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**The Book of Dame Frevisse:
Margaret Frazer's Medieval Mysteries**

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Introduction

During an interview that I had with Margaret Frazer¹ she disclosed that she wanted to pursue a career in architecture. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, the word *architect* derives from the Greek *arkhitekton* (chief builder or craftsman) which comes from *teks* and which means “to fabricate or to weave a wattle (a construction of poles intertwined with twigs, reed and branches) fabric.” By the modern definition of the word Margaret Frazer did not become an architect. However, she did become one in the etymological sense. What has she been fabricating and weaving?

Margaret Frazer has written and published fifteen² medieval mystery books thus far. These books are considered detective fiction. In fact, two³ of Frazer’s books have been nominated for the Edgar Award. Margaret Frazer is indeed worthy of the Edgar Award but she offers much more than a story with a victim, a detective and a formula for solving a mystery. Frazer’s books go far beyond the traditional detective tale.

As P. D. James says in an interview with Andrew Gulli, which appears in *Strand Magazine*, “I think you can learn far more about the social mores of the age in which the mystery is written than you can from more pretentious literature. I mean, if you are thinking of the 1920s, the so-called Golden Age [of mysteries], and want to know what it was like to live in England at that time, you can get a much better story from the mysteries than you can from prize-winning novels” (55). What do these statements

¹ “Margaret Frazer” was two people: Margaret Mary Monica Pulver and Gail Frazer. The two women wrote the first six books together then decided to take different paths. Gail Frazer retained Margaret Frazer and currently writes under that pseudonym.

² Frazer has written two other books in a different series: *The Play of Isaac* and *The Play of the Dux Murad*.

³ *The Servant’s Tale* and *The Prioress’ Tale*

imply? Should mystery novels be redefined? Or should some mystery novels, like Margaret Frazer's, not be classified under the genre of traditional detective fiction?

Frazer fabricates detective stories but weaves historical facts and moral gravitas into the plots. The plot of each book is such that it is not focused primarily on solving the murder. Frazer offers a world filled with factual historical contexts, depth of human psychology, and social and religious mores of the time periods in which her books are set. With their historical facts and moral dimensions, Frazer's books give a sense of *pyschagogia*.⁴ Margaret Frazer's books are in a different genre from those of the traditional detective tales. The depth and richness of Frazer's books will change a reader's internal landscape. They should be seen and read for what they are: Tales that give an education of a particular period in medieval English history and most importantly, tales of morality and mortality. They can be read individually or, given their continuity, as one book that adds to *The Book of Dame Frevisse*.

To argue this point, I will use discussions of the traditional detective tale by Jacques Barzun, C. S. Lewis and Wayne Booth. Also, I will give examples of traditional detective tales like those of Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler. Then I will demonstrate, using Frazer's *Tales*, how she moves away from the *modus operandi* of the traditional detective stories. Historical background, plot, character development and moral gravity will be analyzed. Also, evidence will reveal that the fifteen individual novels, when read in sequence, can be viewed together as one book. I will show that ultimately these books add up to a deep, rich experience that goes beyond the formulaic, traditional detective stories.

⁴ *Pyschagogia* will be discussed in chapter 3.

Chapter 1

I. Political History

Frazer's Tales are set apart from the traditional detective genre by the inclusion of historical facts. These facts are used as the primary background for the stories which take place during prominent political events of the particular time period. Historical characters of the time periods are also used. Frazer highlights the social and religious mores of the period. The Tales include a reliable representation of some aspects of life in England during the 1400s. Frazer does this in a manner that is engaging and entertaining. She gives a historical lesson without the feel of a history lecture.

Jacques Barzun in *A Jacques Barzun Reader* says, "As for historical reconstructions, they run into a danger common to other subspecies of the classic genre: over-stuffing. Too many of the new hands have been attracted to crime fiction because aside from salability, it gives an opportunity to show off special knowledge. They are not really interested in the form, and ignoring its requirement, they present as a story what is in fact a series of lecturettes—on museums, curatorship, the tricks of brokerages, or vicissitudes of social work" (570). Undoubtedly, Margaret Frazer does not fall into that danger. The subtlety with which Frazer integrates the historical facts in her stories is such that the facts fit perfectly with the fiction without the feel of contrivance. The blend of fiction and facts provides for a delightful reading experience and, among other things, an exposure to history, which traditional detective tales do not offer.

In Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* for example, detective Philip Marlowe is summoned to keep an eye on the daughters of General Sternwood. One night he follows

one of the daughters to a cabin and when he enters he discovers a dead body. The plot is centered on finding the murderer. There are many twists and Chandler is rather witty but as with traditional detective stories the entire story is fictional and the main purpose is to figure out who the murderer is. There are no historical facts.

The same kind of formula is evident in Dashiell Hammet's *The Maltese Falcon*. Detective Sam Spade's partner Miles is killed after he is assigned to keep watch over a Brigid O'Shaughnessy. Then another character is killed. Who committed the murders and why? The focus is on finding the murderer(s) and the motive for the murders. Hammet is also engaging in his telling of the story. The dialogue is crisp and entertaining but again, there are no historical facts.

Even such stories as *The Purloined Letter* and *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, by the father of the detective genre, Edgar Allan Poe, do not include historical data. The focal point of *Murders in the Rue Morgue* is that of Detective Monsieur Dupin finding out who brutally killed two people. The process of solving the crime is interesting as it is for *The Purloined Letter* where there is no murder. Poe's stories are not necessarily *murder* mysteries. They are mysteries. In *The Purloined Letter* Detective Dupin has to find an alleged stolen letter. In these stories, Poe is not interested in morality, character development or history. He is mostly interested in reasoning and logic. His mysteries are ratiocinative, which is an interesting and engaging process but different from the objective of Frazer's *Tales*, although she does include some reasoning and logic. She adds more depth to her stories with the historical, moral and religious dimensions.

Frazer does what Barzun says a novel should do. "The purpose of a novel is to delve into human character and describe its environment—that is to say society" (571).

Amid the fictional dimension she uses factual, historical data to describe the environment and society of the Middle Ages. Margaret Frazer's "architectural" expertise is especially evident as she weaves fiction in and around historical facts. The books are set in chronological order starting from 1431 (*The Novice's Tale*) and so far ending in 1450.⁵ She skips a few years but the history is consistent with the time period in which the books are set. She uses major historical events as the frame and foundation of the plot. In line with the architectural analogy, the building itself is the factual, historical events. The furnishings are the fictional additions. Frazer intertwines facts and fiction in such a way that the entire story is plausible.

One of Frazer's outstanding writing techniques is the way in which she integrates medieval history and fiction. The most important fiction is the character Dame Frevisse, a nun of St. Frideswide's, Oxford. Due to her ties with Thomas and Alice Chaucer, Dame Frevisse takes several journeys away from St. Frideswide. It is mainly on these journeys that the reader is informed of the historical context in which the stories are set. In addition to Frevisse's travel, Frazer uses dialogues between characters. Through dialogues the reader learns what is taking place. The conversations between characters provide an understanding of the contextual setting. The dialogues also serve to liven up the story. The conversation technique gives a feeling of immediateness. The characters are not acting or re-enacting. Instead, it is as if they are extemporizing.

Another proficient tool used by Frazer to achieve this extemporaneous effect is that of the narrator. Frazer chooses a limited omniscient narrator who successfully and effectively keeps the views, reactions and judgments of the way of life in tune with that

⁵ Occasionally, Frazer makes references to events that took place before 1431.

of the 1400s. The narrator is not a modern voice/eyes looking in on the life of the Middle Ages. The narrator is looking through the eyes of a person who lives in the Middle Ages. The narrator is omniscient in knowing each character's thoughts but is limited in not knowing what will happen in the future. Frazer has what Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* calls an "implied author." This implied author is from the Middle Ages and stays as objective as possible. Frazer declared that, "One of the most difficult things while writing the Tales is that restraint of remaining objective. I have to put myself in the Middle Ages" (Interview).

Frazer is able to capture the mind set of people living during the 1400s and offers the appropriate reactions. In order to achieve this, she studies the many aspects of history and life in the Middle Ages. This studying includes extensive research. During an interview, Frazer revealed that she does "extreme" research. She has camped in very cold temperatures in medieval clothing and in a nun's habit. She has also joined gatherings of the Society of Creative Anachronism.⁶ She visits historical locations in which some of her Tales are set. Even though some landscapes change she is able to capture the essence of the place. These experiences allow Frazer to write with attention to life-like details and to tell the story like she actually lived it. Frazer does not seem to write vicariously. Rather her books give the impression that she writes with first hand knowledge. The world that she recreates seems present and real.

Using the tools of extensive research, dialogues, relationships with characters and narration Frazer shows ingenuity in her utilization of historical facts in combination with

⁶ The Society of Creative Anachronism is an international organization dedicated to researching and re-creating the arts and skills of pre-17th-century Europe. Members, dressed in clothing of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, attend events which may feature tournaments, arts exhibits, classes, workshops, dancing, feasts, and more.

fiction to bring vitality and illumination to periods during the 1400s. Booth says, “There are many kinds of facts, of course, and they can be “told” in an unlimited number of ways . . . stage settings, explanations, descriptions, summaries They all occur in many different forms” (170). Frazer incorporates these many forms of “telling” in her stories and never changes any facts that she uses. In an interview she said, “I do not change historical facts to suit my story. Rather it’s the other way around. I create my stories around the historical context.” The thoughts and behaviors of the real, historical characters are close—the essence—to those of the characters in real life. Thus, we see a captivating blend of fiction and accurate historical facts. Frazer’s research and representation of the historical facts are impeccable.

In *The Novice’s Tale*, the first book in the series, Frazer introduces Thomas Chaucer, son of Geoffrey Chaucer. Thomas is married to Matilda and has one daughter, Alice. Dame Frevisse is Thomas Chaucer’s niece. This relationship is obviously fictional. However, Chaucer, Matilda and Alice are not. In the *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB) it is stated that “Thomas Chaucer was born in 1367. Early in life he married Matilda. He left one child, Alice” (4: 167). In *The Novice’s Tale* the narrator says, “. . . it was Thomas Chaucer who was come to St. Frideswide today” (5). Later, Chaucer tells Frevisse, “Your aunt Matilda has a way of making an unhappy household” Frevisse replies, “But with Alice married now to Suffolk, she’s surely a little more content” (*Novice*, 9). From this conversation the reader learns a little about Thomas Chaucer’s family. In future novels, this connection with Chaucer requires Frevisse to travel around England.

