'The Franklin's Tale' and the search for an end: Charles Runacres explores the narrative and emotional complexity of Chaucer's tale of knightly romance

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The Franklin's Tale' is, on the surface, as predictable a tale as any in The Canterbury Tales, drawing on the most tried and tested formulae of the knightly romance. The characters are, as so often in medieval poems, recognisable types: the knight wooing his lady, the adulterous squire and the absent husband. Their behaviour fits the formulaic stereotypes of the poetic tradition of 'courtly love' and the dit d'amour. The courtship of Arveragus and Dorigen is straight from the mould, with the knight doing his 'payne' (line 730) and showing his 'worthynesse' to the lady, who takes pity on him. Dorigen indulges in the classic pastimes of picnicking and dancing in a beautiful garden and some lover's crying: 'she moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyneth' (line 819). The squire Aurelius suffers the usual hyperbolic symptoms of unrequited love, not daring to speak 'two yeer and moore' (line 940).

In the hands of the great fourteenth-century French writers Machaut or Froissart, or indeed Chaucer's contemporary the parodic English writer Gower, the audience would know exactly where it was: in the half-comic world of courtly lovers. The set-piece 'compleyntes', the magical visions, the astronomy and the list of exempla are all familiar devices to create an elevated tone. The tale is even given an aristocratic veneer: it is a 'Breton lai' set in castles and beautiful gardens, about 'fredom' and 'gentilesse'. There is to be no 'cherlishnesse' and no chavs. 'The Franklin's Tale' could be one of the fourteenth-century's classic dits d'amour.

Equally predictably, 'The Franklin's Tale' is a fine moral tale. For medieval audiences, the main purpose of narrative was didactic, and the exemplum, of which Dorigen produces so many, was one of the key types of story. 'The Franklin's Tale' offers us all kinds of moral lessons and has a clear moral structure: characters' choices lead to an outcome, which the audience is invited to judge. The marriage vows of Arveragus and Dorigen, Dorigen's mistaken promise to Aurelius, his brother's help, Dorigen's exempla, the responses of the three men at the end of the story, the focus on 'gentilesse', the final moral question: all these point the audience to moral issues. The tale as a whole teaches a clear moral lesson: the key to living well, and happily ever after, is to follow the noble principles of keeping 'trouthe' and being 'fre' and 'gentil'.

Emotional truths

So far, so medieval. But the tale is more than a moral fable: it has an extraordinary emotional truth to life. One of Chaucer's great achievements in 'The Franklin's Tale' is to go beyond the types and exempla to explore the humanity of his story and its characters. All three protagonists really do suffer. Chaucer uses the device of the friends and brother to show his audience what Dorigen and Aurelius go through: 'Hire freendes sawe that it was no disport' (line 895); 'His brother weep and wayled pryvely' (line 1116). The pain ceases to have the ironic stylised quality of many other depictions of courtly love once other people within the poem take it seriously. Arveragus not only endures the courtly 'wo ... peyne, and ... distresse' (line 737) of love but shows true love for Dorigen in his promise to her not to seek 'maistrie' in their marriage: 'Heere may men seen an humble, wys accord' (line 791). When the marriage is on the rocks, Arveragus' reaction is startling in its humanity: "'Is there oght elles, Dorigen, but this?'" he asks, 'with glad chiere' (line 1467), offering his wife unconditional love and
support. The bathos of one of Chaucer's best couplets confirms Arveragus' determination to espouse the highest ideals of knighthood and truth, but also the huge human cost of sustaining that ideal:

'Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe'--But with that word he brast anon to wepe. (lines 1479-80) Aurelius is humanised through his recognition of Dorigen's shame and horror: 'And in his herte hadde greet compassioun/Of hire and of hire lamentacioun' (lines 1515-16). He comes to an empathetic realisation of her point of view and of his own self-centredness: his fantasy has not been romantic, just plain teenage lust. And the squire's abasement and humiliation, with his woefully detailed plans to pay off his debt 'yeer by yeer' (line 1568), lead to the clerk's giving up his financial reward. In a great Franklin-narrator moment he reflects that he has been fed well and that this is enough: 'Thou hast ypayed wel for my vitaille' (line 1618).

'The Franklin's Tale' is not just a beautifully shaped and conceived aristocratic tale; it is a complex exploration of idealism in love, of what it means to hold one's principles at all costs, of the true pain of selfless love, and of the essential natures of 'gentilesse' and love. Chaucer goes far beyond the familiar formulaic types of courtly romance to write about the passionate experience of emotions and the complexity of contingent human life.

The sense of an ending

However, Chaucer goes still further and fashions a poem of remarkable narrative and tonal complexity. One way to appreciate this complexity is to look at how Chaucer plays with the idea of ends and ending in the poem. 'The Franklin's Tale' begins with an unfinished discussion following an unfinished tale and ends with both the closure of a fable and the unfinished business of an open discussion. Dorigen's end is the centre of attention, metaphorically for the two men and all too non-metaphorically for the compromised lady herself. Chaucer repeatedly uses devices that offer to bring the poem to an end, but produces a tour de force in which no end is ever conclusively reached or accepted.

'The Franklin's Tale' begins when the Squire fails to end his tale. Immediately Chaucer plays with the nature of ending. He shows the Franklin offering a critical commentary suggesting that the Squire has finished in style, and apparently drawing a lesson about 'gentilesse': 'Thow hast thee wel yquit/And gentilly' (lines 673-74). But Chaucer draws the audience's attention to the fact that the Franklin is moralising the teller, not the tale. Moreover, he wishes the learning on his son, not himself. The Franklin's commentary, finally, is itself unfinished because of the Host's counter-moralising demand for narrative: 'Telle on thy tale wythouten wordes mo' (line 702); Chaucer hardly allows him to start before he is failing to end. Many of the pilgrims' tales end with the audience commenting or moralising. In this case Chaucer deliberately complicates the moral reaction. He asks us to question how stories work and how we understand and apply them.

