"The Franklin's Tale" and Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo*

Chaucer used Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo* as an analogue for the Franklin's Tale, and the stories have a great number of similarities—their basic characters, their basic plot, and their final questions about the characters. But the differences between the two stories show where Chaucer made choices and how they affect the interpretation of the story. They show the issues Chaucer was interested in, and the ideals or morals he was concerned with. Chaucer's changes deal with the social position of the middle class, valuing love versus just honor, and social strictures and appearances, creating a story that invites audience interpretation.

Chaucer has the Franklin tell this tale, a man whose social position differs greatly from Boccaccio's narrator, a noble named Menedon. The Franklin is of the middle class, but wealthy, and attempting to make his way into the nobility through his wealth and actions. This raises the issue of nobility in general—can people only enter this estate through blood connections, or do wealth and character give access? Unlike Boccaccio's tale, which ends with two noble characters, the Queen and Menedon, authoritatively explaining who they think the most "liberal" is, Chaucer leaves open the possibility for who the most "fre" is in the Franklin's Tale. He leaves this issue of the source of nobility up for debate.

Both "fre" and "liberal," the adjectives used in the final question posed in each story, have a number of different meanings according to the Middle English Dictionary. In general, their meanings are very similar—being noble, in birth or by character, or being unrestricted in movement or action. (This latter definition can lead to an interesting

interpretation of the final question, that may be somewhat different than the standard interpretation of who is the most generous or noble). However, there are also subtle differences between the two definitions that may explain why Chaucer chose to ask about being "fre" over having "great liberalitie." To be "fre" is to have "the social status of a noble or freeman," which is *not* the same as being "nobly born," one of the meanings of liberal. With "fre," those who have a high social status because of their wealth and generosity, but are not necessarily nobly born, such as the wealthy middle class, are also included. Other definitions of "fre" also allow for these non-nobles—those who have a "privileged status," and those who possess "the rights and privileges of a citizen" of a town or city. "Liberal" does not include these extra variations other than the possibility of being "free" in general. Interestingly, "liberal" separates "selfless, admirable" from "generous," while "fre" just has "generous, open-handed" in addition to "noble in character; noble in appearance." With "fre," some of the descriptors from "liberal" may be included, but are defined as specifically noble attributes. Because of its greater amount of definitions, there is more room for interpretation within the definition of "fre."

But before the impact of these words comes into play comes the content of both stories. The characters of each are generally similar, but slightly different in their naming and characteristics. While Boccaccio's tale features an unnamed noble knight with an unnamed noble wife, and another knight, Tarolfo, who is in love with the aforementioned noble woman, Chaucer's includes a named knight and lady, Arveragus and Dorigen, and a squire Aurelius. Boccaccio has an poor old man, Theban, who is an actual magician; Chaucer has a young, unnamed clerk who is a scientist illusionist. These differences in naming point to different emphases of characters in each story. One way to look at it is

that those who remain unnamed become characters that represent a generalization of that type of person, leaving them open for more interpretation and general sympathy, whereas named characters are more specific. The two authors' emphases and generalizations are practically opposite, perhaps because of the social positions of the two narrators. The Franklin wants to leave the clerk up for the most sympathy and interpretation, while Menedon favors the nobles. However, interpretation of these naming choices could also be seen in an opposite way, where those unnamed are less sympathetic. This allows for more of a focus to be put on the follies of those who are named and therefore more responsible for their actions.

Chaucer's tale also places much more of an emphasis on the love between Arveragus and Dorigen than Boccaccio's does on the knight and his wife. Arveragus and Dorigen are happily married and live a "blissful lyf" together (806), and they are so in love that the balance of power in their relationship is even somewhat egalitarian. Dorigen has more freedom than many wives: Arveragus is her "servant in love, and lord in mariage" (FT V.793). She relates this freedom to her husband's aristocratic rank, and says, "sith of youre gentillesse / Ye profre me to have so large a reyne" (FT V.754-5). As a result of her happiness with her situation, she swears to "be youre humble trewe wyf … till that myn herte breste" (FT V.758-9). There is no mention of this sort of love or this equal balance of power within a relationship in Boccaccio's story. Chaucer introduces this type of relationship as a contrast with the relationships of many of the other tales in his work, and to show a type of love possible in a marriage that Boccaccio does not.

Dorigen's love for her husband is apparent from the depression that results when he is away for so long, although her friends tell her that "causelees she sleeth hirself" (FT

V. 825). She does not even enjoy the beautiful May weather and a garden so wonderful that "nevere was ther gardyn of swich prys / But if it were the verray paradys" (FT V.911-2), but is instead distressed. It is this love which leads her to suggest that getting rid of the rocks on the coast which separate the shore from the sea, and cause so many deaths, would be the one thing for which she could be with another man; removal of the rocks would make her feel closer to her love. But she really says this because she sees it as something impossible—she says it "in pley" (FT V.988)—as a way to show that under no circumstances will she ever love another man.