In *The Bishop’s Tale*, which is set in 1434, the plot is centered around Chaucer’s

death. “He [Chaucer] died in 1434” (*DNB*, 4: 167). Because of Chaucer’s death, Frevisse has to travel out of the convent. At first she is informed that her uncle is ill and sets out on a journey from St. Frideswide to Ewelme, where Chaucer lived. She is too late as she is “informed by a villager in the last village before this that Chaucer had died” (*Bishop*, 17). While at the funeral a murder is committed and Frevisse is commanded by Bishop Beaufort to solve the crime. He knows through Chaucer that Frevisse is a good detective. At Chaucer’s funeral, Frazer also expands on Alice. As part of character description and development Frazer uses actual details of Alice’s life. The narrator states in *The Bishop’s Tale*, “Alice had been already widowed from her first husband. Since then she . . . married the earl of Salisbury, been widowed again and a few years ago married the earl of Suffolk” (*Bishop*, 26). These details are confirmed as historical facts: “Alice Chaucer married John Phillip; secondly earl of Salisbury . . . ; thirdly William de la Pole, earl, and afterwards duke of Suffolk” (*DNB*, 4:168). In the same Tale, Frazer offers a glimpse of the character of Duke William of Suffolk. Suffolk is Chaucer’s son-in-law. Through Frevisse’s first reaction to him, the narrator gives a foreshadowing of what is to come. “Frevisse decided that she would avoid him as much as possible” (*Bishop*, 27). Suffolk is a questionable character and Frazer’s negative portrayal of him is the same as he revealed himself to be and what history says about him. Among other things, he is greedy for power as is Bishop Beaufort who also comes to Chaucer’s funeral. Beaufort is present at the funeral because he is Thomas Chaucer’s very good friend. Ralph Griffiths, in *The Reign of Henry VI* says, “Thomas Chaucer’s intimate relationship with Beaufort . . . is beyond question” (35). Though different in many ways, Beaufort and Suffolk share one common trait. They are both ambitious. “Beaufort fully admitted to himself that he

had a drive to power that has taken him now almost to the limit of his ambitions” (*Bishop*, 42). Frazer’s portrayal is true to the point. It is stated in the *DNB* that “Beaufort was ambitious, haughty and impetuous” (2: 47). Due to the fact that her cousin Alice is married to the Duke of Suffolk Frevisse constantly encounters political figures and events. Frazer cleverly created the connection of Frevisse to Thomas and Alice so that she could, with plausibility to the story, center her stories around some of the major, political events of the time in which Frazer situates her life.

In *Tales to come* these two characters, Suffolk and Beaufort, will clash as they did during their real lives. In addition, Frazer briefly mentions in *The Bishop’s Tale* another controversial figure, Humphrey Gloucester, brother of King Henry V and uncle to King Henry VI. Beaufort, Suffolk and Gloucester will meet later. In the mean time, in *The Bishop’s Tale*, the narrator gives an insight into Beaufort’s feelings towards Gloucester, “If plain hatred could kill—God forgive him for it—Humphrey would have long since been dead” (5). The *DNB* confirms the dislike. “There was unease between Bishop Beaufort and Humphrey” (2: 41-47). As will be seen, Beaufort and Gloucester will become great opponents of each other.

One cause of friction between them is the Duke of Orleans. During the battle of Agincourt, which started in 1415, Charles of Orleans was captured by the English. He has to be kept alive because if England wants to make peace with France the King has to release Orleans. According to John Ferguson in *English Diplomacy 1422-1461*, “Burgundy called for negotiations in 1438 . . . Beaufort arrived in Calais in June . . . whatever concessions the King made was unknown . . . Beaufort made no reference to his secret . . . but the Archbishop of York returned to England and provoked the last duel

between Gloucester and Beaufort” (22-23). Gloucester does not want Orleans to be released but Beaufort does. The *DNB* informs us that “Suffolk became Gloucester’s chief opponent in the release of Duke of Orleans” (2: 41-47). “In 1439 the Cardinal had, with the Duke and Duchess of Burgundy of Calais, a conference . . . it was agreed that ambassadors would be sent thither to treat of peace . . . Beaufort was an advocate of peace and hope to secure it by the means of the intervention of the captive Duke of Orleans” (*DNB*, 2: 41-47). Alice tells Frevisse “. . . that Beaufort favors peace is one more reason Gloucester is against it” (*Maiden*, 54). Frazer centers *The Maiden’s Tale* (set in 1439) around this meeting.

Frevisse, in *The Maiden’s Tale*, travels to London where Gloucester, Beaufort and Suffolk meet for a pivotal time in history and Frevisse finds herself in the middle of it all. She goes to London in the first place because she is commanded by the Abbot to do so. The previous prioress at St. Frideswide is arrested for corruption and the Abbot responsible for the convent has a replacement. Frevisse and another nun are ordered by the Abbot to go with him to London, to St. Helen’s convent, to escort the new prioress back. Frevisse is surprised that she is chosen but of course, she obeys because of her vow of obedience. While at St. Helen’s the Abbot lets Frevisse know that her cousin Alice is not too far off. “It’s likely her lord husband is come to London for Parliament and she’s with him” (*Maiden*, 32-33). The Abbot suggests that Frevisse write and tell her she would like to visit her cousin. Frevisse would like to see her cousin but is very suspicious about the Abbot’s ‘suggestion’. When she meets Alice she finds that she is right to be suspicious. She was not randomly chosen to accompany the Abbot and then write to Alice for ‘just’ a visit. Alice informs her as to why she is really there. “You know of the

talks at Calais . . . The Burgundy ambassadors . . . have made it clear that the Duke of Orleans has to be part of the negotiations and his freedom is part of the price for peace” (*Maiden*, 54-55). Frevisse’s function is to serve as a secret messenger between Orleans and Beaufort who then takes Orleans’s messages to the Duchess of Burgundy. Who would suspect a nun? Frevisse is not pleased but she is bound by her vows to obey the Abbot, who will in turn make sure that St. Frideswide gets a worthy prioress and a sizeable donation from Alice as a reward.

To complicate matters, the previous messenger has died and there are suspicions that his death might be murder. Frevisse is asked to solve the alleged murder. Frazer thus creates a murder mystery surrounded by these historical events. In the fictional aspect, Frevisse serves as a secret messenger between Orleans and Beaufort. The correspondence between Orleans and Burgundy had to be kept secret because as Alice says to Frevisse, “Gloucester blocks every move toward peace as best he can, and King Henry still hesitates to offend him by supporting any move toward it openly” (*Maiden*, 54-55). Griffiths reveals why Henry VI might not have wanted to offend his uncle saying, “When Henry V died [Henry VI was barely nine months old] . . . responsibility fell in the first instance on the dead king’s younger surviving brother, thirty-two-year old Duke Humphrey of Gloucester” (12-13). As such, the King does not want to offend his uncle and the negotiations are to be kept secret. The letters go “from Orleans by way of someone to Beaufort . . . to Burgundy” (*Maiden*, 55). While the meetings are going on and secret letters are being delivered (facts) the fictional world has its own life. Frazer integrates the two in such a way that it is easy to believe the fiction surrounding the facts. She has someone try to kill Orleans. After all, he is the key to peace that some major

political figures do not want. Orleans is hidden in Suffolk's house and along with Frevisse, authorities such as Bishop Beaufort investigate the attempted murder. Frevisse eventually discovers that a certain Master Bruneau has tried to kill Orleans on his own account as a patriot of England. He says that peace between England and France would mean that England would never regain full possession of France. At the end of the story, in 1439, there is the understanding that the peace talks have not been finalized. In reality, Orleans was not freed until 1440. In the mean time, "Gloucester made several unsuccessful attempts to rule England as regent"(Ferguson, 10). As Ferguson states, Gloucester was unsuccessful in trying to rule, but that was not the last of Gloucester or Beaufort or Suffolk. Indeed, all three surface again in *The Bastard's Tale*.

The Bastard's Tale, set in 1447, is centered around the death of Gloucester. At the beginning of the book, his influence with Henry VI having declined while Suffolk's has increased, he is summoned to Bury St. Edmunds. One of Gloucester's men says, "I want to know why Parliament was moved from Cambridge to Bury" (*Bastard*, 5). Another says to Gloucester, "You won't find allies there, Humphrey" (*Bastard*, 4). The *DNB* states that "On Dec. 14th the parliament was summoned to meet at Bury St. Edmunds, a place where Suffolk was strong, and where Gloucester would be far away from his friends and Londoners. Gloucester reached Bury . . . and was at once arrested. Five days later he died" (*DNB*, 16: 50-56).

To integrate the facts surrounding Gloucester's death into the fiction that creates *The Bastard's Tale* Frazer has Bishop Beaufort once again summon Dame Frevisse "to attend on her cousin Lady Alice of Suffolk at Bury St. Edmunds during this present Parliament" (*Bastard*, 9). It is disclosed by the narrator that Bishop Beaufort has favored

St. Frideswide with a profitable property so he is owed a favor. The prioress orders Frevisse to go and since one of the vows of a nun is obedience, Frevisse obeys. Thus, she ends up in Bury and finds herself in the middle of Gloucester's arrest and death. The narrator informs us that "Suffolk, facing him, declared in a voice to be heard throughout the hall, 'Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, in the King's name I arrest you on high treason'" (*Bastard*, 112). He is imprisoned and later it is said that Gloucester "had gone insensible" (*Bastard*, 182). Many characters in *The Bastard's Tale*, as when the meeting actually took place in 1447, believe that Suffolk might have done something to Gloucester that killed him. His death is called "mysterious" in the *DNB* (14: 47). Nothing is proved. Gloucester is "found in the morning, quiet in his bed, and unwakable" (*Bastard*, 223). Frazer's *Bastard's Tale* leads us to believe that Suffolk tried to have Gloucester murdered. And here Frazer introduces Gloucester's son, the bastard Arteys.

Arteys is a historical figure but obscure. There are conflicting data as to what really happened to the bastard son of Gloucester. Some say he was hanged soon after his father's death while others say he just disappeared. Frazer chose the disappearance act and has Frevisse help him escape Suffolk and a hanging. The bastard son as is stated in *The Bastard's Tale* is Arteys de Curteys. The *DNB* makes no mention of a bastard son of Gloucester. However, as Frazer said in her 'Author's Notes', "Mention of Arteys, bastard son of the duke of Gloucester, is scant in the records⁷ Recent historians sometimes corrupt his name to Arthur but . . . Arteys he is in the story" (*Bastard*, 308). Griffiths says, "Royal officers arrived to arrest some of Gloucester's more important companions, among them . . . his bastard son Arthur, . . . Arthur de Cursy" (496-497). Whatever his real name Arteys is one the most prominent characters in *The Bastard's*

⁷ Frazer's source is *Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester* by Kenneth H. Vickers.

Tale.

Through the narrator it is learned that Arteys loves his father. “He came to live with Gloucester when he was eight years old . . . had grown to love his father . . . and if Gloucester was set on going to Bury, St. Edmunds then he would go with him” (*Bastard*, 6). Arteys ends up saving his father’s life, if only for a few days.

Arteys kills a man who is attempting to kill Gloucester. Gloucester is locked in a bed chamber after he is arrested. Arteys (in the story only Frevisse and a few other trustworthy characters know he is the bastard son of Gloucester) manages to get access to a key and goes to see his father in secret. As he enters the chamber he surprises someone about to kill his father and Arteys kills that man. As mentioned earlier, Frazer suspects and indicates that he was sent by Suffolk. Arteys, afraid to reveal what he knows, lies low for a time. Frevisse and a few other characters are instrumental in advising Arteys. Frevisse’s main function is to attend to her cousin Alice but between herself, Arteys and a couple of the other characters she attempts to solve the case of who has tried to murder Gloucester. She never discovers who it was for sure but most suspect it was Suffolk. Eventually, Suffolk does find out the identity of Arteys, arrests him and is going to hang him. Frevisse knows that Arteys has killed the man but it was to save his father. For the rest of the story she tries to save Arteys and succeeds but at a price. As is stated in some history records, Arteys disappeared, never to be heard from again. And the mystery of who tried to kill Gloucester was never solved.

