems perplexingly obsessed with these rocks, as she later helplessly wails, “But, Lord, thise grisly feendly rokkes blake, / That semen rather a foul confusion / Of werk than any fair creacioun / Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable / Why han ye wroght this werk unresonable?” (868–72). What incites such anxiety in Dorigen is that these rocks seem to possess not just agency but also malicious will—in contravention of God’s wisdom and perfection. They seem to Dorigen hell-bent on harming her beloved, through their rocklike immutability and their stubborn refusal to obey reason. She imagines them having a great degree of direct power over her and her husband’s fate, in obvious contrast with the powerlessness that she herself feels to keep him safe. In sum, for her, the agential rocks represent, metonymically, the law of Nature itself: inscrutable, arbitrary, uncontrollable, and intermittently malicious. They are the distillation in miniature of the many possible deaths or adversities to which Arveragus would be exposed on every day of his voyage, and they reveal to her the precariousness of her happily contracted marital bond with her husband.

It is this sense of powerlessness to control her reality and protect her marriage that preforms her willingness to enter into a second contract, which countermands the first with Arveragus. While Arveragus has been away, Aurelius the squire has become erotically obsessed with Dorigen. He has tried in various ways to woo her, but she has proved as stonily unmoving in her loyalty to her marital contract with her husband as have the grisly rocks in their mindless menace. Even so, Dorigen eventually takes pity on Aurelius, making a vow that, if he can make the grisly rocks disappear, she will favor him with her love (988–98). Contract number two, obviously in conflict with her marital contract with Arveragus, thus emerges, resulting from her wish to subordinate the agency she perceives the rocks to have—from her fantasy that she can divest the rocks of agency by exerting agency herself.

She enters into this second verbal contract, of course, believing the disappearance of the rocks to be a complete impossibility—indeed, the tale specifically says that she enters into this contract with Aurelius “in pley” (988). And she is not alone: Aurelius calls the feat of disappearing the rocks “an impossible” (1009). This claim of impossibility is pointed: it raises a particu-
larly complex issue in early contract law. In the emergent medieval English law of contract, any contract or covenant that is entered into between two or more parties, in which any condition of the contracted service or obligation is impossible can be ruled unenforceable and nonbinding. But, awkwardly, an impossible contract can also be ruled binding, with the impossible term of the contract alone ruled unenforceable. Thus, the tale sets up this second contract pointedly as a meditation on the limits of contractual obligation: on the one hand, this contract is clearly entered into with no serious intention behind it and is marked for its impossibility. But on the other, since such a contract could be argued binding in a court of law, Dorigen could legally become the object of exchange in the contract, as well as the agential subject who—however jestingly—initially entered into it. Seemingly to get us out of this legal snarl, the legal underpinning of Dorigen’s vow to Aurelius is—or at least should be—fully evacuated when Arveragus returns: since Arveragus is home, the rocks no longer need moving. Both for its prima facie impossibility and for its post factum irrelevance, then, the second contract with Aurelius should be null and void.

But that would be a pretty dull tale.

And the tale is not dull; it is keen to explore the absolute limits of contractual obligation between people. For this reason, the tale confects a way—far-fetched though it is—to obviate the impossibility problem. In order to coerce Dorigen into honoring her contract with him, Aurelius has no choice but to turn to magic. Broken-hearted, Aurelius goes to meet with a magician in Orleans, and they strike up yet another bargain and enter into a third contract: Aurelius will pay a thousand pounds if the magician makes the rocks vanish. And, miraculously, the deed is shortly done: “But thurgh his magik, for a wyke or tweye / It semed that alle the rokkes were awaye” (1295–96). This is most distressing for fair Dorigen, who launches into a monologue about her deplorable position, again evoking the contractual concept of possibility—“Allas . . . that ever this sholde happe! / For wende I never, by possibilite / That swich a monstre or merveille might be!” (1342–44)—to indicate the level of injustice of her entrapment in a sexual contract with Aurelius, in which she herself has now become the object of exchange. For the second time, Dorigen signals why the contract might be ruled nonactionable—its central obligation being “impossible”—but here, she sees herself as nevertheless beholden to the terms of the contract, since the ostensibly “impossible” event has “semed” to find fulfillment. Once the rocks have disappeared, Dorigen shifts from being an agential subject who deploys
contractual language to being a nonagential object of that contract—the
good that is to be exchanged for its fulfillment—entrapped and rendered
powerless by the supervening authority of her own contractual vow.

Grasping her disempowerment through her contractual obligation to
Aurelius, she falls back on a mainstay of common law procedure: she re-
cites a slew of near precedents for her current predicament, in an attempt
to gain clarity on what she should do. Specifically, she lists the scores of
unhappy women in history and literature who, trapped by fate and the evil
workings of men, have chosen to slay themselves rather than succumb to
sexual dishonor. Women, that is, who have chosen to render themselves ab-
solute objects—corpses, rather than volitional human beings—in response
to entrapment in a sexually degrading situation in a supervening patriarchal
system of power and legal relationality.

As she recounts these precedents for female suicide in cases of loss of
sexual value, she deploys language that resonates with contract law:

But natheles, yet have I levere to lese
My lif than of my body to have a shame,
Or knowe myselven fals, or lese my name;
And with my deth I may be quyte, ywis. (1360–63)

Here, by describing her death as an “acquitting” of her obligation to Aurelius,
she semantically flags her situation as a contractual problem: she, like the Man
of Law in his tense conversation with Harry Bailey, will “acquyt [herself] now
of [hir] biheeste” (II.37). To be sure, the language of “quyting” can have many
valences in Middle English—including the famous inter-pilgrim “quyting” that
provides the central agonism of The Canterbury Tales overall. But, in context of
“The Franklin’s Tale”’s overall thematic interest in contractuality, and the ever-
growing net of contractual language in the tale, Dorigen’s particular usage of
this term sounds in a rather more legally specific key.

