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The Franklin's prologue and tale: The idea of change

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Abstract

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, written in 1387, chronicles the transformations that the travelers experience. These modifications can come in a wide range of forms and shapes. Among these travelers is the Franklin, whose account includes a list of certain alterations that may be tracked down and examined. I'll examine how 'The Franklin's Prologue and Tale' handles various kinds of transitions in the debate that follows. After carefully reading this article, readers will understand that transformation in life can take many different forms. It will also provide an opportunity to view other stories from the same viewpoint.

Keywords: Chaucer, the Franklin, *Canterbury Tales*, transformation



Introduction

'The Franklin's Tale' is one of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*; a touchstone of Medieval Literature. Several pilgrims making their way from Southwark to Canterbury narrate the stories. The pilgrims, who represent a spectrum of English social classes, provide a detailed account of life in England throughout the fourteenth century. They can share their thoughts on a range of topics. Indeed, those pilgrims dream of a rapid change for the better. Their tales are consistent with intended atmosphere of the entire journey to Canterbury as well as being intended to entertain the pilgrims and change stress and anxiety caused by travel.

In 'The Franklin's Tale,' Dorigen becomes sad and dejected after Arveragus, her husband, has to leave for a long time. When her friends try to help and console her, a young knight named Aurelius approaches her and declares his love. When he insists, she, in her sadness and fear for her husband, makes an ill-considered promise to love him if he manages to remove all the stones from the Breton coast-stones that have caused the destruction of many ships and death of many people. After seeking the help of a magician, he asks her to fulfill her promise and grant him her body at a time her husband returns from travel.

The tale "has the obligatory triangle"- husband, restless wife and lusty squire (Benson, 1987, p. 13). After writing an article about transformation in 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale', I noticed that the idea of transformation might be the focus of studying 'The Franklin's Tale.' The story of Dorigen might be the focus where a lot of changes take place. Indeed, many articles have addressed this character, of course from a feminist perspective. Najbrov (2013) calls her an "object of honour" and "object of love" (p. 26); Dorigen tries not to betray her husband and at the same time she becomes an object of the lover's attention. Another author sees that "Dorigen, we suggest, is one of these deviant literary individuals" (Houlik-Ritchey, 2018. p. n/a) because it is hard to maintain contradictory values.

Critics, such as Weisel (1998) discuss "how *The Canterbury Tales* reflect the world in which the tales are written" (p. 115). She explores how violence against females has been adopted as something masculine and necessary (Weisel, 1998, p. 115-17). Houlik-Ritchey (2018) addresses emotions and pleasure in the tale while Vanckov (2007) concentrates on the treatment of women at the medieval period. Some of Chaucer's tale tellers express their opinions, portraying "personal reflections regarding the institution of marriage with respect to their social positions" (Marcotte, 2007, p.1). The open access studies focus on women and their lives in a patriarchal society. For example, Nakley (2017) points at freedom in *The Canterbury Tales*, and urges readers to compare freedom as presented in different tales, one of which is 'The Franklin's Tale' where Dorigen "is quite free to make decisions, which is not an ordinary medieval situation" (Vanckov, 2007, p. 58). Similarly, Najbrov (2013) writes about representation of women in *The Canterbury Tales*. Moreover, researchers like Dohal (2021), and Alanazi (2023) focus on the wife of Bath and her opinion regarding the institution of marriage. By the way, Bennett (2019) runs a linguistic analysis of how speech is adopted in 'The Franklin's Tale.' This article will focus on transformation in particular in 'The Franklin's Prologue and Tale' (hereafter referred to as *F's P & T*). The text and its context will be used in this study; the text will be analyzed in order to explore the idea of transformation.

Discussion

Indeed, pilgrimage itself is a type of change; pilgrims leave the secular world and set out to Canterbury, a symbol of spiritual world. Regarding definition, “transformation is a change that might take place in form, appearance, nature, class, behavior, situation, understanding, etc.” (Dohal, 2021, p. 121). To “transform” means, according to *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (1987), to “change the shape, appearance, quality or nature.” Hence, transformation is not limited to form and appearance, but it implies the change of nature. It becomes clear that some changes are more memorable anyhow, yet there are many changes that take place in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. In this article, the focus will be on ‘The Franklin’s Prologue and Tale.’ This tale is one of the marriage group tales. Initially, marriage requires a change of one’s life and living for the sake of continuity. As a matter of fact, Dorigen’s “marriage transfers her in a category where honour and shame are measured by keeping one’s promises” (Vaněčková, 2007, p. 60). Moreover, “existing hierarchies restricted women; therefore, marriage fittingly presented more obstacles for women” (Marcotte, 2007, p. iv). All these factors will lead to some transformations that will be discussed here.