Even though, as is stated in the *DNB*, “Popular belief laid his [Gloucester’s] death at Suffolk’s door no formal charge was ever made but Suffolk became even more unpopular among his people” (16: 50-56). That very impression is given at the end of

The Bastard's Tale as Alice tells Frevisse, "In London . . . [Suffolk is] furious at the crowd for being mad at him" (303-304). From there onwards it was downhill for Suffolk in history and in *The Widow's Tale*, a sequel to *The Bastard's Tale*.

In *The Widow's Tale*, set in 1449, a widow, Cristina, falsely accused by her villainous brother of committing adultery is brought to St. Frideswide until her trial, and to keep her from further sin to her soul. Then the convent receives an order from the very brother saying that Cristina should be returned immediately to her home in Hertfordshire. Frevisse is selected to accompany her there and stay on a just a bit longer to keep Cristina company. Since Frevisse is a nun, it is believed that she would provide some kind of spiritual comfort to the grieving widow. During the stay, however, murders are committed and Frevisse finds herself once again in the middle of a murder mystery. Then she learns that it is highly likely that Suffolk is involved in the murders. Frazer's plot hinges on Suffolk's treachery. There is a damaging document in Cristina's possession that could implicate Suffolk in quite a number of illegal, covert acts relating to the question of France and the English possessions. The document passes through a few hands evidently and Suffolk has ordered that all who know of the document be killed. Then Frevisse's cousin Alice, Suffolk's wife, appears and the plot thickens. Frazer expands on the downfall of Suffolk preparing for his inevitable demise. Frevisse learns from Alice, "In Parliament the Commons were not much agreeable to the king's wishes. There's trouble in France again . . . truce has fallen into pieces and we look likely to lose all of Normandy . . . Suffolk had given the counties of Maine and Anjou freely back to the French . . . but Normandy was the rich heart of England's land in France . . . to lose Normandy was beyond thought" (*Widow*, 132-133). Ferguson confirms this in *English*

Diplomacy 1422-1475 stating, “It is sufficient to note that the rapid loss of Normandy in 1449-50 put parliament in a bad mood and they began to look for a scapegoat. Suffolk was the obvious choice . . . following the death of Gloucester, which some attributed to him [Suffolk] . . . Suffolk virtually governed the kingdom, bypassing the council and conducting business directly through the king . . . The Commons presented the King with a list of allegations that Suffolk was responsible for the English losing Maine and Le Mans. Eventually [in 1450] he was charged, found guilty and was banished for five years” (162-163). Ferguson adds that Suffolk was murdered on his way into exile. Just as the events in history unfolded so they do in Frazer’s *The Sempster’s Tale*, where she focuses on the Cade uprising.

In *The Sempster’s Tale*, Frazer gives a look at the political condition of London during the 1450s. This time Alice bids Frevisse to go to Kent to pick up gold from one merchant David Weir, who turns out to be a Jew, having an affair with a Christian widow and sempster, Anne. Frevisse is to go under the guise of getting clothes made for the funeral of Suffolk. And the narrator says, “Lady Alice’s late husband had been the powerful duke of Suffolk and murdered . . . on his way into exile” (*Sempster*, 23). Now that he is dead Frevisse does not know what Alice will do. One year before, in *The Widow’s Tale*, when they last met and Frevisse realized the Alice was involved in the corruption with Suffolk, they had not parted on good terms and Frevisse is reluctant to undertake this journey to get Alice’s gold. However, in obedience to her prioress, who says that there is a sizeable profit to be gained, Frevisse sets out for London. She gets the gold in parts and has to wait a couple of weeks to get it all. While there, two people are murdered and Frevisse cannot help herself from trying to find the killer(s). In the middle

of it all Jack Cade enters the scene and Frazer sets the story around the 1450 rebellion. “The rebellion led by John Cade occupies a prominent place in accounts of fifteen-century English history . . .” (Griffiths, 610). In 1450 he arrived in London and seemed to be involved in a peaceful demonstration as confirmed by one of the characters in *The Sempster’s Tale*, Bette: ““No sign they’re doing any harm to anybody though. No rioting or burning or anything. It’s just as folks have been saying. That Jack Cade is keeping everything right because they’re only out to be rid of those around the king as shouldn’t be there”” (136). The *DNB* states, “Cade’s demonstration . . . demands the removal of the false traitors around the king” (3: 623-626). That is how the demonstration starts, but then things change. *The New Cambridge Medieval History* gives an account of the demonstration saying, “The rising in Kent led by Jack Cade began comparatively peacefully as a mass demonstration . . . but later the Cade rebels advanced on London and pillaged the city . . . From their base in Southwark; they captured and executed Lord Say” (470). Ferguson elaborates, saying, “The main advocates of peace, who had lately fostered a war, Aiscough, Moleyns and Suffolk, were murdered” (33). This is told by Frazer as characters converse, ““Have you heard about the Bishop Aycough of Salisbury? He’s been murdered”” (*Sempster*, 186). Then ““Say was killed . . . Cade’s men seized him and . . . on Cade’s order cut off his head . . . Cade is finding out just what he can do and he’s doing it”” (*Sempster*, 186). The *DNB* adds, “After midnight the drawbridge was set on fire” (3: 623-626). Frazer puts Frevisse to look “out the window where she saw the orange glow of fire off a black roil of smoke blotting out the sky above the London Bridge. The bridge was on fire” (*Sempster*, 331). Thus ends *The Sempster’s Tale*. Frazer

revealed in a phone interview that in the next book she picks up right with the burning bridge. According to historical data, Cade was killed and Alice was indicted for treason at the Guildhall. These facts, most likely, will be included in Frazer's next Tale.

Thus far, in her Tales, Frazer is up to the year 1450. From a historical perspective if one wants to know what happened one could read a history book to find out or wait for Frazer's next book. The depth of historical accuracy in the Tales is one feature that separates Frazer's Tales from the traditional detective story.

Frazer's representation of historical facts is accurate. In addition, the chronological order in which the books are written and the consistency of the character development and events show continuity from book to book. Thus, while each Tale ends, the big story continues to evolve.

Chapter 1

II. Social History

Margaret Frazer not only includes historic political facts in her Tales. She also uses authentic social and religious mores. As Frevisse travels and visits hither and yon, or visitors come to the convent the reader gets a look at some aspects of everyday life during the time periods in which the books are set. Rather than create fictional life styles and mores she uses those that actually existed in the Middle Ages. Even though Frazer lives in the 21st century, she does not allow her judgment or opinion of people's life styles to seep into the stories. Whether those lifestyles are bad, good, right or wrong Frazer does not say. Weaving these facts of social mores into the fiction is another characteristic that separates Frazer's Tales from the traditional crime genre.

Convent life as described by Jeffrey L. Singman in *Daily Life in Medieval Europe* is exactly the way Frazer portrays it in her fictions. "Most nuns were Benedictines" (Singman, 166). At the beginning of *The Novice's Tale* it is revealed that at the convent, St. Frideswide, "A Benedictine peace ruled here" (1). A. J. Pollard says in *Late Medieval England 1399-1509*, "Nunneries were small communities of women, not normally of more than a dozen who managed their own affairs and made their own decisions within the rules of their order. But nuns . . . who from time to time controlled their own lives, only did so under licence from and under the supervision of men" (193). In *The Prioress's Tale* the narrator says that currently at St. Frideswide there are "nine nuns and no novices" (3). Singman confirms Pollard's claim saying, "Even though the monastery⁸ is run daily by nuns it is ruled by the abbot. But since he has many other

⁸ Pollard claims that most of the rule for monasteries were the same for convents, though adopted for women.

responsibilities the day-to-day running of internal matters within the monastery fell to his second-in-command, the prioress” (Singman, 145).

St. Frideswide has a prioress. For various reasons—ranging from death to deception—they changed over the years but there was almost always one in the convent. However, as in Singman’s account, the main authority is male. It is revealed in *The Maiden’s Tale* that Abbot Gilbert was responsible for St. Frideswide: “Abbot Gilbert had pried into every possible corner of the priory’s life . . .” (16). The Abbot occasionally visits the convents and if there are major decisions to be made he is consulted. Other than that, the nuns run the convent. The nuns’ duties include household chores but they have the additional duty of daily prayers.

The day consists of regular services starting with Matins (Lauds) as early as two or three o’ clock in the morning. Then at 4:30 during summer and 7:30 during winter Prime is observed; at 9 am, Tierce; Midday, Sext; 2:30 pm, None; Evening 6 pm, Vespers; and at night before bedtime Compline. These services, including other special services as necessary, have to be observed by all nuns. “These Hours are called Divine Offices” (Singman). Throughout Frazer’s books these offices are mentioned. “She had stayed in the Church after the long midnight prayers of Lauds and Matins . . . to greet the sunrise with prayers of Prime” (*Novice*, 32). “It would be time for Vespers before they were finished” (*Prioress*, 8). “. . . when she and Dame Perpetua returned from Tierce . . . unexpectedly finding after Sext a copy . . .” (*Bastard*, 113). Services are a prominent part of the nuns’ lives. After prayers in the morning they met for confessions, punishment and other daily convent business.

Every morning, directly after breakfast and Mass, the nuns would meet “in the

chapter house where they handled current business. This was also an occasion for administering discipline” (Singman, 146). Singman explains that nuns were expected to confess and report each other’s misdeeds during the chapter meetings. In *The Prioress’s Tale* the narrator says, “Chapter meetings were for dealing with the nunnery’s daily business and they were looking forward to asking questions” (51). Later the narrator reveals Dame Frevisse’s thoughts, “Tomorrow in chapter she would confess it and by her own choice take the consequence” (*Prioress*, 66). It is the prioress who decides what punishment should be given according to the nature of the confession. The prioress not only manages the nuns, but she is also responsible for everyone who lives in, and works for, the convent.

“Not all of the inhabitants of the [convents] were nuns” (Singman, 149). There were lay people “recruited from the lower classes, who provided manual labor for the monastery: bakers, launderers, and wood gatherers. (Singman, 149). In *The Servant’s Tale* we are told, “The servants were well trained” (12). Lay people were hired for different functions as we learn in *The Outlaw’s Tale*. “Master Roger Naylor, the priory steward . . . was their necessary escort” (4). Everyone has his or her duties. And there were many in the convent as the convent served many purposes.

“The [convent] also provides hospitality for travelers in an age when inns were not always easy to find” (Singman, 167). In many of Frazer’s Tales, the convent often houses visitors. Sometimes the convent would have to give free room and board but often rich visitors board and when they do usually the convent would receive a donation. So a visitor could be a source of expense or income. Of course, the visitors had to be tended to and “Dame Frevisse [is] the priory’s hostler, responsible for its guest halls and

guests” (*Servant*, 11). This means that Frevisse is responsible for the visitors’ food and beddings. She has to ensure that they are fed and comfortable. Some of these comforts she can control, others not. One thing out of her power is heat. This, visitors understand, and they accept whatever warmth there is. “The medieval living environment also tended to be cold The only artificial source of heat was fire” (Singman, 47). “In St. Frideswide’s cloister, only the prioress’ parlor, the kitchen and here [the refectory] had fireplaces” (*Maiden*, 15). They “hoped for comfort of the warming room and an hour by a fire before shivering bedtime” (*Maiden*, 15). The nuns didn’t have much choice and were often cold. But they did not complain and looked after their visitors to the best of their abilities. More often than not visitors are satisfied. The convent can serve many functions and some people use it for reasons other than temporary board.