As her lament continues, she deepens and complicates its embedded le-
galism in several ways. She does so first by noting the specifically trespassory
nature of the sexual bind in which she finds herself. From there, she coordi-
nates her own contractual trespass with those of many women before her:

Hath ther nat many a noble wyf er this,
And many a mayde, yslaun hirself, allas!
Rather than with hir body doon trespas? (1364–66)
But Dorigen’s sense that her problem is one of contractual obligation and legal conflict is not limited to her registering of her need to “acquit” herself of her obligation, nor to her awareness of the impending bodily “trespass” to which she is ensnared. Her next lexical foregrounding of the legal nature of her plight comes when she anchors her listing of the virtuous women before her as constituting some kind of legal precedent for her case. She does so by again deploying the lexicon of legal procedure, saying, “Yis, certes, lo, thise stories beren witnesse” (1367) to what she herself must do. Next, she specifies the “bearing witness” that she expects her stories to do as “case” precedent a few lines later: “O Cedasus, it is ful greet pitee / To reden how thy doghtren deyde, allass! / That slowe hemself for swich manere cas” (1428–30). The unprepossessing line “That slowe himself for swich manere cas” amplifies the legality of this moment not only by using the word cas but also by implicitly raising the logic of case law: situations that arise in legal cases are resolved by looking back to historical cases that work in “such a manner,” or, in the same way. The precise events do not need to be the same, but the manner does. Dorigen’s already contractually inclined mind—having made one with Arveragus and another with Aurelius—is quick to fall into legal logic, and even to “pleyn” in a manner evocative of presenting cases: “Thus pleyned Dorigen a day or tweye, / Purposynge evere that she wolde deye” (1457–58). The term “pleyned,” of course, means “complained” or “lamented,” but, cognate with “plaintiff,” it can also mean to present a case. Given the proliferation of contractual and legal language around this term and in “The Franklin’s Tale” more broadly, it seems designed to signal the kind of “complaint” Dorigen makes as a precedential, legal one. Ironically and painfully, Dorigen is not only the accused in this imaginary trial, but is also her own prosecutor. By recounting precedential cases ad nauseam in which women faced with sexual disgrace choose self-slaughter over shame, Dorigen builds a case against herself, weaving herself more and more deeply into the web of patriarchal legalism that she has fallen into through her overlapping contracts.

The patriarchal ensnarement of Dorigen takes a turn soon thereafter, when she confesses her bind to her husband, Arveragus. Happily, it seems, Arveragus is supportive of her, bidding her to do what she must to protect her “trouthe” (1474) to Aurelius, and vowing that he will try to “endure” (1484) the insult of having his wife couple with another man. In this tale, evidently, the cumulative authority of case law is not enough to keep Dorigen ensnared in a disempowering obligation that results in self-harm.
this tale, through the collusion between Arveragus and Dorigen, precedent becomes an option, not a mandate; how contracts get fulfilled, that is, can vary freely according to circumstances and according to the free wills of the agential parties involved. By confiding in Arveragus and, with his permission, overriding her list of narrative precedents, Dorigen reclaims her agency even within a contractual system of overlaps that seemed bound to be her undoing.

Or does she? Despite the fact that Arveragus addresses his distraught wife “with glad chiere, in freendly wyse” (1467), thus putatively playing the role of a supportive and understanding spouse, the particulars of his creation of a loophole in his marital contract with Dorigen are far from straightforwardly geared to spare Dorigen any distress. When Arveragus tells Dorigen she shall hold her truth, he adds the oath, “by my fay” (1474). Seemingly innocuous, this oath begins to reveal that Arveragus’s true motives in having Dorigen guard her “trouthe” to Aurelius are far from magnanimous. He tells Dorigen that he would rather be “ystiked” than have her break her honor (1476–78), thus registering her honor as his problem, as his concern. Immediately thereafter, he anchors this impression further, noting that “Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe” (1479)—not woman, but man. Evidently, Arveragus understands this renegotiation of terms with Dorigen primarily through his sense of his own honor, not hers. Indeed, he quickly insists that he will murder her if she ever breathes a word of her tryst with Aurelius to anyone (1480–83). From there, he says “As I may best, I wol my wo endure” (1484), thus construing her impending affair with Aurelius as his own woe, rather than Dorigen’s; in so doing, he utterly elides her own feelings. Arveragus, that is, allows her this loophole not so much for her sake, nor to promote her sense of freedom and agency, but because it seems right to him to uphold the contract, so long as he can keep his own honor untainted. Arveragus, then, actually supports the patriarchal system that seeks to objectify Dorigen through contractual entrapment and coercion. The lack of agency felt by Dorigen is tragically encapsulated in her statement to Aurelius, made “half as she were mad” (1511), that her husband “bad” (1512) her to hold her “trouthe” with Aurelius, “allas! allas!” (1513). She may have escaped the precedential fate of suicide, but she has not accessed true agency as a legal subject.

