Masculine Misreading in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*

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Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are arguably filled with many misogynistic undertones, but the *Franklin's Tale* may exhibit them most clearly through the blatant masculine misreading of Dorigen's oath made "in pley," or "as a joke" (988). Dorigen makes this supposed oath to Aurelius after rejecting his advances by telling him that she will love him "best of any man" (997) if he can complete the impossible task of clearing rocks from the sea shore. Despite Dorigen's jesting tone while pledging this oath to him, Aurelius manages to complete the task. Not only does Aurelius misread her in order to force her to keep her promise, Dorigen's husband Arveragus does so as well. It becomes clear that neither Aurelius nor Arveragus seem to care about Dorigen's true intent while making her "promise" to Aurelius. Instead, the two men respect only each other's supposed nobility as well as their own ideas of their masculinity. By intentionally misreading Dorigen in order to increase their own masculinity, the men of the *Franklin's Tale* prove themselves to be the opposite of "fre," or "noble" (1621), the trait which the narrator ironically suggests that they are filled with.

While the blatant disregard for Dorigen's true intent may seem odd in modern times, the culture during this medieval period is, as Carol Pulham suggests, "just emerging from orality to literacy…fiction itself is newly created, [and so] it is not surprising that misintentions and misinterpretations…take place" (79). Because of this custom, Dorigen's "trouthe," or "pledge" (998), would have held a considerable amount of weight in terms of validity, just as written oaths do in modern times, despite her jesting nature. Additionally, once Aurelius had completed – or claimed to have completed – her task, Dorigen's obligation to honor her oath increased vastly. As Pulham says:

> the greater the expectations, the more obligation the promisor has to keep the promise…[and] the more trouble Aurelius takes to obtain the condition that Dorigen names (removing the rocks), the more obligated Dorigen is to fulfill her promise. (84)

Aurelius therefore "changes the circumstance of the promise from a joking one to a serious one" and places "a moral demand" on Dorigen (Pulham 84). In this way, he not only misreads her, but he ignores her and makes it impossible for her to take back her unintentional oath.

The customs surrounding orality during the period allow Aurelius to easily misinterpret the seriousness of Dorigen's oath, drawing light to the fact that his misreading was not accidental in the slightest. Through Aurelius deliberately misreading Dorigen despite her oath being made "in pley," the tale highlights the misogynistic undertones as well as the problematic gendered power structures at play in the tale. This all occurs while the narrator praises Aurelius and the other male characters in the tale for being "fre." Aurelius proves the narrator wrong when he

deceives Dorigen in order to force her to fulfill her oath; he uses magic to make the rocks seem to disappear in "apparence" (1157). Even though Dorigen believes that the rocks have truly disappeared, and that she is bound to her oath because of it, because Aurelius did not actually get rid of the rocks, it is debatable whether or not Dorigen was actually obligated to keep her oath to him. This uncertainty is easily linked to the uncertainty of the oath itself; Dorigen's promise was unreal, so it seems fitting that Aurelius' completion of her task be unreal as well.

While Dorigen's intentions may have been clear to Aurelius, her language can be argued to have been ambiguous, therefore creating a sense of uncertainty to her promise:

> I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene
> Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,
> Thanne wol I love yow best of any man.
> Have heer my trouthe in al that evere I kan. (995-998)

For Aurelius, desperate to be with Dorigen, all he may have needed to attempt her impossible task was a sense of uncertainty; so by not being completely sure of Dorigen's seriousness, doing all he can to fulfill her task becomes a more viable option in his mind. In this way, the lack of certainty in Dorigen's language: "by heighe God above,/Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love," (989-990), or "by high God above, yet would I grant you to be your love," is able to encourage Aurelius to misread her in order to attain what he desires while purposefully ignoring the fact that she was telling him this "in pley." The presence of any uncertainty in Dorigen's language may seem abnormal since she was not serious in making her promise; it would have made more sense for her to make it clearer to Aurelius that she was truly rejecting him. However, the traditions of courtship during this time made this difficult to do. According to Susan Crane, "the overwhelming presumption in courtly literature [is] that a woman worthy of courtship will eventually accede to a worthy suitor" (62), and because "refusal becomes an integral part of courtship, [as] an expected first response that the lover's efforts can overcome" (63), even if Dorigen had rejected Aurelius' advances more than she already had, it probably wouldn't have made much difference. Additionally, her task of removing the rocks "parallels the resistant lady's demand that her suitor perform extraordinary deeds in order to win her love" and that these "extraordinary demands, even when motivated by distaste, no more deflect courtship than do outright refusals" (64). This immediately becomes problematic and uncomfortably close to scenarios of rape, in which there is a clear disregard for any type of refusal. By essentially being forced to use language which invokes uncertainty in order to maintain and follow the rules of courtly love, Dorigen becomes trapped in a situation where she inevitably allows for Aurelius' misreading. Through this misreading, Dorigen's agency is taken away and proved to be nonexistent to begin with. The custom of courtly love, while at times seemingly empowering for women, instead removes Dorigen's agency while leading her to make a promise she has no wishes of following through with.