“Aristocratic families sometimes placed physically or mentally handicapped children in monasteries” (Singman, 25). Frazer mentions this in *The Prioress’s Tale*. “. . . there was little Lady Adela, Lord Warrenne’s daughter. The girl was a cripple, with a malformed hip and a twisted leg, so what else could Lord Warrenne expect to do with her except to make her a nun” (*Prioress*, 3). Lady Adela was brought to St. Frideswide. Then in *The Maiden’s Tale* she is mentioned again, “Lord Warrenne had other children so her [Adela’s] marriage was not needful to him and likely she would end up a nun to save him having to trouble over her” (23). In *The Maiden’s Tale*, Jane la Pole, Suffolk’s niece, suffers a similar fate. She is known as “Jane, with the blemish” (7). “Jane Pole was taken care of by nuns who were paid to do it, with the expectation that she would take her vows when she was old enough and become one of them” (*Maiden*, 6). Jane ended up not becoming a nun. But as mentioned, the nuns were paid and this was a

source of income for the convent.

Another source of income was the lending out of books. The nuns would hand copy manuscripts whenever they were able. They brought the copies back to the convent and started a library. Nuns were allowed to copy the manuscripts which they then loaned for a small fee. “Monastic production of books was especially important . . . all books had to be copied by hand” . . . (Singman, 168). In *The Bastard’s Tale* Frevisse and another nun, Dame Perpetua, sees an opportunity for copying during their visit to the great monastery of St. Edmund at Bury. “Dame Perpetua had settled to work in the abbey’s library” (14). They were able to make copies if a visitor brought a book to the convent and stayed long enough. Or sometimes, on the occasions when they travel to the homes of the rich with libraries they would copy if circumstances and time allowed. When the nuns leave the convent they have to follow certain rules of conduct. As Singman states, the nuns often went beyond the walls of the convent, though never alone. Pollard adds saying, in *Late Medieval England 1399-1509*, a woman, “If respectable, went nowhere alone” (192).

The world that Frevisse visits outside the convent is as richly detailed in Frazer’s *Tales* as that inside. In *The Reeve’s Tale* the narrator reveals that “Bess Underbush had been fined two pence for . . . [h]aving begun to sell ale before the village ale taster had a chance to taste it” (3). Bess broke a civil law. Singman says, “Minor civil infractions commonly incurred a fine” (10). Bess pays the fine as her household depends on the income provided by the sale of ale. “A woman’s responsibilities included maintaining the house . . . she might also engage in labor within the home, such as . . . brewing” (Singman, 14). “Brewing was another predominantly female activity that provided

nutrition and income for the household” (Singman, 81). The men were the typical bread winners however, and they usually engaged in field work. However, that was not always the case if parents had higher aspirations for their sons.

“The principal alternative, and one that was followed in the case of the younger sons, was a career in the church. Even a poor villager’s son, if he showed promise for a clerical career, might receive some schooling from the parish priest” (Singman, 24-25). In *The Servant’s Tale* one character, Meg, sometimes works in the priory. Her husband is a drunk. She has two sons. She has hopes for one of her sons. “Years ago she had sent Hewe to Father Clement to learn his lessons . . . proud to be singled out he tried hard and learned with an ease that only confirmed her instincts . . . Hewe would be a priest”⁹ (*Servant*, 6-7). Being a priest was considered an honor during those times. A priest was responsible for specific duties.

One major duty was hearing confessions, of course, but in Frevisse’s words this is sometimes needed for the dying. “The parish priest was summoned to administer to the dying person the rite of Extreme Unction, the last of the sacraments of the church” (Singman, 31). For each murder or death in Frazer’s books, one of the major concerns is whether the victim was able to confess before dying. A priest is always called in. Sometimes the priest arrives in time as with Sir Gawyn in *The Boy’s Tale*. “‘I wish to confess my sins’ . . . beginning what had to be done before the absolution and the last rite could purify his soul.” (230). In some cases the priest does not arrive in time. In *The Murderer’s Tale*, Martyn “died in violence and without time for the last things that should be done to insure the soul’s safe going from the body” (129).

⁹ After some time as a student, Hewe abandons the quest for priesthood with hopes of becoming a player, which is not a respectable job. His own mother, Meg, eventually kills him.

While people depended on priests for the salvation of their souls, they relied on crops for the survival of their bodies. People in the medieval ages (as today) depended heavily on agriculture for food. “A bad harvest could easily lead to famine” (Singman, 50). “Meats could generally be had year round, for those who could afford them Though during the winter meat was salted rather than fresh” (Singman, 51). “A poor harvest meant shortages of food, especially in the summer, as the previous year’s supply was used up the next not yet gathered” (Singman, 55). In *Private Life in the Fifteenth Century*, edited by Roger Virgoe, it is stated, “Ploughing, sowing, sheep-shearing, and the hay and corn harvests, made up the shape of their year At the end of the Epiphany in January, [farming] work began in earnest. February marked the start of tillage, ploughing, sowing and harrowing. August 1, marked the beginning of the harvest period. September marked the end of one farming year” (159). After the harvest, workers take a break until January.

Frazer conveys the importance of harvesting to people during the Middle Ages: “. . . considering how bitterly bad the harvest had been . . . the prospect of a hungry winter was ahead of them” (*Servant*, 2). “It was mid-September . . . beyond St. Frideswide priory walls the harvest went its steady pace” (*Novice*, 1). “It was mid-January . . . it would have been better to have the men at winter-work, at plowing and dunging” (*Clerk*, 4). The men work hard at preparing the fields for planting crops. One of the staple foods is bread. But they need grains for other purposes.

For beverage “Ale was the staple drink. It was brewed from barley, sometimes mixed with other grains” (Singman, 53). That was for the lower class of people. Red and white grape wine was mostly “consumed by the aristocracy” and those who lived in

the middle to upper class (Singman, 54). This kind of luxury is seen in *The Outlaw's Tale*. "Mistress Payne's house was in new fashion . . . a private room with a fireplace was a luxury . . . her hand was wrapped around a mug of spiced, hot wine" (*Outlaw*, 61). At the priory the nuns drink ale. Once in a while they get the luxury of a taste of wine, which is costly to buy and make. Also, wine was used for other purposes. It was used in the medical field.

In the medical field both men and women were active. "Surgical procedures might be performed by a barber. Women in particular learned traditional medical practices as part of their training People knew it was beneficial to cleanse a wound with wine, even though they did not understand the antiseptic use of alcohol" (Singman, 57). Dame Claire "the infirmarian, was dwarfed by her box of medicines and a bundle of bandages . . . she was cutting away the bloody cloth with a slim knife" (*Servant*, 13). "Dame Claire began to work over his wound" (*Boy*, 31). In the convent, Dame Claire is primarily responsible for medicines and healing the sick and injured. One of her remedies includes wine. In *The Outlaw's Tale*, Dame Frevisse says to the Evan, ". . . I've nothing to cleanse this with but water. Dame Claire at St. Frideswide's used wine on the worst cuts that came to her; she claimed it kept illness out of hurts better than water did" (157).

Frazer not only looks at the life of the poor and middle class, she also gives glimpses of the rich. "The staff of a substantial aristocratic household commonly included a chamberlain, a steward, usher, butler, panter, marshal, almoner and many other servants who took care of laundering, cleaning and cooking" (Singman, 129-130). The Lady of such a household had her own chamber and chambermaids. Sometimes the servants slept in the chamber with the Lady. Throughout the day they were at her beck

and call starting from early in the morning when they helped her to get dressed. “. . . at the upper level of aristocracy it was customary for husbands and wives to have separate rooms” (Singman, 130). “At the close of evening . . . a maidservant would help her undress” (Singman, 136). “‘My lady will be in her chamber,’ Lady Sibill said. At Lady Sibill’s scratch at the bedchamber door, one of Alice’s ladies flung it open . . .” (44). “The woman who was setting Alice’s headdress shifted . . . another of the women quickly moved the chair . . . and another stepped close to arrange the train of her dress” (*Maiden*, 47). Lady Alice is married to the Duke of Suffolk. She is rich. And as Singman and Frazer point out the rich women lived in luxury. The men too had their perks. Rich men were allowed to go hunting but under certain rules.

“Hunting, particularly in pursuit of deer in forest or park, and hawking, was the sport of noblemen . . . according to elaborate rules and codes” (Pollard, 187). In *The Hunter’s Tale*, “Only fallow and roedeer bucks and hare were allowable to hunt through the summer months and early autumn, between St. John’s day and Holy Rood, and since Sir Ralph had hunted roedeer a few days earlier he had been in the humour for hare hunting” (Hunter, 27). *The Hunter’s Tale* provides some insight on hunting during the Middle Ages. Frazer gives facts of a little of this and a little of that in each of her Tales. In some Tales she mentions facts of seemingly trivial details like traveling.

In the stories, characters travel. Singman says, “Most people were obliged to journey on foot. A rider traveled on a horse or donkey. Riding was the fastest mode of transportation available. Aristocratic ladies sometimes traveled in covered wagons. Large trains with substantial number of carts, such as an army or aristocratic households with its possessions, tended to move slowly” (Singman, 215). Frazer portrays the right

mode of travel. “Four day’s ride from north Oxfordshire . . . brought them south toward London” (*Maiden*, 22). This is one of many examples of Frazer’s attention to the details of the facts she portrays in her Tales. Every description of daily life during the particular time periods is precise. Whether it is in the regular, everyday social life or in the religious life Frazer captures the essence of people’s lives and attitudes. She gives a glimpse of religious attitudes during the 1400s, a time when Jews were persecuted.

“[The Jews] rights were invariably restricted, and the wave of religious enthusiasm kindled by the first Crusade in 1095 led to an outbreak of anti-Semitic violence that remained in Europe for centuries that followed” (Singman, 200). Frazer mentions anti-Semitism in *The Sempster’s Tale*. “Christians were not supposed to mix with Jews or Jews with Christians. Each is supposed to look on the other as unclean and damned” (*Sempster*, 70). “. . . Any Christian flare of anger against any Jew could lead on almost the instant to a hunting and killing of any Jews that could be found” (*Sempster*, 93). Frazer gives a brief but accurate image of how Jews were treated during the 1400s. She also brings to light another example of religious bigotry, Lollardy.

“Lollards. He is talking about Lollards . . . damned to Hell’s eternal fires” (*Sempster*, 45). “It’s been years since we’ve heard much about Lollards in Oxfordshire. Little heard about them means only that they’ve learned to lie low and keep the quieter at their work” (*Sempster*, 102). This detail is confirmed by Pollard. “Lollardy, the first English heresy . . . was expounded by the Oxford theologian; John Wycliffe . . . after 1414 Lollardy was driven underground. Followers, if they did not recant/abjure they were persecuted. Persecution did not eradicate them but the Lollards were contained” (212-216). *The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe*, edited by George Holmes, adds,

“Infiltration of the Church by the Lollard priests was stopped and the severe penalties laid down in the statute De Haeretico Comburendo¹⁰ (1401) gave England the equivalent of continental procedures against heresy” (334). “Treason, felony, trespass, and lollardy encompassed practically every crime committed in England in the early fifteen century” (*DNB*, 129).

Frazer’s detailed research into political and social history is manifested in the *Tales* through conversations among the characters and narration. These facts augment the literary merits that set Frazer’s *Tales* apart from the traditional detective tales. However, Frazer weaves a rich tapestry in that her eruditeness is not limited to the meticulous political and social fact. Another thread that she weaves is the multi-faceted plots within each book.