Even so, there is a relatively happy conclusion to the conflict. When Dorigen goes to tell Aurelius of her husband’s decision, Aurelius is so moved by the “gentilesse” of Arveragus that he decides not to hold her to her con-
tract, instead releasing her of all her bonds. In releasing her, Aurelius recapitulates the language of *trouthe* that we encountered in the first contract between Arveragus and Dorigen as well as the language of contractual obligation that Dorigen had so recently uttered:

> “Madame, seyth to youre lord Arveragus
> That sith I se his grete gentilesse
> To yow, and eek I se wel youre distresse,
> That his were levere han shame (and that were routhe)
> Than ye to me sholde breke thus youre trouthe . . .
> I yow relese, madame, into youre hond
> Quyt every serement and every bond . . .
> My trouthe I plighte, I shal yow never repreve
> Of no bihest . . .” (1526–30, 1533–34, 1537–38)

In this story, there is a trickle-down effect of truth: Arveragus and Dorigen hold to their truth, which exerts hermeneutic pressure on Aurelius to interpret his contract liberally as well, rather than holding Dorigen to a contract made as an ostensible “inpossible” obligation. Through this emergent economy of *trouthe*, Dorigen’s agential status is maintained, as is her sexual virtue. It must be noted, however, that the core dynamic in this scene is between the two men: it is because of Aurelius’s perception of Arveragus’s honor (1527) that he releases Dorigen of her bond. The power dealing is between two agential men, with Dorigen acting merely as the object of exchange. She may escape self-slaughter at this point, but she does not gain ground as a fully fledged agent in brokering her own contracts and determining her own value.

Unfortunately for Aurelius, his dissolution of his contract with Dorigen does nothing to relieve him of his contractual problem, because of his preexisting agreement to compensate the magician for making the rocks vanish. Aurelius laments, “I se namoore but that I am fordo. / Myn heritage moot I nedes selle, / And been a beggere; heere may I nat dwelle . . .” (1562–64). When he goes to the magician, however, the pressure to demonstrate generosity and *trouthe* between men continues: the magician absolves Aurelius of his contractual debt, following Arveragus’s and then Aurelius’s example, so that Aurelius will not have to sell off his patrimony and inheritance. The magician says, eliding Dorigen altogether, “Leeve brother / Everich of you dide gentilly til oother / Thou art a squier, and he is a knyght / But God
forbede, for his blisful might / But if a clerk coude doon a gentil dede / As wel as any of yow, it is no drede!” (1607–12). In keeping with the thematics of the rest of the story, honesty, good intention, and trouthe-keeping among men are contagious, even if that contagion is born of each man’s desire to keep his own reputation for being “gentil” intact, and the magician forgives Aurelius’s debt, claiming that Aurelius’s true intention to perform his end of the bargain “is ynoh.”

On the one hand, this seems a rather sanguine take on the interpretability of legal obligation. It is a tale in which the trouthe-based interpretations of contracts enable everyone to thrive. In the end, by each person’s reliance on their own agential trouthe, the destabilizing social effects of conflicting contracts are undone. The tale has borne witness to a drama of language, in which interpersonal relationships are created, endangered, broken, and remade by the verbal enactment and dissolution of promises and contracts, and in which trouthe is sometimes better maintained by flouting case precedents and breaking contracts than by adhering to them.

But on the other hand, the tale implicitly registers that these truth-based, honor-saving contractual loopholes are designed by and for men. Dorigen, throughout the tale, is the object of the law—the object of her marital contract, the object of her contract with Aurelius, the object of her litany of precedential felo de se, the object of the new contract she makes with Arveragus. To be sure, the rigid law of contractual obligation and the rigid logic of precedent have some give in them, but only when the wielders of those laws are men. In the end, contracts and precedents are objects: they have power only insofar as male interpreters grant power to them. If male interpreters instead deny all-encompassing power to these legal instruments, then the male interpreters themselves become the agents and authors of the law, rather than its passive objects. Women, on the other hand, remain the law’s objects all the while.

Unlike “The Man of Law’s Tale,” which imagines the fundamental and historical underpinning of British law as just and Christian, “The Franklin’s Tale” insists that we recognize the potential dangerousness of contracts, words of obligation, and the ways in which they can imperil self and social relationality—particularly for women. But in the end, “The Franklin’s Tale” evinces its own flavor of optimism about the law, suggesting that if all male parties bring their trouthe to the negotiation table, and, moreover, if all parties are willing to bend the strict letter of case precedent to suit the exigencies of a particular situation, a just outcome can be arrived at, in which
all parties survive intact. For the Franklin, the justness of legal relationality is underpinned by the justness and free exercise of interpretation of the male agents of the law whose lives are interconnected by an ever-shifting net of obligation that can be recast as needed.