There is no such powerful love on the part of the gentlewoman in Boccaccio's tale; he says only that her husband loved her with "most loyall love" (Boccaccio 1)[1]. She is merely attempting to stop the other knight from trying to woo her, so he does not end up getting in a fight with her husband, who might hear about his continuing attentions. She, too, makes up a task that is "an impossible thing, so that in this sort I shall rid him from me" (Boccaccio 2). Her task for Tarolfo, however, has nothing to do with her love for her husband, but actually resembles the garden that Dorigen, truly in love, was unable to enjoy. This garden would be a "gift" and something that she could conceive no way of actually creating.

Because the women's motivations are different, their reactions to the completion of these impossible tasks are also different. Dorigen does not even go look to see if the rocks are actually gone when Aurelius tells her he has made them disappear—she is just shocked. "She wende nevere han come in swich a trappe. / 'Allas,' quod she, 'that evere this sholde happe! / For wende I nevere by possibilitee / That swich a monstre or

[1] The numbering for Boccaccio's tale comes from the number of the printed page by directly printing the webpage on which the story is found.

merveille myghte be!'" (FT V.1341-4). She is too distressed by the fact that she might actually have pledged her love to another man to even be interested in seeing the evidence that she so wanted to see earlier, when she looked out on the rocks and meditated "how mankynd [they] destroyeth" (FT V.876). She values honor greatly, which can be seen by the fact that she decides she must keep her promise, but she also clearly values her love, because she is so distressed about the situation. The fact that it is actually an illusion, and the rocks are not actually gone, makes her distress even more poignant.

The lady in Boccaccio's tale, however, immediately does not believe that Tarolfo has done what she asked, and calmly answers that "it pleaseth me right well, ye shall let me see it to morowe (Boccaccio 10). When she does go see the garden, "accompanyed with many others," she enjoys it—there is "temperat aire," and she goes around "gathering both hearbs and floures" (Boccaccio 10). These are hardly the actions of a heartsick, distraught woman. She clearly values honor over love, because she tells Tarolfo "ye have deserved me love, and I am ready to stand to my promise" (Boccaccio 10); she only become upset about the prospect of having to leave her husband when she returns to her chamber.

Without even looking at the husband's responses and the later actions of the stories, it is clear that Chaucer has introduced a powerful element of love in his story. Dorigen does consider killing herself to best preserve her honor, but ultimately does not do so, allowing for the possibility that her love might prevail. Her husband does not seem to consider love greater than honor, for he lets her go, and although he is very upset because he does love her, he is also extremely concerned with the own social appearances of their relationship. This concern seems to outweigh even Dorigen's life—he forbids her

to tell the situation to anyone, "up peyne of deeth" (FT V.1481). This element of love does perhaps tip the scale in answering the question of who is the most "fre" at the end in a way that the interpretation of "liberalitie" in Boccaccio is not affected. The answer to this question really comes down to the values of answerers—is honor, love, or money most important? And if love is so important for Dorigen, then perhaps it is also for Aurelius, and for readers considering the characters.

Aurelius is, indeed, a good man—"oon of the beste farynge men on lyve" (FT V.932). His love for Dorigen, like Tarolfo's love for the gentlewoman, is enormous, with "great good wil" (Boccaccio 1). In viewing both tales from a literary standpoint, rather than from a consciousness of social class or an ethical standpoint, Aurelius and Tarolfo are perhaps the most important characters because of the change they undergo throughout the course of the story. They each begin with an extremely selfish desire for a woman who is happily married to another man, which leads them to pester her and do everything they can to try to twist her outrageous promise into something she actually has to keep. But this turns into an understanding of the love woman's love for her husband, and a realization that exhibiting generosity in unbinding the women from the contract—one that they basically forced the women into—is what will make each of them a good person and happiest in the end. The Queen in Boccaccio's version condemns Tarolfo's behavior, because the fact that he was being dishonorable before does not make him more noble than others when he begins to act as a good human being should. Yet this transition should not be condemned. He and Aurelius do suffer in working to find a way to meet the demands of their object of desire, and then once they finally achieve their goals, they almost immediately give it away for the happiness of others. They learn their lessons:

Tarolfo learns how honorable a knight really is, and that he should also attempt to be so noble, and Aurelius learns that not only is the knight honorable, but the "love bitwix" (FT V. 1532) Arveragus and Dorigen is so strong that it would be dishonorable to disrupt it. The differences in these lessons point to the differing values of the tales.

The women of both stories are also each taught a lesson, but it is overtly told to them, and not something they discover within themselves, as Aurelius and Tarolfo did. Those who articulate these lessons differ, however. Aurelius is the one to tell Dorigen, or perhaps just the audience in general, that promises are dangerous: "But every wyf be war of hire biheeste!" (FT V.1541). However, the knight in Boccaccio is the one to tell his wife to "take ye better heed hereafter of such like, although a demanded gift may seeme unto you impossible to be had" (Boccaccio 11). By articulating this, Boccaccio's knight is establishing his authority through his superior knowledge and understanding of interaction. But in Chaucer, Aurelius is demonstrating his own learning and self-discovery in reminding Dorigen of her mistake, and in warning others of a future mistake they might make. It becomes less of a reprimand when it comes from someone who himself has made a great moral mistake, but realized it and fixed it.