Chapter 2

1. Plot

C. S. Lewis in *An Experiment in Criticism* states, “The unliterary reader reads to find out what happened . . . likes what is called the ‘exciting’ — imminent dangers and hair-breadth escapes—(36) . . . ignores the words and only wants to know what happens next” (30). Given Lewis’s definition of the unliterary reader, Frazer’s *Tales* are not intended for such readers. The unliterary reader looks for the traditional detective stories where the plot is focused strictly on solving a mystery.

¹⁰ *WRIT DE HAERETICO COMBURENDO* - English law. The name of a writ formerly issued by the secular courts, when a man was turned over to them by the ecclesiastical tribunals, after having been condemned for heresy. It was founded on the statute 2 Hen. IV.; it was first used, A. D. 1401, and as late as the year 1611. By virtue of this writ, the unhappy man against whom it was issued was burned to death.

Frazer's books are not centered on solving the murder mystery. Instead, they offer much more from book to book and the reader is often taken up with other occurrences. These are not sub-plots that tie in with the solving of the murder mystery. They are independent stories that unfold alongside the murder plot. Sometimes it is as though the murders are by the way; as if they interrupt the flow of everyday life. In the development of plots Frazer does not conform to the formulaic, traditional mystery.

For example, in *The Boy's Tale*, two little boys, Jasper and Edmund, have to be hidden. Their lives have been threatened. They are half brothers of King Henry VI. The children, in the company of adults, have to escape. They plan to seek sanctuary in St. Frideswide. Someone betrays the boys and their parents in disclosing the secret escape route. Along the way, an attempt is made to kidnap the boys. Their attendants are attacked and some are killed. During the ambush the servant manages to escape with the boys. Who is the traitor? But the bigger question is whether the boys make it to safety or not. As a result of the ambush, one of the prominent characters, Sir Gawyn, is injured and is dying. Finding the traitor becomes secondary to the worry as to whether Gawyn will survive. He is a likeable character. He has been with the boys since birth and his death will indeed be a loss. We do not want to lose him and neither do the boys. Another important focus in the same Tale is the sickness and imminent death of Domina Edith who has been with the convent for a long time and is loved by all the nuns. Will she die? Will we lose two likeable characters? One will die of natural causes. There is no mystery to solve there. Yet we are engaged in the plot.

Towards the end of the book we find out that the traitor who led the (other) villains to the boys is Sir Gawyn. These other villains want to hold the boys ransom so that they

can blackmail the King. Sir Gawyn is promised money enough that he wouldn't have to work again. He is close to dying and wants to redeem himself. Eventually the boys are safe and that concern fades into the background. The focus moves to death and redemption. On the one hand, we have a traitor whose treachery leads to the death of others. On the other hand, we have Domina Edith who is not a saint but nowhere near being perfidious. We hope Domina will have an easy passage and that Sir Gawyn, whose repentance we believe, gets to confess before he dies. The focus of the story at this point is whether these two characters get what is hoped for them.

This same hope is true In *The Bastard's Tale*. We know that the killer is the bastard Arteys. But he kills only to his save his father from being murdered. Part of the main focus of the book is trying to figure out who has given the order to kill Arteys's father. Then Suffolk wants Artey's hanged. The focus on the plot then shifts to the outcome of Arteys. Dame Frevisse has to save Arteys. Will she? She is sympathetic towards him even though he is a killer. Arteys is dragged through the town. He is tied to the hanging post. He is about one minute away from being hanged. Can Dame Frevisse save him? The focus and kind of focus varies from Tale to Tale.

In *The Sempster's Tale* there is a dangerous, saucy love affair in the middle of a peasant uprising in England, which includes instances of anti-Semitism. In the midst of it all, someone in the household where Frevisse is staying is murdered. We find out who that first murderer is, then that murderer is murdered. The second killer is not turned in because she is somehow justified. We are more concerned with the two lovers Anne and Daved who are in an extramarital affair. She is Christian and he is Jewish. Both of them could be executed by law if found out. Will they be found out? There is so much

political unrest that Daved cannot stay with Anne. In addition, he is married. The only way he can stay with Anne is if he converts to Christianity and leaves his wife. Will he? Also, what will be the outcome of the war? Solving the mystery of who committed the murders seems trivial compared to the magnitude of the civil war and the love affair. All the Tales present this variation of plot.

Take *The Murderer's Tale* where very early in the story the reader learns who the killer is. Will Dame Frevisse and other characters figure out who the killer is and how will they figure it out? We know that the killer hates Frevisse and plans to kill her. We know he won't, since she is the main character in the Tales. But will the killer harm her? What plan will he come up with to lure her into the trap?

In addition, there is a religious aspect. One of the characters, Lionel, very often gets a violent spasm and he has to be removed to a secluded place so as not to hurt himself or anyone else. The villain, Giles, curses him saying that God has forsaken him, and that he will continue to get the spasm. When the attacks first start, Lionel had no warning. They are sudden and dangerous. Lionel prays and after a while he starts to realize that his hand twitches right before an attack. As such, he has enough warning to go into hiding before the attacks actually hit. He is spared the humiliation and also there is less inconvenience to those around him. A little miracle. The miracle is the twitch in his hand which has not been there before, and the recognition that the twitch comes right before the spasm attacks. Will people recognize that this is a miracle, that his prayers have actually been answered and that he has been helped? And how will they respond? Frazer shows exceptional skills in plot development in that she generates engagement from the reader even after the murder mystery itself fades into the background or is even

completely solved. Regardless of which Tale a reader picks up he will find that same engrossment.

In *The Novice's Tale* the young Thomasine is running from her aunt who wants to marry her off. Thomasine seeks refuge in St. Frideswide. The aunt follows her there and is subsequently murdered. Thomasine is the primary suspect. The reader suspects that Thomasine is innocent but to the characters in the book all evidence points to her. Will she be arrested and convicted for the murder? Along the way she is courted by a very dedicated and worthy young man, Robert Fenner. Sister Thomasine is, however, deep in prayers and seems bent on serving God. Will Robert's depth of love make her change her mind? Will he be able to pierce the religious wall and touch and awaken the worldly side of Thomasine? Will Thomasine give up her vocation, her love for God for this mortal man? There is also focus on her impending arrest. Very early on Thomasine is portrayed as holy and as such we do not want her to get harmed. There is more concentration on her well being than there is on the catching of the real murderer. As with all of Frazer's books there are many foci.

Each of Frazer's books is like a part of a bigger tapestry. In her work as a whole, there are a variety of patterns or pictures. The reader gets a sense of deep religious dedication. Contrasting that is the greed of humans for worldly possessions. There is redemption in that some characters repent for sinful acts and are given forgiveness by other characters or through confessions to priests. There is love of God, parents, siblings and friends. We see pure evil in characters like Giles and Suffolk who harm others without regret for the harm they cause. There is depth of human character. And, oh yes, there are murders in the plots.

The plots, as mentioned before, can be seen as individual stories but put together they can also be viewed as one book. Looking at the development of the characters we see continuity. The primary focus in some Tales is characters, some of whom appear from Tale to Tale. Just as we wonder about the real characters so too we wonder about the fictional ones. As Booth says in his discussion of characterization, “We have, or can be made to have, a strong desire to see any pattern or form completed, or to experience a further development of qualities of any kind” (125-129).

Chapter 2

II. Character Development and Continuity

As discussed in Chapter 1, included in the historical aspects of the Frazer’s Tales are real, historical characters like Chaucer, Alice and Suffolk. From book to book we see how the lives of these characters play out and what their fates are. Along the way we begin to respond to them. We love them. We hate them. We are indifferent to them. These characters, whether they are real or fictional, evoke different responses in us. As Booth says, “We have, or can be made to have, a strong desire for the success or failure of those we love or hate, admire or detest; or we can be made to hope for or fear a change in the quality of a character (125-129).

In addition to real, historical characters Frazer creates and includes fictional ones. Just as the real ones appear from book to book so too do the fictional ones. Along the way they grow and mature. At the end of each Tale the reader could either wonder what has happened to a particular character—he can come up with his own ending—or he can

read the next book to find out what becomes of the character. All in all, the development of the characters engages the reader in that he gets to 'meet' them, then develop an interest and wonder about them. Booth agrees, saying,

If we look closely at our responses to most great novels, we discover that we feel a strong concern for the characters as people, we care about their good and bad fortune. In most works of any significance, we are made to admire or detest, love or hate, or simply to approve or disapprove of at least one central character, and our interest in reading from page to page, like our judgment upon the book after reconsideration, inseparable from this emotional involvement. We care, and care deeply. Any characteristic, mental, physical, or moral, which in real life will make me love or hate other men, will work the same effect in fiction. In great works we surrender our emotions for reasons that leave us with no regrets, no inclination to retract, after the immediate spell is past. They are, in fact, reasons which we should be ashamed not to respond to (169)

Frazer evokes these responses in her readers. She makes the fictional characters as real as the factual ones. And because she allows them to grow from book to book the reader sees the development of the characters.

Dame Frevisse is the primary detective who solves the mysteries. Frazer revealed in a phone interview that Frevisse was born in 1400. Given that knowledge her age is easily discernable from book to book but her "biography" is supplied only in fragments, and is not in any order, from Tale to Tale. In the most recent Tale which is set in 1450, Frevisse is fifty years old. At the age of nine she went to live with her aunt Mathilda Chaucer, her mother's sister, and her uncle Thomas Chaucer. She "had been part of her

uncle's household for the eight final years of her girlhood" (*Bishop*, 18). When she was 17 years old she became a nun. In *The Maiden's Tale* we discover where Frevisse was born when she says, "No, my parents are entirely English, but I was born in France and, yes, was named for Saint Frevisse because she's the same as our St. Frideswide of Oxfordshire" (67). In *The Sempster's Tale* we are given a glimpse of Frevisse's early childhood. "'And the death-wielders' numbers are growing,' her father had said once, when the small band of players with whom he and her mother and she were presently traveling were sheltering through a rainy night in a barn somewhere in France . . . Frevisse still remembered the firelight on tired faces, the rustle of rain on the roof, the warmth of her mother's arm around her" (132). "She [Frevisse] had followed where her heart and mind had led her and never regretted her choice" (*Sempster*, 168). In *The Hunter's Tale* we learn that, "Frevisse had become a nun not so much in withdrawal from the world as in a glad going toward God" (112). In *The Novice's Tale* we hear that she "was carried along with her parents on their wanderings" (87). There is still a lot left to reveal about her. We know she had a calling to become a nun. We also know that her parents were players and traveled a lot and can conclude that that is why Frevisse went to live with Chaucer. Frazer has not yet revealed in the Tales whether Frevisse's parents are still alive or not. Frazer revealed, in a phone interview, that at fifty Frevisse is getting rather philosophical and she drifts off into thoughts rather than focus on issues at hand. Since Frevisse is the main character we expect to see a lot more of her and look forward to finding out more about her past and what will happen to her in the future.

What is Frevisse like? In *The Bastard's Tale*, "To be difficult, Frevisse said, 'He was very highly thought of'" (223). Sometimes just for the fun she would be challenging

and mischievous. When we first meet her in the first novel *The Novice's Tale*, we learn that her uncle Thomas Chaucer is quite fond of her and that she gets along, for the most part, with her cousin Alice. "When Frevisse had known her, she had been a quiet mannered child" (*Bishop*, 26) "They were almost laughing with pleasure together, Frevisse surprised at her pleasure in seeing Alice and how pleased Alice seemed to be" (*Maiden*, 44). From what we know of Frevisse, she appears bright and likeable.