According to ‘The General Prologue,’ Franklin is:

A Sheriff had he been, and a lawyer;
Nowhere lived so worthy a landowner. (*G P*, lines 359-60)

Being a sheriff and a lawyer requires some qualifications, including knowledge, that help a person to hold these careers. When we learn that this Franklin is no more than a layman, as readers we wonder what makes him a sheriff. In his prologue, he acknowledges his real educational status and apologizes for that stand:

I never learned rhetoric, that’s for certain;
And whatever I speak is bare and plain. (*F’s P & T*, lines 719-20)

Here, I wonder what makes him a sheriff. As indicated in ‘The General Prologue,’ it seems that his table “stood always / Ready set with covers, every day” (*G P*, lines 354-55). Hence, his table offers him a credit and grants him this position. Indeed, his generosity is what makes him honorable and changes the reality of his social status. His generosity compensates for his ignorance and lack of knowledge. Otherwise, he cannot hold this position among people.

In the tale, Dorigen accepts “to make him [Arveragus] her husband and her lord” (*F’s P & T*, line 742); this is a change in her marital status even if this marriage “not to be constrained, as in thrall” (*F’s P & T*, line 769) for “women, by nature, wish for liberty” (*F’s P & T*, line 768). Yet, she has to fulfill the requirements of marriage, including respect and love. Theoretically, marriage should bring peace to the couple in question. All changes should prevail, but that peace is interrupted. Dorigen’s “blissful life” (*F’s P & T*, line 806) is transformed into unhappiness for she loves her husband and “at his absence she

wept sore and sighed” (*F’s P & T*, line 817); hence, changes take place quickly.

Despite the patriarchal norms that were in place throughout that medieval period, the story suggests that none of the pair should have the upper hand in the marriage. The Franklin continues:

For one thing, goods sirs, I may safely say,
That lovers must one another fast obey,
If they’d keep company for many a day.
Love will not be constrained by mastery;
When mastery comes, the God of Love anon
Beats his wings, and farewell, he is gone!
Love is a thing as any spirit free.
Women, by nature, wish for liberty,
And not to be constrained, as in thrall,
And so do men, and truth is this for all. (*F’s P & T*, lines 761-70)

The Franklin attempts to lay out expectations for the perfect marriage in the aforementioned quotation. As previously mentioned, marriage is a bond with responsibilities that both parties must meet. These responsibilities come with costs and sacrifices that, paradoxically, could be seen as constraints. Therefore, it is appropriate to view marriage as a transformation in the lives of the married couple.

According to the tale, “Dorigen articulates her suffering in a wide range of expressive modes, from wordless weeping to elaborate speech” (Bennett, 2019, p. 153); this is a change of her quiet and calm life after her husband’s departure. Living a desperate life, Dorigen spends time pondering of her husband’s return. In an unusual way, a squire named Aurelius approaches her and informs her that she can change his life “for with a word you may me slay or save” (*F’s P & T*, line 975). Because of his insistence and his desperate status, she tries to console him. Indeed, she makes it worse for him because she asks,

You remove every reef, stone by stone,
So no ship is hampered through that zone. (*F’s P & T*, lines 993-94)

At the time “when the coast is rendered so clean” (*F’s P & T*, line 995), she will become his lover and “will love [him] more than any man” (*F’s P & T*, line 996). She wants him to change the surface of the coast and move all the huge rocks. This condition transforms his hope into complete distress; “He to his house has gone, with sorrowful heart” (*F’s P & T*, line 1021). Well, for Vaněčková (2007), “she has enough freedom to make her own decisions not only because her husband promised her not to be her master, but also on behalf of his long absences” (p. 56). It is not her freedom that allows her to promise this squire. Apparently she is not aware of what she is doing because she is so desperate that she cannot make a responsible right decision at that time. For Aurelius, such a transformation cannot be done by human beings, so he beseeches Apollo to ask his sister Lucina to:

Beg her to sink each rock deeper down
Into her own dark region. (*F’s P & T*, lines 1073-74)

A change that requires gods to interfere is not a mere transformation; it is a kind of creation. Remembering a magician in Orleans, Aurelius’ brother knows that the transformation might be done

through magic; even if the transformation is not true, rocks disappear “to everyone in sight” (*F’s P & T*, line 1151):

. . . . there are true sciences
By which men conjure up appearances,
Such as the subtlest conjurors display. (*F’s P & T*, lines 1139-41)

Bringing a magician, the black rocks disappear from the coast to the human eyes:

And through his magic, for two weeks I’d say,
It seemed that all the rocks were cleared away. (*F’s P & T*, lines 1295-96)

What happens has nothing to do with reality. It is a way of deceiving the eye; it is an illusory change. Hence, reality is relative.

Being told that the rocks are removed away, she is astounded and knows that “it defies the processes of nature” (*F’s P & T*, line 1345), which demand and allow transformations. Thus, “And home she went, a sorrowful creature” (*F’s P & T*, line 1346); her despair turns to sorrow. Indeed, “Dorigen finds herself bound by the literal form of the promise she has made, when Aurelius manages to fulfill its impossible condition by removing all the rocks from the coast of Brittany” (Mann, 2002, p. 152). Instead of depending on reality, deceiving other people through magic is practiced. Anyhow, appearance does not usually reflect and represent reality; how many people have been deceived by appearances? Hearing the story, her husband unusually asks Dorigen to keep her promise because he believes that promise is eternal; for him, “his word is the noblest thing a man may keep” (*F’s P & T*, line 1479). Being “eternal” means that promise should not change while other mundane things are changeable.

However, “even in ‘The Franklin’s Tale,’ which creates an illusion of equality between the partners at its beginning, the wife is eventually ordered to submit to the husband and she passively does so” (Vaněčková, 2007, p. 98). She becomes a woman who has no decision; her husband orders and she carries out; this is a change of what she has been promised with at the beginning. Arveragus’ decision reflects “a shrewd manipulation of Dorigen; it is a sign of perplexity or moral confusion” (Vaněčková, 2007, p. 54). According to the tale, this husband’s stand will make others involved in the cause, particularly the wife and her lover, change. In fact, “his decision shifts the focus of the tale back into the male world and Dorigen is no longer in the center of the narrative. She only acts out her husband’s will, and the rest of the tale celebrates the noble behavior of the men” (Vaněčková, 2007, p. 62); the husband orders and she carries out, the squire acts as a knight accordingly, and the magician should value the husband’s action and releases the lover from payment. After being the focus of the tale, Dorigen steps backward and leave the stage for the men; it is a predicable expectation in a patriarchal society.

When Dorigen tells Aurelius that her husband asks her to keep her promise, Aurelius changes his mind and decides to release her from her promise; he realizes the meaning of love, suffering, and gentility:

Then I would rather suffer lasting woe
Than ever harm the love between you so.
I release, you, Madame, from your bond. (*F’s P & T*, line 1531-33)

Thus, he releases her after hearing the complicated relations of different tendencies and values. She returns to her husband and to the “blissful life” (*F’s P & T*, line 806) she has to live in. This change from distress and sorrow to happy life always happens because this life is not eternal; it is changeable and transferable. Yet, this bliss does not mean that Aurelius is going to be happy in return. In turn, hearing Aurelius’ story, the magician changes his mind. He releases Aurelius from the amount he is obligated to pay; he says, “Sire, I release you from your thousand pounds” (*F’s P & T*, line 1613). All these main changes in this tale suggest that nothing is eternal in this life; life requires change.

Conclusion

Transformation takes different forms, and this fits *The Canterbury Tales* because the pilgrims leave the secular works and set out to Canterbury; this is a transformation for eternal reward becomes their goal. In particular, Geoffrey Chaucer’s ‘The Franklin’s Prologue and Tale’ include many transformations that take different forms. These changes lead to reflect on how life is a changeable. One of the main changes is that of marriage; it shifts the life of the couple in question. The Franklin draws up in Dorigen an image of male-designed archetype of a wife in the Medieval Ages. At the end, all characters realize the milieu they live at and act accordingly. Indeed, such behavior is what is required from any person. You have obligations and you are human; mistakes are expected and solutions should be provided for at last reality is relative.

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