THE CONFLICTING JURISDICTIONS OF VIRGINIA

“The Physician’s Tale,” by contrast, paints a far darker picture of the law, showing it to have a dangerous tendency to objectify women beyond reason and redemption. As will become clear, the Physician, who speaks immediately after the Franklin in the Ellesmere order, sees overlapping jurisdictions, legal procedures, and case precedent not as potential resources to be exploited for the creation of greater and more prosocial trouthe among men, but rather simply as machines by which women run the risk of being trapped in the status of radically contingent, nonagential objects. Although not widely regarded as one of Chaucer’s more compelling tales, “The Physician’s Tale” is not without its driving philosophy. Indeed, I would suggest that the Physician tells a tale of astonishing sophistication about the socio-legal plight of women living in a patriarchal society. Throughout, the tale bodies forth a programmatic and witheringly critical interrogation of how women’s bodies can become the objects of law and what the consequences are of that objectification. The tale will stage a situation in which there are so many competing claims on the body of a woman that she cannot tell her own tale, cannot speak in her own defense, and certainly cannot—as the Franklin would have us believe—rely on well-disposed and truth-seeking male intercessors to extricate her from legal binds. To this end, the Physician structures his tale carefully as an imaginative pitting of a particularly corrupt version of the medieval English law of villeinage—the law that governs the free or unfree status of people—against the long-standing Roman law of the pater familias, to suggest that, in the absence of innately just and law-abiding male representatives, young women are terrifyingly vulnerable to being converted into mere objects in the eyes of the law. Their vulnerability to being converted into objects—objects of fragile sexual value—means that, at least in “The Physician’s Tale,” women have no real legal agency. In the Physician’s story, women’s un-power to tell their own tales, their un-power to overwrite and rewrite the law is irredeemable and tragic, as Virginia’s demise makes clear.
We meet the beautiful, young, virtuous Virginia, the legitimate and thus free-born daughter of a knight named Virginius and his wife (VI.5), through the eyes of the Physician himself, who describes her beauty and gentility at great length, taking up, indeed, nearly half the story with detailed meditations on her excellence. Once the Physician has introduced us to Virginia, he turns to tell how Appius, a local judge, is smitten with desire for her, after catching the merest glimpse of her while she is on her way to temple. Rather than attempting to woo Virginia, however, as Aurelius had initially done with Dorigen, this judge uses the legal machinery at his disposal, in essence, to steal her: he colludes with his henchman, the cherl Claudius, to claim that Virginia is not in fact the legitimate daughter of the knight Virginius and his wife, but is instead a thral that has been stolen by Virginius. Rather than conforming to standard procedures for pursuing a villeinage case, namely procuring a naifty writ against Virginia, and instead availing himself of his boss’s privileged status as the maker of legal documents, the cherl Claudius simply presents a “cursed bille” (176) at court, asserting that Virginius, “Agayns the lawe, agayn al equitee, / Holdeth, expres agayn the wyl of me, / My servant, which that is my thral by right” (181–83). Without further examination, without assembling witnesses to attest to the churl’s allegation, without even hearing a word of self-defense from Virginius (191–97), Appius passes summary judgment: “The cherl shal have his thral, this I awarde” (202). Thus, the judge bends the law of personhood to his sexually depraved will, superimposing unfree status—that of a “thral”—on a free woman, superimposing on her, that is, the status of an object in the eyes of the law.

Further activating a reader’s legal awareness and complicating that awareness by insisting on some of the moral problems that can emerge through the wrongful enforcement of villeinage law, that bill mentions that Virginius has broken “al equitee” (181) in keeping Virginia for himself, ironically invoking a key phrase—equity—for bringing suit before an appellate court. But this evocation of “equitee” does not result in equitable judgment, but rather in its opposite: instead of waiting for Virginius to defend his daughter, Appius summarily rules against him, awarding Virginia to Claudius, who will hand her back over to Appius himself. Evidently, the very law of equity itself can be badly corrupted in a trumped up trial of villeinage, and can instead be converted into a mechanism of legal corruption by the powerful men who control the law’s mechanisms and devices.

Although Chaucer follows Livy and the Roman de la Rose in setting the
tale in Rome, the evocation of villeinage law is designed to resonate with the legal culture of fourteenth-century England, since the law of villeinage had been a feature of the English legal landscape for many generations by the time Chaucer wrote. But the Physician’s evocation of villeinage law comes at a moment in English history at which the law that governed free/unfree status is under strain: in the wake of the plague years, as the labor supply in England has declined, the problem of controlling populations of serfs and regulating the status of laborers has become an increasingly volatile and complex issue. Thus, when Virginia’s status comes up for examination by Appius and Virginius, the contemporary fourteenth-century legal awareness of the precariousness and intricacy of determining someone’s free status would be quickened. This poem, that is, quietly announces itself not as pertaining to Rome but as pertaining to contemporary medieval Europe, and as meditating on how this contemporary law could be miscarried and perverted in England.

Virginia has been deprived of her status as a free woman through a corruptly conducted and summarily executed villeinage trial. She herself, we must note, has not even been called to account for herself, nor to defend her right to her free status. Virginia is, to this point in the tale, utterly mute, merely a disputed object of value in the eyes of the law. And in this omission of Virginia’s access to justice, the Physician’s dark legal exemplum parts ways with the Man of Law’s much more sanguine presentations of women’s access to legal power, their access to agency via either God’s truth or their own ability to tell their own tales. It also parts ways with “The Franklin’s Tale”’s more complex optimism about a trouthe-ful law maintained by good men, by reminding readers what can happen when the men who control the law fail in their role as upholders of trouthe.

But this grotesque abuse of the procedures and mechanisms of the law is not the limit of Virginia’s woe, indignity, and objectification. Instead, when Virginius returns home to report to her what has happened, we find that Virginia is caught between one dehumanizing and highly corruptible jurisdiction—the law of villeinage—and another: the law of her own father as the Roman pater familias. He decides that, rather than allowing his daughter to be debauched and dishonored, he will simply execute her by striking off her head—literalizing her status as an object by rendering her a corpse. As atrocious as this decision may seem, it is critical to recognize that a father in the ancient Roman legal system was perfectly within his rights to slay a daughter, particularly one who destroyed or threatened to
destroy the family’s honor by engaging in illicit sexual acts. The conflict in the tale, then, is between a corruptible and patriarchal extrafamilial mode of power and a Draconian and patriarchal intrafamilial one. Appius’s justice is the justice of social control, which seeks to keep unfree persons unfree, to regulate motion and movement, and to control the female body. Virginius’s justice is the justice of honor, the protecting and sequestration of family cohesion and the nom du père. Indeed, even her own name derives directly from her father’s; her independent personhood is radically compromised from the get-go.

Virginia thus is set up as “a pure object,” caught between two competing and overlapping legal jurisdictions, each of which derives its juridical power by denying the independent humanity and agency of its subjects, and each of which is equally susceptible to misuse by the men who control it. She has, to this point in the tale, exerted no power, spoken no words, participated in no meaningful way in the processes that determine and delimit her life, and yet her fate has been categorically and ineradicably determined. As the Physician presents it, both of these systems of justice are lamentable, according to the reactions of the local populace, although it is crucial to note that it is Virginius’s familial law that ultimately triumphs: the family can do an end-run around publicly corrupt justice by taking the law into its own hands and exerting power directly and irrevocably over a living body. It does so, simply and awfully, by turning that living body into a radical object, a corpse, which cannot in any way impinge upon the honor of the family, because of its abject lack of agency and correlative fixity of signification. As in the Franklin’s narrative, so here an interpersonal solution is offered to legal entrapment. But here that solution is coded as extremely tragic: both Harry Bailey and the Physician himself find Virginia’s fate horrifying (288–93).

