

Canterbury tales: the franklin's tale



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A franklin, in Chaucer's time, was a freehold landowner whose status would have been that of the minor gentry. Chaucer's pilgrim is described as having been a member of Parliament, a magistrate, a sheriff and a district auditor, and would thus have been a very important person in his local community. He is by no means a poor man, as is evident from the description given in the General Prologue. His tale is told immediately after that of the Squire, who would have come from the social level just above that of the Franklin.

The Squire's Tale is incomplete, so the words of the Franklin at the end cannot be seen as an interruption but as congratulations at the end of a tale well told. He clearly admires the Squire, and wishes that his own son had turned out to be as sophisticated. He proposes to tell a tale that is a " Breton lay"; rhymed tales of love and chivalry, often involving supernatural and fairy-world Celtic motifs.

However, the Franklin begs the pardon of the company because he is an unlearned man and simple in his speech. He has, he says, never learned rhetoric, and he speaks simply and plainly. The Franklin's Tale however also appears to deal with the theme of marriage. The Franklin seems to provide a compromise between the Clerk's advice of patience and submissiveness on the part of the wife, the Wife of Bath's demand of sovereignty over the husband, and the Squire's courtly or romantic idea of love.

The Tale starts with an echo of the " marriage debate" that pervaded the tales of the Wife of Bath, the Clerk and the Merchant, as to who should have " mastery" in marriage. Here we have a knight, named Arveragus, who offers marriage to a lady, Dorigen, with the promise that he will not dominate her

but allow her a certain degree of freedom; the desire of the Wife of Bath and the women in her tale. Arveragus has to go to fight in Britain, and is away for two years. This causes Dorigen great distress and she relies on her friends to keep her sane.

Her friends would often take her on walks where they would pass the cliffs overlooking the ocean and watch ships enter the port, hoping that one of them would bring home her husband: " She mourned and wailed, she fasted, lost her rest/By longing for his presence so distressed "(lines 819-20). Her fears are made worse when she looks down from the cliffs at the black rocks that threaten passing ships; especially the one that she hopes will bring Arveragus back home. The friends therefore decide that she would be happier away from the coast and take her to a secluded garden where there is a feast and dancing.

At the dance is a young squire, named Aurelius, who has long admired Dorigen from afar, in the approved " courtly love" tradition. He eventually gets his chance to talk to Dorigen and declare his love, which she rejects. However, she then tells him that she will return his love if he can get rid of all the horrible black rocks that she has been so concerned about. The dance soon ended and the guests went home, except for Aurelius, who fell to his knees, and prayed to Apollo, the sun god, to appeal to his sister, the moon goddess, to bring about a high tide of such height and duration that the sea covers all the rocks for two years.

Arveragus then returned from abroad, and Dorigen was delighted to have him back. Two years passed, and Aurelius lay in torment. Aurelius' brother

suggested that he meet a student of law at Orleans who was versed in the school of illusion. Heading toward Orleans, the two came across a young clerk, roaming by himself, who greeted them in Latin, and claimed to know why they came. And before they went a step further, he told them exactly what they were travelling to achieve. A deal is struck and, for a fee of a thousand pounds, the magician agrees to remove all the rocks from the coast of Brittany.

The next morning they travelled to Brittany, where, by illusion, the man made it so that, for a week or two, it would appear that the rocks had vanished. Aurelius then goes to Dorigen and asks her to abide by her promise, as he has fulfilled its conditions. Dorigen is distraught, and considers committing suicide as a way out of this dilemma, bringing to mind a whole host of examples from classical history and mythology of women who had sought death rather than dishonor. Arveragus was out of town, and Dorigen was overcome with grief, realizing that she must forfeit either her body or her reputation.

When Arveragus returned home and Dorigen told him the truth of what had happened, he told that he will bear the shame of her actions, and that adhering to her promise is the most important thing. When Aurelius meets Dorigen, he is suddenly struck by the noble honor shown by both Dorigen and Arveragus and realizes that he cannot hold her to her promise and thus destroy her marriage. He claimed that a squire can indeed be as honorable as a knight. Dorigen returns to her husband, they are completely reconciled and live happily ever after.

Aurelius then went to pay the magician, even though his affair remained unconsummated. Aurelius then found that he only had five hundred pounds to give to the magician and begged him to give him two years to pay the rest of the amount. Aurelius also tells him that he felt bound to release Dorigen from her promise, having taken pity on her plight. Hearing this, the magician releases Aurelius from his bond, proving himself honorable. The Franklin ends by posing a question to his audience: which of the three “forgivers” in this tale, Arveragus, Aurelius and the magician, was the most “free” or forgiving?

So is Aurelius perhaps the most generous, willingly giving up the thing he most desired? Maybe, but the thing he gave up, he had no real right to have anyway, considering that the “thing” was sex with another man's wife. Another detail to point out is that the magician was skilled in the art of illusion. He never actually destroyed or removed the rocks from the water, but only made it to where the rocks were not visible to the eye. The actual deal between Dorigen and Aurelius was that the rocks be removed from the sea for safe passage for ships.

Spells versed in illusion will only hide the rocks, but they still exist in the sea, still in their same positions. Meaning, the chances for safe passage for ships have not been increased but in fact decreased because of the invisibility of the rocks. Either way, it is a good story, well told despite the Franklin's simple speech, and one that raises interesting questions. The moral of the tale is that one noble deed performed will lead to another, and then another. In this way, good may overcome evil.