So, rather than engaging with the customs of courtship, Dorigen instead attempts to use them as a mechanism to delay Aurelius' unwanted advances. Because, as Crane says, "Dorigen's

reply to Aurelius resists the conventional feminine role in courtship by scrambling and exaggerating it" (Crane 62), even her most obvious forms of rejection could be misread simply because it is being said in the context of a courtship:

> By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf
> Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf
> In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit.
> I wol been his to whom that I am knyt.
> Taak this for final answere as of me. (983-987)

Dorigen's attempt at delaying Aurelius, therefore, fails because of the courtship she is forced into. While at first it may seem like Aurelius is doing everything he can to prevent any amount of delay in obtaining Dorigen for his own, he ends up also participating in the act of delaying; he delays the fulfillment of Dorigen's promise itself by "releasing" her from her oath. Interestingly enough, it is not Dorigen's lamentations that seem to be the deciding factor in Aurelius' release. According to Crane, "Aurelius does note her sorrow when Arveragus sends her to him, but his mercy on her depends on his acquiescence to Arveragus, who inspires him and to whom the squire addresses his decision" (49). This brings attention to the respect Arveragus and Aurelius have for each other, as well as to the parallels between the two men and their separate oaths with Dorigen.

Despite the marital oath Arveragus has made with Dorigen, he essentially forces her to break it by telling her that "trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe" (1479), or "one's pledged word is the highest thing that one may keep." This is problematic, because while he says it in order to convince her that she must fulfill her pledge to Aurelius, he is also allowing her to break their marital pledge, and therefore, breaking it himself. As a result, Arveragus seems to misread Dorigen in order to attempt to maintain his own nobility. Aurelius, on the other hand, seems to do so for surprisingly similar reasons; rather than fulfilling Dorigen's oath to him, he does the opposite fairly quickly. This seems fairly uncharacteristic of Aurelius, whose obvious distress and absolute need for Dorigen near the beginning of the tale changes drastically by the end, when, after he releases her from her oath, he doesn't seem to be upset about losing the apparent woman of his dreams. Instead, Aurelius takes pride in his level of nobility: "Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede/As wel as kan a knyght, withouten drede" (1543-1544), meaning "Thus a squire can do a gentle deed as well as a knight can, without a doubt." This sentiment contradicts the question posed by the Franklin at the end of the tale, which is: "Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" (1621), or "which do you think was the most noble?" According to Alcuin Blamires, "Arveragus has no right to be 'fre' with his wife's marital vows and chastity, [and] Aurelius no reason to think himself generous for relinquishing a 'right' to Dorigen based on an illegal adulterous promise and on magic…" (150). From Aurelius' sentiment that he can be as noble as the knight, the tale moves from claiming to have a "somewhat egalitarian view of men and women to an exclusively male and moreover complacent competition in virtue" (Blamires 150). The idea of competing for virtue is the opposite of "fre," just as is the

misreading of Dorigen; by taking away her agency over her own language, the men prove to care more about their masculinity than being generous or noble. Because of this, it can be argued that the cause of pleasure for Aurelius lies not in Dorigen, but in the power he is able to wield over her, as well as his resulting expanded masculinity.

Because Aurelius' true desire lies in having this power over Dorigen, it can be said that he misreads her in order to gain anticipatory pleasure. By putting so much effort into obtaining Dorigen only to then release her from her promise highlights Aurelius' masculine pleasure in anticipation; this is an interesting idea on one level because of its subsequent sexual suggestions. By going through as much "foreplay" as Aurelius does partly in order to increase his masculinity, the fact that he doesn't actually complete his supposed intended goal sheds light on his possible pleasure in his own impotence. By attempting to increase his masculinity, the opposite actually occurs by being unable to fulfill his part of Dorigen's oath. Instead of taking sexual pleasure in Dorigen, Aurelius takes pleasure in both increasing his masculinity through the power he briefly has over Dorigen as well as the anticipation of being with her. Additionally, because Aurelius chooses to respect Arveragus' wishes rather than Dorigen's, his need for social respect becomes apparent. The irony in Aurelius' desire for masculinity is clear; despite his desire to increase his own masculinity, he does this not by becoming Dorigen's lover, but instead by stopping their relationship from taking place before it even begins. Because of Dorigen's lack of agency stemming from uncertainty and doubt that comes from the rules of courtly love, Aurelius is easily able to misread Dorigen in order to maintain the validity of his claim that she was being serious when she made her oath. Aurelius, consequently, exemplifies the overall system of men misreading women in order to gain anticipatory pleasure and increase their ideas of their own masculinity. This damaging system of misogyny comes to light in the men's priority of increasing their masculinity over respecting Dorigen herself. Despite the societal expectations and rules concerning oral oaths, the deliberate masculine misreading of Dorigen's intentions when making her oath "in pley" highlights the harmful society that Chaucer creates in which it is only natural to bend the words of a woman in order to fit the desires of a man.

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