And yet, within the tale itself, there does seem to be some kind of emergent and possibly salvific mode of true justice. Virginius’s choice to slay his child seems to meet, if not with the approval of the locals, at least with their understanding, since Virginius goes unpunished for the slaughter. Once Appius’s malfeasance is discovered, by contrast, the populace responds by imprisoning him (268), indicating their intolerance for his corrupt exercise of legal power. Appius’s corruption of the local legal system, then, is corrected by the community. And it is corrected in part through the expert knowledge of the locals themselves: according to the Physician, the people were aware of Appius’s shady character (266), so the judgment against him was not difficult to reach. Meanwhile, in a more surprising move, Virgin-
ius, heretofore entirely unable to exercise merciful or equitable judgment on anyone's behalf—including and especially his own daughter—finds it in his heart to beg leniency on Claudius's behalf, so that he will be exiled rather than killed for his collusion with Appius (274, 273). Thus, Virginia's entrapper escapes her cruel fate by the exercise of the very kind of equitable ruling that she herself was utterly denied.

But this conclusion to the tale raises a rather perplexing problem. How has the populace—including Virginius himself—suddenly become empowered, capable of exercising its own legal agency as interpreter of the law? How have they managed, at this late stage, both to punish Appius's corruptness and to understand the value of equitable rulings? In some strange way, I would suggest, Virginia's death seems to have righted the legal system in her city. It seems to have done so by integrating the local knowledge of people who were able to attest to the characters of the parties involved. The manner in which the locals use Appius's known character as evidence against him corresponds with how medieval English jurors were meant to bring their own knowledge of the character of an accused party to bear on their assessment of his probable guilt.

From Virginia's lamentable death, that is, we see an emergent form of common law procedure and common law justice, a justice based on the collective exercise of immediate knowledge. From Virginia's death, from witnessing that gross injustice, the people of her town learn their proper role as, in effect, guarantors of the law.

This canniiness about legal procedure, this staging of the careful exercise of collective, community knowledge about a person's status and character, reflects how villeinage trials are supposed to work in England in the late Middle Ages. In a case of 1283, a judge rules that the circumstances of a defendant's allegedly unfree status are complex enough to warrant the formation of a full jury, so as better to assess the all-important question of whether the defendant's father was or was not unfree. Communal knowledge is ground zero of villeinage procedure in medieval history; the judgment of the people is what is supposed to attest to a person's status and, in many cases, to defend that person's freedom. Unfortunately that shared, communal knowledge arrives too late for Virginia herself. Virginia, object of the corrupted consistory justice and the twisted patriarchal logic of her father, becomes, in effect, the point of origin for true and collective justice in her death.

But why? To answer that question, we must note that, despite Virginia's lack of control over her own fate, she does speak up, however briefly and ineffectively, in her own defense. She begs her father first for “mercy” (231),
and then she evokes the language of equity courts, asking her father if there is no “grace” or “remedye” for her situation (236). In this plea, not present in Chaucer’s sources, she channels fourteenth-century English legal theory, recognizing that in cases of misapplied justice, the best available recourse is to appeal a ruling in a court of equity, by relying on the traditional formulae for assessing nonequitable prior judgments, namely that they now need the king’s grace, conscience, and remedy to be resolved properly. She shows herself aware, that is, of the logic of the English appellate system, notwithstanding her residence in Rome. But her father—relying on his Roman right as the pater familias—flatly denies her access to remedial justice. At this point, having exhausted all possibility of equitable appeal or remedy, she has no choice but acquiesce to his harsh and arbitrary ruling that she must die.

But, even as she acquiesces in body, in voice she asks for a moment to make her own complaint, to tell her own story and express her feelings. In so doing, in making herself an author, however briefly, she resists the tale’s overarching pressure on her to remain simply and unqualifiedly an object. As a precedential justification for her wish to lament, she makes reference to the biblical story of Jephthah, who unrighteously slew his daughter (240). Virginia notes that even this woman was allowed to complain before her execution and that, here again relying on the technical vocabulary of the law, Jephthah’s daughter did no “trespass” in her request for self-expression (242). In this brief and pointedly juridical reference to the biblical story, Virginia reminds the Physician’s audience of the fundamental nature of their own shared legal system, their own shared legal habits: she reminds them of the logic of case-as-precedent, the same logic that Dorigen performed in her recitation of historical female suicides. By locating her own right to complain in the precedential biblical story of Jephthah’s daughter, Virginia simultaneously calls attention to English legal logic and reminds her audience that all legal authority derives ultimately from the Bible, the Old Testament, the book of God’s Law itself, not from the wicked earthly justices and narcissistic fathers who notionally represent that law.

Indeed, Virginia’s case-based protest against the justice of this ruling is savvy not simply in terms of its formal articulation or its procedure but also in terms of its explicit content. As medieval exegetes well recognized, Jephthah’s slaying of his daughter was wildly unjust; he was condemned as being overly obedient, overly strict, and unable to moderate justice for her daughter based on extenuating circumstances. Thus, at the moment of her own death, Virginia is able to marshal a precedent that not only justifies her
own request for a moment to express herself but also quietly undercuts any
notion that Virginius could possibly be justified in taking matters into his
own hands as he does. Virginia’s final lament, although not efficacious in
saving her own life, nevertheless succeeds in highlighting the wrongfulness
of both of the two legal systems within which she is trapped. For the Physi-
cian, patriarchal systems of law that derive a woman’s value from her sexual
purity and seek to regulate that purity, either by documentation or violence,
must be counterbalanced by equitable collective judgment and an awareness
of the hermeneutic flexibility with which one ought to approach the law that
governs personal freedom.