James Como¹¹, has this to say:

Whose reeve, Chaucer's or Frazer's, is the more thoroughly imagined? Now, only in Shakespeare do we find anyone who exceeds the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath in penetrating richness. But in neither Chaucer nor in Shakespeare is there a Frevisse, and as a continuing character, developed over time and with astonishing nuance, only Falstaff (and Falstaff by far) is the more engaging. And yet: whereas there is nothing more I'd want to know about Falstaff, there is much I hope to learn about the nun [Frevisse]. I'd very much want to speak with her, to visit and befriend Frevisse, and I'd want her to like me. Would anyone think the same, say, about Harry Bailey? I've already met many a Harry Bailey -- but Dame Frevisse is unique. Notice I have not mentioned Conan Doyle? That's because even the great Holmes does not belong in this mix. I earnestly hope that, in some drawer, Frazer has a Frevisse manuscript without a murder and narratively unlimited by the constraints of a (presumed) semi-literary reading public.

However, not all readers may find Frevisse likeable. Frazer has given her a wide

¹¹ James Como is the author of *Branches To Heaven: Geniuses of C. S. Lewis*. He is also the editor of *C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences* and *Remembering C. S. Lewis: Recollections of Those Who Knew Him*. Como has read all of Frazer's Tales.

variety of personality traits. She is smart, witty and even though she is a nun she possesses many flaws, most of which she is aware. She can be very stubborn and opinionated. She makes mistakes. She repents. Frazer does not say that Frevisse is good or bad. Instead, she reveals the qualities and leaves the reader to make up his or her mind. Frevisse helps some murderers get away with murders. Is she just or not? We do know that she recognizes and prays for her faults, her sins. Either way, one way or another, we respond to her and her life unfolds from book to book. Of course, Frazer is not the only character that is developed.

In *The Novice's Tale* Domina Edith, the prioress, is seventy-nine years old. She has her faculties about her but only when she is awake, which is not much of the time. "Everyone at St. Frideswide's knew that in her seventy-ninth year, a fabulous age, Domina Edith came to sleep easily at almost any time" (*Novice*, 6). In *The Servant's Tale* Domina Edith is in poor health. "This was Domina Edith's first attendance at chapter in almost two weeks, a longer absence than ever before in all her more than thirty years in office. The rheum that was only a severe nuisance to the others had settled into her lungs and nearly killed her" (*Servant*, 32). Then in *The Bishop's Tale*, "Domina Edith was very old, and last winter's deep cold had dealt harshly with her. She had survived a heavy rheum in her chest but not recovered her strength" (12). In the Summer of 1436 in *The Boy's Tale* Domina Edith is very, very ill. "Domina Edith, their prioress, had not risen from her bed since Easter week . . . now Domina Edith was dying" (14). At the end of *The Boy's Tale* Domina Edith dies. Along the way, the reader is told that Domina Edith is kind and wise, and although she is also stern, she is loved and respected by all those who know her. She is revered and that reverence transcends the pages unto the reader,

who shares the sorrow of her death with the nuns, and is relieved because she is no longer suffering. After her death another prioress has to be appointed. We are told, with the death of Domina Edith “. . . matters were different now” (*Murderer*, 15). The nuns elect a successor.

Out of fear, some of the nuns vote for Dame Alys. Some doesn't but the votes are enough for her to be elected to the position. Dame Alys is first introduced in *The Novice's Tale*. She is a disagreeable person. “Dame Alys had a temper that boiled quickly and held on to wrongs long, . . . most of the nine nuns had been wary, if not plain afraid, of Dame Alys' temper and memory. None wanted her as prioress, but some of them had been fearful of what would have to be endured if she received not even a single vote on the first ballot. Frevisse herself had not cared; she had cast her vote willingly for Dame Claire, and so had Sister Thomasine, she thought, because Sister Thomasine was not swayed by such worldly troubles as fear of Dame Alys' wrath” (*Murderer*, 15-16). We know what the sisters thought of Dame Alys. But what did Dame Alys think of herself? Alys knows that she is corrupt. In *The Prioress' Tale* “Alys had long since admitted to herself, with some relief, that she was not meant to be a saint” (5). In *The Prioress's Tale* her corruption and inefficiency are made evident. She “had made a waste of the priory's properties and taken them deep into debts as well as into other troubles” (*Maiden*, 22). In *The Maiden's Tale* she is replaced by Domina Elisabeth, who “was slowly bringing matters around. She brought peace and prayers back into the nunnery” (*Maiden*, 22-23). Dame Alys is portrayed as a negative character and at the end of *The Prioress's Tale* she is arrested and taken away. In the voting for Dame Alys some of the characteristics of the other nuns are revealed. Some give in to their fears and even

though they know that Dame Alys would be a bad prioress they vote for her anyway. Not so other nuns, including Sister Thomasine, who is in a league of her own. She changes dramatically from the novice portrayed in *The Novice's Tale*.

When we first meet Sister Thomasine, the Novice in *The Novice's Tale*, she is trying to hide from her aunt who wants to marry her off. The aunt is murdered and Sister Thomasine is accused of the murder. Men come to arrest her but something unusual happens.

As they chanted their defiance and a warning of God's wrath, somewhere outside the day's cloud shifted, letting a long and single golden shaft of brightness sweep the length of the church's darkness, from the western window to Thomasine, where she stood above them all. She shone in the sudden brightness and as if to answer it, raised her face, shining, into it. With pure and simple loveliness, as if she were seeing something more wondrous than any fearful thing before her, she smiled, and reached out into the light and emptiness in front of her, toward something there that no one else could see. (210).

The men who come to arrest her "began a furtive slipping backward out of the great door behind them. Others started to draw back after them, their fear of staying there stronger than their obedience to Sir Walter" (*Novice*, 210) who orders the arrest. With the help of Dame Frevisse, Sister Thomasine is found innocent and stays on at St. Frideswide because she wants nothing else — nothing else —but to become a nun. Even as early as *The Novice's Tale* we see that she is holy. Throughout the books we see her progressing to possible sainthood. She is rarely sick and never gives in to worldly desires. "Sister Thomasine there was well on her way to sainthood. Anyone who knew how many hours

she spent in prayer had to know how holy she was” (*Prioress*, 5). In *The Widow’s Tale* Sister Thomasine is even more deeply pious. She has been in the convent for about eighteen years now. When Cristina is accused of being unchaste and is sent to St. Frideswide, all the nuns avoid her as if she carried a contagious disease—all the nuns except Sister Thomasine. She somehow knows that Cristina is not guilty of the charges against her. Thomasine’s sanctity also seems visible in her appearance.

Whatever Sister Thomasine had been when young—pretty or plain or even ugly—was gone. Her face was refined down to fine bones and pallor almost as white as the wimple tightly around it, as if both food and sunlight were things in which she rarely indulged. And yet in her eyes were more of depth and distances than Cristiana had ever seen in anyone’s. Cristiana stared into them as Sister Thomasine put out a narrow, white hand and laid it gently on her shoulder with all the tenderness a mother might have given a child. It was only for moment. Yet for that moment of her touch and look, Cristiana’s hatred, angers, and pain all seemed little things. (*Widow*, 60)

Sister Thomasine is holy. The reader may not be able to identify with her on that level but he has a certain veneration for her. From 1434 to 1450, through fifteen books, Sister Thomasine grows from a shy, timid novice to an assertive, holy nun. Along the way she inadvertently breaks someone’s heart.

Robert Fenner is deeply in love with Thomasine in *The Novice’s Tale*. He knows early on that she is not to be his. “But while Thomasine was beholding something only she could see, Robert was looking at her with all his heart, knowing that he had lost her. All hope of having her died in his eyes as Frevisse watched” (211-212). For many years

he remains unmarried. But as time passes he realizes that Sister Thomasine will not change her mind. He is forced to marry one Lady Blaunche. In *The Squire's Tale* we know that he is very unhappy for several reasons. Lady Blaunche loves him but she is deranged. And Robert has fallen in love someone else by the name of Katherine. In *The Squire's Tale* Lady Blaunche dies and Robert ends up marrying Katherine. We sympathize with Robert when he loses Thomasine, pity him when he is forced to marry Lady Blaunche, and then are delighted when he finally marries Katherine, a woman he loves. He is a good man and we want good things for him. When we first meet Robert Fenner he is an attendant to a noble. After he marries Blanche he becomes a noble himself and remains one. He is mentioned again in later Tales, here and there, so that we see the progression of his life. Another character that is mentioned continually is Master Naylor.

Master Naylor is introduced in *The Novice's Tale*. He works in the stable at St. Frideswide and usually accompanies Frevisse on her many journeys. He is married and has two children. In *The Reeve's Tale* his young son Dickon who is eleven years old is mentioned. "Did he also tell you it was Dickon found the body" (116). In *The Sempster's Tale* Dickon is grown up and goes with his father on his travels. "Frevisse left the cloister to meet Master Naylor and his son Dickon . . . near to twenty-one years old and nearly to be a man in his own right. Master Naylor's . . . face had creased with years and duty into lines . . ." (37-38). Whenever Frevisse has to leave the convent Master Naylor accompanies her and serves as the protector. He is firm, courteous and honest. At first Master Naylor seems grouchy but as he grows older we find that he commands respect. Master Naylor is quite different from another grouchy character, Master Montfort.

Master Montfort is the coroner. He is a disagreeable fellow who wants a quick solution and would point to anyone he dislikes just to solve a crime. We encounter him in *The Novice's Tale* where he starts off on the wrong foot with Dame Frevisse. Whenever there is a murder, Master Montfort shows up to try to solve the crime and is always wrong. In *The Clerk's Tale* he is murdered. Characters in the Tale are not really sorry because he was obnoxious to most people. In *The Novice's Tale* he wants to arrest Thomasine without even investigating the circumstances. For the most part, the reader dislikes him and does not miss his absence very much.

Some characters, like Domina Edith, we do miss when they are no longer in the story. Other characters like Master Montfort, we may not mind their absence. Then there are those that we wish well like Robert and Naylor. We wish some of them would change for the better like Dame Alys or even Alice Chaucer who because of her husband involves herself with some dishonest business. As for Sister Thomasine: when will she become a saint?

It is difficult not to respond to the characters one way or another. Frazer describes them with such personalities and characteristics that it is not difficult to match them to someone we know in our own lives. At times we even see ourselves. As Barzun says, "By the end we feel we have lived though a lifetime of worry, dismay, hope, shame, ignorance, sorrow . . ." (575). In *The Widow's Tale* we worry about Cristina whose husband dies and then her children are taken away. In *The Murderer's Tale* we are filled with dismay when the compassionate Martyn, who looks after Lionel, is murdered. We hope that the possessed Lionel will get better. We feel deep sorrow for the mother in *The Servant's Tale* who because of poverty kills her children so that they won't suffer. We

are happy when, in *The Prioress' Tale*, Robert marries Katherine. We feel ashamed because we are relieved when Frevisse agrees to keep Mister and Mistress Payne's secret that their son committed murder in *The Outlaw's Tale*. And we feel guilty for not being sorrowful when certain characters, like Montfort, die. All in all, as serious readers we react one way or another to the characters in Frazer's Tales. That the characters surface and re-surface from book to book adds to the interest that the reader develops.