The weight of this mistake really depends, however, on the validity or power of the oath, which is an issue in both versions of the tale. Before Dorigen makes her promise, she expresses in a sort of oath format that being unfaithful to her husband is not a possibility: "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" (FT V. 983-5). But her promise to Aurelius also seems to be in the language of an oath, although it begins with "in pleye thus seyde she:" (FT V.988). She makes her promise by the authority of "heighe God above" (FT V. 989),

and ends with "Have heer my trouthe, in al that evere I kan" (FT V.998). And predating these two oaths is her original marriage oath. Which of these oaths reigns supreme? The characters in the story seem to conclude that the oath that is given the most recently has the most power. In Chaucer, there is no overt discussion of the actual lawfulness of this later oath that Dorigen gives after two other oaths confirming her loyalty to her husband.

The question of lawfulness does become an issue in *Il Filocolo*. The gentlewoman's promise may be less of an oath, although she does say that if Tarolfo he completes what she wishes, "she sware by her gods, and by that loyalty that ought to be in a gentlewoman, that she would accomplish al his desire" (Boccaccio 2). However, the Queen says in her interpretation at the end of the tale that the wife "could not justly make such an oth, without the will of her husband" (Boccaccio 16), or if she did so, as the story shows her to have done, it was not lawful. So in this case, it actually turns out that the oath was non-binding, and the knight's act of giving his wife to Tarolfo just came from his own personal sense of honor. The knight and his lady's original marriage oath is here the most powerful.

In the viewpoint of the queen in Boccaccio's story, the fact that the oath was not lawful makes the knight's actions even more honorable than they had been otherwise, because his personal honor extends beyond the law. This could also be interpreted as the knight acting very stupidly, and giving up more than is necessary in order to prove some inflated sense of honor. Because the question of lawfulness does not come up in Chaucer, the issue of which oath is more powerful goes along with the issue of which virtue is more valued—honor or love. If love is the most valued, then Dorigen's love for her husband, represented by her marriage oath and claim that she will never be untrue to him, have

more weight than her rash promise to Aurelius. If honor is more valued, then the fact is that technically Dorigen did make an oath the Aurelius, and must live with the consequences. Aurelius, who values love, ultimately realizes that if he truly does value love, he must honor the love between Dorigen and Arveragus.

One character in both versions that does not have much connection with love or honor at all themselves are the clerk and magician that helped Aurelius and Tarolfo. Although Theban did perform actual magic, where the clerk just created an illusion, they both fulfilled the contract by doing what was asked of them. The clerk and Theban also both acknowledge the honorable actions being made by others, and the clerk in Chaucer's tale asserts his own generosity and level of nobility much more forcefully than Theban.

Theban acknowledges how "liberal" the knight was to Tarolfo and how generous Tarolfo was to him in return, and sees it as simply his due to also be so generous. But he also puts himself into his place as a poor member of the lower class serving a knight when he says "for above all things in the world it contenteth me, in that I have served thy turne" (Boccaccio 13). He seems to not care about the money, which is not valued in this tale, and is happy to go back to his life of poverty and herb-collecting, a decision which the queen asserts is "wise," because poverty is much calmer and safer than being rich (Boccaccio 19). The clerk in Chaucer, however, does not want to submit to the restrictions and stereotypes of a lower class. He says, "Thou art a squier, and he is a knyght; / But God forbede, for his blisful myght, / But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede, / As wel as any of yow, it is no drede!" (FT V.1609-12). He is interested in being seen on the same level as the nobility in terms of his actions, as the Franklin himself is. There is

no condemnation of the value of money or getting paid for completing a contract in the Franklin's Tale as there is in Boccaccio's tale.

Indeed, since the Franklin is narrating his tale, Chaucer has him put his own agenda into the story. The tale ends with the Franklin questioning the audience about who they think is the "mooste fre" (FT V.1622), but is followed by no epilogue or prologue to another tale in which this question is discussed by the pilgrims. It is left completely open, up to interpretation and debate by the audience reading it, as it would have been up to debate among the pilgrims listening to it. It has no suggested interpretation in favor of the aristocrat-born characters.

This level of openness fits well with the overall message coming from the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*, starting from the Miller's Prologue, when Chaucer tells the audience, "And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere, / Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (MTPr I.317-8). Just as readers can choose to read in whatever order they want from these tales, of which today scholars are still uncertain of the exact intended ordering, they can choose who they think is the most "fre," based on their own background and experience. Chaucer updates the story from Boccaccio's tale, which had some discussion provided at the end, but with a final conclusion in favor of honor. He makes it into something more progressive and asking for intelligent thought from readers. Comparing Chaucer's tale to Boccaccio's original makes apparent Chaucer's agenda and achievement.

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