The implicit dual critique of the law in “The Franklin’s Tale”—a critique
of the dangers of contractual obligations and a critique of the authority in-
herent in precedent—becomes a rather more explicit, and far more damning,
critique of the law in “The Physician’s Tale.” There, rather than seeing how
like-minded and trouthe-ful people can work even dicey legal circumstances
to their benefit, we see how two conflicting but equally patriarchal forms of
legal power are forcefully exerted over the body of Virginia and how she,
debarred from any kind of authority or power as an agential subject, can
only exert influence on her city’s deeply corrupted legal system once she has
become a corpse, a radical object, and one now devoid of sexual value, but
impregnated with a surplus of symbolic, ideological value as a case of unex-
ercised equity. Her precedent-based complaint about Jephthah’s daughter
has no efficacy in the end for her; but her very vulnerability, powerlessness,
and ultimately mortality, her ability to suffer an unjust death, finally prompt
the legal reformation we witness in Appius’s imprisonment and, ironically,
Claudius’s partial pardon. Her legally reforming power consists solely in her
fully achieved status as an object, a thing, a nonperson. Thus, in the end,
“The Physician’s Tale” enacts a two-pronged critique of the law, both as a real
structure of power in the political world and as an interpersonal structure
of power in families, that amplifies the objectification and dehumanization
of women as at once a possible side effect of those systems of power and,
seemingly, as the initial condition for the exercise of collective judgment and
equity. That is, in “The Physician’s Tale,” it is Virginia’s death that prompts
the evolution of a better justice in Rome; women’s objectification lies at the
heart of justice, whether that justice is corrupt or equitable.

In the end, then, “The Physician’s Tale” serves as a bleakly cautionary
corrective to “The Franklin’s Tale,” with all of its emphasis on free will, gen-
erosity, and interpretation as efficacious in determining the actionability of
contracts and precedents that determine the fates and statuses of women. Where Dorigen survived her contractual double-bind, Virginia has no such salvation from the conflicting laws of villeinage and patrimony, no such recourse to well-disposed men who have legal power. Women, the Physician warns, do not often have the kind of power that men have to bend the law to their will. At baseline, in legal situations, women are vulnerable to being converted into exchangeable objects of sexual value while they are alive, and into nodal objects of ideological heft when they are dead. Since they cannot always tell their own tales, cannot always interpret case precedent for themselves, cannot serve as their own jurors or judges, they too often end up instead subject to the hermeneutic practices of the men who surround them, insuring and ratifying their status as objects of value in the eyes of the law and of the law’s male practitioners.

Notes

1. Chaucer’s interest in how women are barred from legal power in other poems has been more studied. Focusing on *Troilus and Criseyde*, Christopher Cannon has read Criseyde’s letter in book five as a manifestation of Chaucer’s awareness that women had relatively little access to legal representation in the late English Middle Ages. See Cannon, “The Rights of Medieval Women: Crime and the Issue of Representation,” in *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 156–85.

2. Maura Nolan has studied the utility and gravity of legalism in “The Man of Law’s Tale.” In Nolan’s view, “For a vernacular poet such as Chaucer, seeking to establish not only his own authority but also the authority of poetic and secular discourse itself, the language of the law could provide an essential vocabulary of legitimacy.” See Maura Nolan, “Aquiteth Yow Now,” in *Letter of the Law*, ed. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 152.


5. Helen Cooney sees the tale itself as an enactment of a providential view of his-


7. Alan Gaylord registers that the core problem for Dorigen in the tale is one of two conflicting contracts, one between her and Arveragus and one between her and Aurelius. Gaylord, “The Promises in The Franklin’s Tale,” *ELH* 31 (1964): 331–65, at 342.

8. The numerous records of lawsuits between parties about the legal enforceability of a marital covenant, bond, or contract attest to the seriousness of the contractual obligation that marriage had become by the late Middle Ages in England. In one case from the 1490s in London, a woman tries to free herself from an engagement that was witnessed and entered into using the correct formulae for betrothal; even her mother testifies against her in the case, fearing damage to her own reputation if her oath were to be found untrue (she had sworn in favor of the daughter’s marriage during its initial contracting). See *Love and Marriage in Late Medieval London*, ed. Shannon McSheffrey (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 37–40. As R. H. Helmholz has shown, the words exchanged are the central and necessary constituent of a legally enforceable marriage: “... all the cases required an actual exchange of promises and words which clearly related to marriage. The contract might be difficult to evaluate, but an actual contract there had to be.” See Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 45.


10. Emma Lipton has also noted how carefully the words of Dorigen and Arveragus echo the formulae required for binding marriage—though Lipton also draws out how the Franklin’s protagonists emphasize their own free will and mutuality, indicative of the tale having taken on board the values of “sacramental marriage.” See Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late*
Medieval English Literature (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 29–30, 34.


12. For a fuller discussion of marital contractuality in general and specific instances in which the medieval law seeks to establish the legally enforceable status of specific marital contracts, see Helmholz, 25–73.


14. Alan Gaylord, considering Dorigen’s “promise” to Aurelius, notes the solemnly covenantal tone of their exchange, but notes that “legalism” was not necessary in Aurelius’s mind (335).