In *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis says, "The art of bringing something close to us . . . is making it palpable and vivid, by sharply observed (Frazer's extreme research) and sharply imagined detail (57). In addition, Lewis says, "A fiction is realistic in content when it is probable or 'true to life'" (58). Frazer's characters are true to life. She not only researches historical contents but she also observes human behavior. Frazer shows how the lives of the characters unfold in the big picture. But she goes even further. And it is perhaps one of the most exceptional features of Frazer's Tales that separates them from the traditional detective tales. Frazer's characters are part of the moral vision of her novels.

Chapter 3

Moral Gravity

In the *Phaedrus*¹² Plato uses the Greek word psychagogia to identify a constructive function of rhetoric. Literally translated the word means "the art of leading the soul by means of words." Plato discusses psychagogia as an art. Aristotle, on the other hand, says that it is more than an art. In *Criticism: The Major Texts*¹³ it is stated, "In

¹² Edited by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (p. 55)

¹³ Edited by Walter Jackson Bate. This quotation is taken from a chapter titled "Classical Antiquity:

answering Plato's suspicions about the moral effect of art, he also stressed, . . . the healthful and formative effect of art on the mind; and, in doing so, he was quite in accord with the general Greek confidence in the power of art as psychagogia, the leading out of the soul, and as a molder and developer of human character" (13). This "leading out" (or enlarging) of the soul is among the most prominent features that separates Frazer's Tales from traditional detective tales. Indeed, psychagogia is the basis of Frazer's Tales.

Characters are often faced with moral dilemmas. Sometimes they make the right choices, sometimes not; often their choices transform them. It is in these experiences, through the characters, that Frazer achieves a leading of the soul by means of words. The inner landscape of the reader is changed providing that the reader is a serious reader. As Lewis says in *An Experiment in Criticism*, "the first reading of some literary work is often, to the literary, an experience so momentous . . . their whole consciousness is changed" (3). Booth agrees: "The best . . . has always been the spectacle of a good man facing moral choices . . ." (169). Booth also says, "In any case, for good or ill, we all seem convinced that a novel or play which does justice to our interest in truth, beauty, and in goodness is superior to even the most successful 'novel of ideas'. Our emotional concern . . . is firmly based on intellectual, qualitative, and moral interests" (133). Frazer possesses psychagogia, in that she cultivates the art of leading the soul.

She achieves just the right balance in the handling of moral issues. Frazer does not produce what Booth calls "mistakes" in bad authors. "In the literature of moral quest there are many works in which the quest is a failure. In some, the confusion is never resolved: the reader is intentionally left baffled about one or more questions raised by the work. One can theoretically project a novel in which no attempt would be made to give a

sense of progression toward any conclusion or final illumination. Such a work might simply convey an all-pervasive sense that no belief is possible, that all is chaos, that nobody sees his way clearly, that we are all engaged in a “journey to the end of the night” (297). In none of Frazer’s Tales will we find any of the above-mentioned errors. Frazer does not bite off more than she can chew. She takes the moral questions and the dilemmas to a point where she achieves clarity and credibility in her conclusions of the moral dilemmas. In the process, she manages to lead—or at least touch—the soul of the reader.

One of the most pious characters in the Tales is Thomasine. It is clear that she is not a worldly human. In many ways she is unlike the average person. She has not much desire for material things. Internally, within her thoughts, she strives for spiritual growth. As she grows older Thomasine is able to accomplish a spiritual level above that of most people. However, as a young novice, she had her flaws like everyone else. “Thomasine halted, exasperated, and looked around with impatient anger for a servant to signal to the door—then caught herself and offered a swift prayer of penitence. *Anger* is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, and its appearance marked a severe departure from holiness” (*Novice*, 33). Who has not experienced impatience or worse, anger? Through Thomasine, Frazer reminds—perhaps even instructs—that anger is not only a vice but a deadly sin. The fact that Thomasine is angry is quite believable. She is still a young novice. But as she grows and matures, Thomasine displays such emotions as anger less and less. From a religious perspective, especially Christian, but also true in other religious groups—anger is one of the diseases that can be detrimental to the soul.

So is despair. In *The Servant’s Tale* we are told that “Meg was in despair . . .

despair is a sin" (1). The character, Meg, has two young sons and a drunken husband. She serves as help in the kitchen at St. Frideswide from time to time. Meg is financially poor and everyday living is a struggle. There are times when she goes hungry for days. Her husband, who did manage to bring in some form of income, is killed. This puts Meg in deeper despair. She does not believe that she can effectively raise her two sons. So, at different points in the story Meg kills them both. She explains to Dame Frevisse why she has killed her sons. "Sym never understood anything really . . . Hewe seemed set on wandering from his appointed path into sinfulness" (Servant, 230-231). She tried to get Hewe to become a priest but that was not his desire. Meg, in *her* despair, thought that she did the right thing in 'saving' her sons from a life of despair. Even though Meg is a murderer she is a sympathetic figure. Her motives, though not acceptable, are understandable. Frazer sets up the character to be a sympathetic one. As Booth says, using Dostoevski's works as an example of the sympathetic criminal, "His (Dostoevski) criminals remain deeply sympathetic because he knows, and makes us know, why they are criminals and why they are still sympathetic. Not genuine ambiguity but rather complexity and clarity seems to be his secret" (Booth, 135). This is also true of Frazer's Tales. Meg's husband is dead. Her sons, with no ambitions of her liking, could become burdensome. They are financially poor. Following her thought pattern we understand how she has come to the decision to kill. In her mind she is 'protecting' her sons. However, the reader understands that the root of her misguided thoughts is despair. Meg, in this world, will be punished by hanging. Frazer does not even venture to ask, or answer, whether God will forgive her or not. As such, Frazer does not commit the error that Booth speaks of, which is that of giving any final conclusions about the final

destination of the soul. Instead, she gives a reminder that ultimately despair is a lack of trust in God and despair can be overwhelming with consequences that can be serious not just to others but to our very own soul. However, once the sin is recognized and is repented for, there is hope for salvation. At the end of *The Servant's Tale* the narrator says that Meg thinks she has done what had to be done. She has put her sons out of misery. Meg is taken away to be hanged but she doesn't care about the physical death. "She knew why she had to go, and that she would not be coming back. They could take her where they wanted, it no longer mattered" (232). But Meg cares about the retribution: "Everything was settled and there would be a priest there for her" (232). The priest will listen to her confession. Whether a person can kill, ask for forgiveness and be absolved by God we don't know for sure. But Meg will do what the religion prescribes. She will confess before she is hanged.

In *The Murderer's Tale* there is a different kind of murderer than Meg. There is no sympathy for this one. What Meg has done is evil but she is not an evil character per se. Her reason for killing is the good of her sons. Giles, in *The Murderer's Tale*, kills because killing gives him joy. He wants to see characters suffer because he hates them. He finds pleasure in inflicting pain, both emotionally and physically, on others. His sins are many. He is hateful. "But for now everything was Lionel's . . . except for Edeyn. She was the one thing of dear cousin Lionel's that Giles had taken for himself. That made him smile as he joined Lionel and Martyn¹⁴ beside the table, loathing the both of them as he did so" (4). He is greedy. "For a while it has seemed that Lionel would lose his right to inherit because of his fits, and Giles had had hopes . . . everything would

¹⁴ Martyn is Lionel's caretaker and friend. Whenever Lionel gets into his violent spasms, Martyn goes with him to ensure he doesn't hurt himself.

come to Giles eventually” (6-7). “It was that ‘eventually’ that irked him” (7). He is covetous. “He preferred large-breasted, wide-hipped women, they offered more . . . Edeyn was the opposite . . . but because he suspected that Lionel had loved her . . . maybe still did love her, come to that, he made it a point sometimes of letting Lionel see how very much Edeyn was his now” (10). And he is a murderer. “Giles rocked slightly back and forth, containing his pleasure with difficulty, because tonight was going to be different” (116). Giles plans to kill Martyn during one of Lionel’s attacks and let everyone believe that Lionel, in his unmanageable convulsions, has killed Martyn. Lionel will be deemed murderous and no longer fit to be in society. Thus, Giles will collect the inheritance. “He realized he was smiling to himself in the darkness and moved cat-footed toward the stairs up the chapel” (*Murderer*, 122). Martyn and Lionel are in the chapel. There is an impending attack and they come to the Chapel to be away from people. Once the spasm gets out of control, Giles strikes: “Giles, sure and harsh with pleasure, smiled down at him, saw recognition come, and slashed the long edge of the dagger across his throat . . . Giles in sudden exaltation shoved him again, and then stood over him, watching, until all movement and any sound ceased. It had all been so easy” (125).

Ultimately, Giles wants to inherit all of his cousin Lionel’s wealth. Lionel is sickly and Giles does not know how much longer he will remain alive. It could be a long time. So to speed up the inheritance Giles kills Lionel. One sin, like a seed, when planted can grow and spread. One leads to the other and before we know it we are deep in immoral acts that can damage the soul. Of course not all sins lead to murder. Frazer’s point is that all sins lead to potential harm to the soul. Frazer does not say why Giles is greedy

and has such an evil nature. Whether it's a test or Giles allowing the devil to overcome him, Giles's soul is in peril and needs prayers and forgiveness. Frazer does not venture to say that his soul is in more danger than anyone else's; just that it needs prayers. Whether it's an evil murderer or a nun each soul needs prayers.

In *The Outlaw's Tale* as with other Tales we see the vices of the nuns including those of Dame Frevisse. In *The Outlaw's Tales*, Frevisse recognizes and accepts her flaws. "I might have seen if I'd looked. But I didn't look. And outcome or not, what I did were sins. And behind them all was the worst sin. Pride. My Pride made me believe that I should interfere because I thought I knew best what should be done" (*Outlaw*, 212). In *Mere Christianity* Lewis says that Pride is among the deadliest sins. That pride leads Frevisse into serious moral choices and consequences.

Dame Frevisse is on her way with Dame Clare, in the company of Master Naylor, to a baptism when they are all kidnapped and held captives until Frevisse's uncle, Chaucer, gives clearance to the outlaws who want to change their lifestyles. It will take some time to get the letter of request and clearance back and forth. In the mean time, Dame Clare falls ill and has to be cared for. They are brought to the Paynes, some friends of the outlaws. While there someone is murdered. Frevisse intervenes and finds out that the young son of Master and Mistress Payne is the killer. The death is an accident. Frevisse believes that it was indeed an accident. However, if the authorities are notified it would be difficult to prove that it was an accident and young Edward could die by hanging. "Mistress Payne says, 'Are you going to let us keep our secret?' Lying. Deception. Abuse of trust. Here they all were, joined together in a single act. For this more than all the rest, there would be penance so deep in her own heart that she might never be free of it.

But the choice had been made already. Quietly Frevisse says, ‘I’ve helped you make it. I’ll help you keep it. Tell Edward that he’ll have my daily prayers through all his life to come’” (*Outlaw*, 217). Frevisse puts her own soul in danger to protect Edward. But had she not given in to pride she would not have had to make that choice or face such dire consequences. We are reminded that the temptation to sin is there in everyone.