15. For this reason, Wood has criticized Dorigen’s “single-mindedly literal” compulsion to honor the contract; this reading, however, blunts the legal-theoretical sophistication of the tale. Chauncey Wood, “Of Time and Tide in the Franklin’s Tale,” Philological Quarterly 45 (1966): 688–711, at 701–2. Alan Gaylord, though, has noted that in her initial articulation of her “solemn promise” to Aurelius, Dorigen clearly believes her vow would never be meaningful because the terms of its fulfillment were so difficult (334).


17. Simpson, 29, 108. For other cases in which the court seems mixed on whether the impossibility of the terms of the contract do or do not rule it nonbinding, see Y. B. Mich. 31 Edw. 1 (1303). In this case, Bereford ruled the impossible contract binding, but Toudeby dissentied. Yearbooks of the Reign of Edward the First: Years XXX and XXXI, Rolls Series no. 31, ed. Alfred Harwood (London: Longmans, 1863), 476–77. For Bereford, an impossible condition could be ruled irrelevant to the ultimate doing of the contract, if the contract’s other terms were possible. Toudeby felt that the impossible term invalidated the whole.
18. Or seems to be: the consensus in scholarship at this point is that the “magician” actually just waited for the tides to come in, and that readers of Chaucer’s poem likely would have known that to be the case, leaving Dorigen’s belief in her own accountability to Aurelius only all the more problematic. See Anthony Luengo, “Magic and Illusion in ‘The Franklin’s Tale,’” JEGP 77 (1978): 1–16, at 12; see also Gertrude White, “The Franklin’s Tale: Chaucer or the Critics,” PMLA 89 (1974): 454 and Chauncey Wood, “Of Time and Tide in the ‘Franklin’s Tale,’” Philological Quarterly 45 (1996): 688–711. The most compelling proof, in my view, for this reading comes in an astronomical history article that argues for a freakishly high tide off the coast of England and France around the time Chaucer was born. See Donald Olson, Edgar Laird, and Thomas Lytle, “High Tides and the Canterbury Tales,” Sky and Telescope (2000): 44–49.

19. Steele Nowlin also notes the centrality of precedential logic to this tale; indeed, in Nowlin’s view, the characters of the tale must gradually realize that there are options beyond those dictated by precedent, and Arveragus’s forgiveness of Dorigen is central in that realization. See Nowlin, “Between Precedent and Possibility: Liminality, Historicity, and Narrative in Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale,” Studies in Philology 103 (2006): 53, 55.


21. “Arveragus has chosen the spirit over the letter; the new covenant of love and truth over possession and law” (White, “Chaucer or the Critics,” 456).

22. Lipton sees this release of Dorigen and Arveragus as an indication that the friendship dynamic of mutuality between Dorigen and Arveragus has spilled over, as it were, into Aurelius as well, so that he is now bonded as by friendship to Arveragus. See Lipton, Affections of the Mind, 42.

23. Referring to this passage, Gaylord notes that Aurelius talks as if he is revoking a “chattel mortgage” (Gaylord, “Promises,” 345). But Gaylord goes on to ask why anyone would think Dorigen had truly entered into any kind of binding agreement with him, given that her intention is obviously not behind it, and suggests that there must be something morally (or hermeneutically) wrong with Aurelius for even attempting to hold her to her word (Gaylord, 347). For Gaylord, the takeaway from the tale is that “rash promises are not to be kept,” in keeping with contemporary legal and moral treatises; this decisive and moral reading, however, blunts the edge of what I think Chaucer (via the Franklin) is up to: thinking through the hermeneutic and physical difficulties that arise through the creation and dissolution of contracts (Gaylord, 352). In his view, Dorigen’s promise, although worded as a solemn promise, should not at all be construed as one (Gaylord, 357).

24. Putting rather a positive spin on this dynamic, as White puts it, “In the Franklin’s Tale, the real magic is not that of the clerk of Orleans. It is Arveragus’ ‘trouthe,’ which maintains the reality of an ideal in a world full of physical and moral menace”
(White, “Chaucer or the Critics,” 462). Kathleen Kennedy sees the interactions between the men of this tale as “competition,” with Aurelius “making an implicit power play against Arveragus’ that only begins to resolve with Arveragus’s orders to Dorigen. See Kennedy, Maintenance, Meed, and Marriage in Medieval English Literature (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 40.

25. As Kennedy puts it, “Arveragus steps in to clarify the situation, and lay down the law in his marriage, in an attempt to define, to fix, the degree of her autonomy relative to his” (Kennedy, Maintenance, Meed, and Marriage, 40).

26. See also Lipton, Affections of the Mind, 42–44. Lipton construes these homo-social bonds positively, as evidence that the mutuality and friendship of Arveragus’s marriage with Dorigen has suffused the nonamatory relationships of the tale as well.


28. This is not, of course, to say that late medieval English women had no power in the law, nor even to say that Chaucer thought or the Franklin thought they had no power. As Carolyn Colette has shown, certain categories of women in the English Middle Ages often had a great deal of legal power, particularly high-ranking women such as Anne of Bohemia in Ricardian England. See Collette, Performing Polity: Women and Agency in the Anglo-French Tradition, 1385–1620 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), 99–121. What I am suggesting here is rather that the Franklin is interested in meditating on the vulnerability of women in legal situations, a vulnerability borne of the fact that their access to legal power and agency is far more attenuated, partial, and contingent than is that of the men who surround them.


30. Jerome Mandel has argued that the tale is fundamentally about governance, where the judge represents the state and Virginius represents family. See Mandel, “Governance in the ‘Physician’s Tale,’” Chaucer Review 10 (1976): 316–25.

31. As Paul Hyams has demonstrated, suits of villein status—also called “naifty cases”—were almost invariably initiated by the claimant, who sued for repossession of the alleged serf as his property. The claimant would have to produce a naifty writ, as well as two male witnesses who could speak affirmatively to the defendant’s unfree status. See Paul Hyams, Kings, Lords, and Peasants in Medieval England: The Common Law of Villeinage in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 162–67, 174–75.
32. The production of witnesses to the accused’s serf status was absolutely critical to the suing of a naify case: without two witnesses who would swear to the accused’s being a serf, the suit failed automatically. See Hyams, *Kings, Lords, and Peasants*, 174–75.


34. See May McKisack, *Oxford History of England, vol. 5: The Fourteenth Century, 1307–1399* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 335–37, 341–42. Indeed, there were cases in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that were quite similar to what we will see happen to Virginia—involving probably collusion between plaintiffs and witnesses in suits about a third party’s free status. In 1269, a court reverses the judgment of a previous court, which had assigned unfree status to a freed man. The reversal of the decision noted that the previous court had not undertaken appropriate measures to verify that the person in question was, indeed, a villein; instead, the first court had simply taken the testimony of two witnesses produced by the plaintiff, which persuaded the county court that the man was unfree. See *The Earliest English Law Reports*, vol. 3, ed. Paul Brand (London, 2006), 122 SS 6–7. In 1345, a plaintiff sues for recovery of his alleged villein, bringing that alleged villein’s alleged grandfather to testify that he himself was a villein of the plaintiff’s grandfather, to be inherited by the plaintiff, and that the defendant was his own grandson. Fascinatingly, the defendant counterclaimed that his own father was a bastard, and thus not the child of the alleged grandfather, so that the suit of villeinage could not be prosecuted. See *Year Books of the Reign of Edward the Third: Year XIX, Rolls Series no. 31, Part B*, ed. Luke Owen Pike, (London, 1906), 32–33. This case illustrates how suits of villeinage relied on the testimony of local people as to the nature of their relationships with the accused. A similar case, wherein the accused claims his own father is a bastard in order to escape the accusation of villeinage, occurs later in the same year. See *Year Books of the Reign of Edward the Third*, 110–13.

35. Chaucer’s immediate source, *The Romance of the Rose*, also has Appius’s servant call Virginia his slave, thus invoking a villeinage situation. But Chaucer amplifies both the specific legal language pertaining to this law and its potential for corruption (his references to equity and the cursed bill) and how precisely the trial is conducted. Chaucer was likely inspired to think through the logic of villeinage law
from his sources, but he significantly augmented the legal attention to it in his own redaction. See *Roman de la Rose*, ed. Armand Strubel (Paris: Lettres Gothiques, 1992), 5594–5654.

36. From the vantage point of medieval English villeinage law, it must be noted, this was at once highly unusual and highly typical. Although people on trial as potential serfs were indeed always supposed to be present at their own trials, making Virginia’s absence a conspicuous miscarriage of justice, it is also true that women’s testimony counted for practically nothing in practice in villeinage suits. Indeed, in a villeinage trial of 1279, a justice ruled that two women’s testimonials in a suit of villein status were inadmissible because women are inherently less reliable as witnesses than men, and of lesser status in the eyes of the law. See *The Earliest English Law Reports*, vol. 3, ed. Paul Brand (London, 2006), 122 SS 63–65. Paul Hyams notes that it is possible women were allowed to testify in villeinage cases in which women were on trial, but there are no surviving cases to affirm that possibility. See Hyams, *Kings, Lords, and Peasants*, 175.

37. R. Howard Bloch notes that it is difficult to understand what the narrative motivation is for such an awful story. Bloch, “Chaucer’s Maiden Head,” *Representations* 28 (1989): 113–34 at 113. He further notes that the plot is hugely illogical—Claudius’s accusation is improbable, Appius’s demands are ridiculous, Virginius’s lack of fighting back is implausible (113). Ultimately, in Bloch’s view, the tale is designed to stage the medieval ideology of virginity (115).


39. In most cases, for a *pater familias* to kill a daughter for sexual acts, she would have had already to commit adultery; in this case, the killing is preemptive. See Jane Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 121–22.


41. Anne Middleton argues that Virginia is made into a “purely passive object,” whom her father can, by rights, sacrifice (Middleton, “Love’s Martyrs,” 21).


45. This is also the language of Christian repentance; the logic that underpins equity language is, of course, the same logic that underpins repentance: the logic of conscience-taking, whereby one party seeks the merciful intercession of a more powerful party’s conscience-motivated judgment on their behalf. But in the context of “The Physician’s Tale,” in which court scenes and worldly justices dominate, I would construe these lexical choices more squarely in legal discourse than religious. It may also be designed to evoke the logic of royal pardon, which, as Helen Lacey has shown, centers on the idea of obtaining the king’s “grace.” See Lacey, The Royal Pardon: Access to Mercy in Fourteenth-Century England (Woodbridge, UK: York Medieval Press, 2009), 20.

46. In medieval England, the Chancery court, which delivered equitable appellate decisions for previous misapplications of justice, was designed to provide “remedy” (Tucker, “Early History of the Court of Chancery,” 804–5, 807 n. 1) according to the dictates of “conscience” (Tucker, 806, 807 n. 1, 810) and “grace” (Tucker, 800).


48. Hoffman and Peter Beidler have also noted close parallels between “The Franklin’s Tale” and “The Physician’s Tale,” arguing that the two are authorially designed as a pair. In addition to finding parallels between the plots of the two tales, Beidler sees strong juxtapositions between the two heroines, Dorigen and Virginia: in his view, Virginia’s virtue, modesty, and chastity function as retroactive correctives to the imprudence, impulsivity, and impatience of Dorigen. See Hoffman, “Jephthah’s Daughter,” and Peter G. Beidler, “The Pairing of “The Franklin’s Tale’ and “The Physician’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 3 (1969): 275–79.

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