In *The Boy's Tale*,

Sister Thomasine's eyes were wide. Since she had come to St. Frideswide as a novice seven years ago, she had been no farther out of the cloister than the inner yard and the orchard, and those only rarely. Then she stared out of the wide world beyond the bank with gentle wonder, squinting against the sunlight glancing into her eyes. ‘Oh, how lovely,’ she breathed, and Frevisse felt a pang of mingled satisfaction and alarm. It was good to see Sister Thomasine startled out of her still-faced holiness, it was also disquieting . . . it has been in girlhood that Sister Thomasine had blithely given up the world. What effect would this glimpse of unrealized beauty have on her now? (74)

It seems that Sister Thomasine is momentarily swayed by the beauty of the world beyond the convent walls. We wonder what her reaction will be. Will she regret her decision of becoming a nun? Will she find herself in a moral dilemma or choosing between her vows to Christ and life beyond the convent walls? It may seem a trifling comparison and yet how many of us choose a life of nun- or priesthood? We know of Thomasine’s piety and dedication to God. We also know that she is a fallen human. What will she do? What effect will this view have on her? “Very little, it appeared, for after a moment Sister Thomasine said contentedly, ‘It’s good to see, once in a while, how

beautiful it is, so I can understand the ones who choose to stay in it and pray the better for them”” (*Boy*, 74). Frevisse, on the other hand, we are not worried about because she is older and more settled as a nun: “Frevisse drew a deep breath, letting everything but the moment's loveliness slip from her mind. She had learned the value of life's momentary beauties and to enjoy them when they came” (*Boy*, 87) In both cases we understand that the ladies have given up things they find beautiful. Frazer is not asking us to become nuns and priests but she is reminding us about our obedience to the laws of religion and the difficulty in conforming to those laws sometimes. She reminds us of the virtue of sacrifice. She also reminds us that constantly and in many ways we are tested. Whether it's out in the world at large or in the confines of convent walls, temptations are ever present.

In *The Prioress's Tale* there is corruption. "And the daily office of prayers was increasingly badly done, increasingly uncomfortable, between the builders' noise and the prioress's inattention. It seemed that day by day there was less and less peace to be had anywhere in St. Frideswide" (*Prioress*, 9). The prioress, Dame Alys, is not interested in heading a group of nuns or for that matter in serving God. She wants to gain as much wealth as she can for herself and her extended family members and steals money from the convent. She buys minimal food and keeps the rest of the money for herself. Eventually she is caught and punished. We are reminded that eventually our bad deeds will catch up with us and we will have to suffer the consequences. Also, greed for material things leads to distress of the soul. Such temptations are all around us.

In *The Prioress's Tale* Dame Frevisse is tested and gives in to temptation, even if only in her thoughts. “Frevisse had not thought that far ahead until now, but what she

was doing was a willfully committed fault and under obedience she would have to confess it. She shrank a little, inwardly, at the thought and could not stop the one that came treacherously after it: why should she confess it? If Domina Alys saw fit to treat all rules - even the Rule itself - as things to be ignored or shifted as suited her own purpose, why shouldn't she do the same?" (*Prioress*, 65). Frevisse recognizes that her thoughts and actions are perilous. Hopefully, the reader is aware that her reasoning is extremely faulty. Domina Alys pays no heed to the rules. That does not mean that Dame Frevisse should do the same. We may be surprised that Dame Frevisse would think this way. However, such thinking and behaviors are not improbable, even in a mature nun. As humans, we all look for reasons and justifications for our ill behaviors from time to time. Frevisse is faced with choices and she sometimes makes the wrong ones even though she knows that her soul is in danger. As with most humans, her spirit is in constant see-saw. We are reminded that no human is perfect. However, knowing that, we should try to be better humans. Also if we do commit sins we should repent as Sir Gawyn does in *The Boys Tale*.

Sir Gawyn betrays two little boys in *The Boy's Tale* and as a result the boys are almost killed. They are not, but other men die. At the end of the book Gawyn confesses his treachery and is given absolution by the priest just before he dies. The two boys also forgive him. Whether or not God forgives him, Frazer does not say. However, if we are religious and we believe in the Christian doctrine we believe that he will be forgiven because he acknowledges his sinful behavior and tries to redeem himself. Frevisse attempts the same in *The Prioress's Tale*.

“Frevisse said to Sister Thomasine, ‘Is there anything to be done for her, any help

we can give?’” (Prioress, 242). “‘Our prayers,’ said Sister Thomasine, simply, sounding surprised she had need to ask. But, yes, she had the need to ask, Frevisse realized to her shame, because prayers and Domina Alys did not go together in her mind, except to pray for patience to endure her, and that was not going to be enough for now. Prayers for Domina Alys was possibly the hardest thing she could be asked to give and therefore the most necessary for her own sake as well as Domina Alys’” (Prioress, 242-243). Often times the right thing to do is the hardest but we must do it anyway especially when the soul of others is in need. Domina Alys is arrested and punished under the secular law but her soul needs absolution. And even though we are punished by the law that does not mean that the soul has been cleansed (according to Christian and other religious doctrine).

In *The Hunter's Tale* also Frazer touches on the secular versus the religious law. One of the characters, Miles, murders a rather despicable man. It seems like an accident but Frazer and members of Miles's family know that during a fight with the murdered man Miles has sent a signal to his dog to attack and kill the man. To everyone else it seems that the dog is protecting Miles. Miles, caught in the moment of passion and hatred, committed murder. Frazer knows that Miles is wrong but does not turn him in: “For Miles there was the hope that penance might finally cleanse his heart and spirit of hatred's ugly dross and bring, in God's eyes, absolution for his sin of murder. And Frevisse found that she could live with the law's justice not being done if a deeper justice was being answered, if payment was being made, payment of maybe a deeper and more healing kind than the law's justice would have exacted. Penance and love might well save Miles” (Hunter, 318). Frevisse is faced with a moral quandary of whether to turn Miles in or

not and decides that ultimately penance is what he needs.

There is moral dilemma among the characters in the stories, which transcends the stories. Frevisse especially makes many moral decisions that are questionable. In *The Outlaw's*, *The Hunter's*, *The Sempster's* and *The Bastard's Tales* Frevisse protects murderers whom she finds sympathetic one way or another. Meg, in *The Servant's Tale*, is sympathetic for her yet Frevisse does not show the same compassion. However, in whatever ways she shields a murderer she knows that there is potential to harm her own soul and always prays and repents. "She (Frevisse), on the other hand, had penance ahead of her, both for lying and her anger," (*Bastard*, 301). Frevisse knows when she's sinned. And while Frazer explains, she does not offer justifications for any of Frevisse's behaviors. Frazer leaves the reader, based on his/her value system and beliefs, to make his/her own judgments as to whether Frevisse is justified or not. Ultimately, she does the same with the murderers in the stories.

In each Tale there is at least one murder. Frazer revealed in an interview, "A murder is never gratuitous." She always touches on the consequences for the soul of the murderer(s). Whether the reason is justifiable or not, there will be consequences, with the law, within oneself and eventually with God.

Frazer's main focus is on the soul. In every Tale, characters commit sins. Sometimes they are forgiven by the people they hurt, sometimes not. Some are punished by law, some not. What happens in this world is one thing. And punishment here in this world can be severe. However, ultimately Frazer focuses on the saving of the soul not the body. She writes about sins, the constant presence of temptations and of the choices made. She talks about the possible consequences of those choices. Frazer does one more

thing. That is, in the middle of the sinful nature of human beings, she never fails to mention hope, penance, redemption, love and forgiveness. Each Tale offers a moral lesson. As long as the reader is serious and pays attention he/she will be reminded of the laws of God and his/her soul will have been touched—led— one way or another.

Frazer does not preach. She does not give sermons in religion. She skillfully incorporates values and mores into the characters and has them act out their beliefs, whether good or bad. As a human being a reader will be able to identify one way or another. Not all humans are murderers but surely we have been greedy, jealous, covetous, prideful, angry and despairing at some point in our lives. We have also forgiven and shared and loved. We too have been faced with moral choices. Frazer does not attempt to explain the workings of the world. She does not point to God or science as the cause of human nature. What she does is describe and discuss human nature. And based on the choices of possible theories of outcomes for what are labeled sinful behaviors she chooses theological outcomes.

When we read Frazer's Tales we get many things but most importantly we are left with a reminder—or instruction—of an enlargement of the soul. We are told what helps and/or harms the soul. We are reminded that we should be protective of the soul. In all of Frazer's Tales there is at least one murder and what leads up to the murders are often reasons that are tragic. Aristotle in *The Poetics* says, “[T]ragedy does more than simply arouse sympathetic identification and a vivid sense of tragic evil and destructiveness. It offers a *katharsis*, a proper purgation of pity or terror.” We pity the villains and we are terrified that we too could cross the line between good and evil. With the realization, hopefully, we are vigilant. In all of Frazer's Tales there is that reminder and caution.

Conclusion

C. S. Lewis says, “A work of literary art can be considered in two lights. It both *means* and *is*. It is both *Logos* (something said) and *Poiema* (something made). As *Logos* it tells a story, or expresses an emotion, or exhorts or pleads, or describes or rebukes or excites laughter. As *Poiema*, by its aural beauties and also by the balance and contrast and the unified multiplicity of its successive parts, it is an *object d’art*, a thing shaped so as to give a great satisfaction” (132). Frazer’s Tales consist of both Logos and Poiema. The things said are the social, political and other historical facts, along with the morality that makes up each story. The thing made is the combination of each story: the one Book of Dame Frevisse. Within that Book— amid the education in medieval history—there are elements that invariably touch the soul. That touch is the primary feature that sets Frazer’s Tales classes above the traditional detective tale. Frazer adroitly enlarges the mind and soul.

There are many dimensions to the Tales that distinguish them from the traditional whodunit-mysteries. If we read the books individually we see that there is a story in each. But from book to book we see a continuation of the story, of the historical plot and of the characters. This continuity of the books adds up to one whole: The Book of Dame Frevisse. In addition to continuity we see that unlike traditional detective stories the main focus is not on solving a mystery. There is depth of the human psyche. The focus may vary from book to book but always there is depth.

Indeed, Frazer's Tales may be uneven, though the weakest never sinks beneath the very good: instructive, enlarging, and always engaging. One does not want to press the

comparison to Chaucer too far, of course, but the invitation is plain. His Tales, too, are uneven. Frazer has a sense of humor, to be sure; but few have had Chaucer's (whose work, lest we forget, is comic, like Dante's *Comedia* -- that is, happy). And though the medieval master is variously touched by gravitas, in this respect he lacks what Frazer never fails to deliver: a deep, penetrating belief in our fallen nature, in the necessity of paying a price for any misdeed, and in the utter moral horror of murder, which is never a mere prop for Frazer. Does she, therefore, achieve a Tragic Vision as Chaucer does a comic one? That may be claiming too much, even for elevated—and occasionally exalted—genre fiction. But in both, be it Chaucer's celebration of human richness or Frazer's understanding of the depravity of immorality, we are able to apprehend the value of even a single human life and moral values in general. Finally, then, the comparison comes down to this: Chaucer's characters, like the complex and striking Dame Frevisse, are, after all, on a pilgrimage; whether that pilgrimage be to Canterbury or to a greater depth of moral understanding. I have noted that Frazer has been nominated twice for the prestigious Edgar Award and that twice she has lost. My argument respecting the literary merit of her work suggests that those losses are all to the good. For how may the Edgar Award be given to an author who justly deserves the Pulitzer Prize?

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