An inconclusive conclusion

The next irony is that the Franklin, already struggling with conclusions, begins his tale with an ending. 'The Franklin's Tale' opens with the complete mini-story of the courtship and marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen, and Chaucer finally allows the Franklin to reach the end of something: 'Where as he lyveth in blisse and in solace' (line 802). Several things happen here at once. The story of the knight courting the unattainable lady should keep us going for quite a while, but it does not. Chaucer, especially through the narrator's commentary, focuses on the end of the story (the marriage and the promises) and not, as is much more typical, on the process of reaching that end. And the ending of the courtship narrative, when Arveragus vows to 'take on him no maistrie' (line 747) is most unexpected, subverting the rules not only of chivalry but also of such narratives.
Within just 30 lines of opening, 'The Franklin’s Tale' has not only reached an ending for the first time, but has ended unexpectedly and on the basis of complex moral choices: 'Thus hath she take hit servant and hit lord' (line 792). The audience faces a conclusion that is inconclusive. Arveragus and Dorigen prioritise love and respect over custom and chivalry, and the outcome of their story is no longer predictable: none of our experience as an audience of romances or of moral tales has prepared us for this.

The rest of the tale is filled with similar games. Arveragus reaches one end and should live happily ever after in 'this blisful lyf' (line 806), but he returns to the narrative in which he started, once more seeking 'in armes worshipe and honour' (line 811). Chaucer subverts the formula of the courtly romance by having Dorigen cry helplessly. Her cliff-walking allows Chaucer to explore the narrative urge again: 'An hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde/Han rokkes slayn' (lines 877-78). Dorigen makes up dire stories, although the result of these stories is, as we are now coming to expect, inconclusive: her lengthy 'compleynte' neither explains nor ends the rocks. Instead Chaucer gives us another restarting, when Dorigen is wooed in the garden. Again, we are following a familiar narrative pattern, but again nothing is what we expect. Dorigen has already been wooed and won, and that story should be finished. The marriage is strong, and adultery is not to be thought of: 'I wol been his to whom that I am knyt' (line 986); 'What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf/For to go love another mannens wyf,/That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh?' (lines 1003-05). Aurelius fits the patterns of the courtly lover, but it feels as though he is in the wrong story. The narrative confusion reaches its peak when Dorigen's obsession with her story of the rocks leads her to confute that story with her refusal. Aurelius finds himself part of at least three narratives: his wooing of Dorigen; her refusal of him on the grounds that she belongs to her husband; and her apparent conditional consent. This time there are too many ends in view and it is no wonder that Aurelius retires confusedly alone to his bed.

The moral of the story

The story of the trip to Orleans and of the making of the Mr Muscle magic is another complete sub-narrative and reaches an end: 'voyded were thise rokkes everychon' (line 1301). This time there really is a sense of ending, confirmed by the intrusion of Dorigen's exempla, stories intended to have a didactic effect, teaching you how to behave. Exempla should thus be conclusive, with a clear consequence, and the great majority of these point to one end: death. As it turns out, however, neither end of the exempla is served. Dorigen does not follow the advice of the stories and does not end it all. Once more the narrative raises a host of structural questions, especially about ending: the moral of the exempla is that stories themselves are neither conclusive nor a guide to life.

It is Arveragus that Chaucer uses to hit on an ending, albeit the most painful one. When Dorigen, her end threatened, tells her story to Arveragus, he reffames it in different moral lights: first comfortingly as an apparently unimportant one, then as one touching on the 'hyeste thyng that man may kepe'. Dorigen is sent to meet her end, only to find that because of Arveragus Aurelius can now moralise their story in the right way. The moral of the story, it turns out, is not about love, which can be confused with lust, but 'gentilisse'. It is this moral that leads Aurelius, the magician and 'The Franklin’s Tale' to their generous conclusions. And so it would all conclude, but for Chaucer's very last sting in the tail. Just as we settle down to end the story, its meaning is thrown open again: 'Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?' The moral structure is all there, but the audience is allowed a personal interpretation, not necessarily one determined by the tale.

'Erepest' or 'game'?
Chaucer and other fourteenth-century writers such as John Gower followed important ideas about poetry expressed by the Latin writer Horace in his Ars Poetica: 'Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae' (lines 333-34). Poets wish to instruct or to please; as Chaucer put it, poetry can be 'ernest' or 'game'. 'The Franklin's Tale' is both. It is clearly an 'ernest' tale, from the vows of love and marriage to the seriousness of the predicament in which Dorigen finds herself and the weighty terms in which actions and judgements are framed. But there is also much 'game' in the touches of comedy and the lively descriptions. The tale is in many ways another escapist fantasy, told by a narrator whose world is sadly lacking in the gentilesse that he idealises.

Horace said also that, in the best writers, instruction and pleasure are inextricably linked. 'The Franklin's Tale', which starts with a rhetorical game artfully disclaiming art and ends with a new beginning, is one of Chaucer's claims to greatness. It is highly courtly and sophisticated; it is intellectual and academic; it is a complex story well told; it is human and emotional; it is funny and witty; it is serious; it makes you think, in subtle and emotional ways; it makes you smile at its endless wit. The serious moral tale is so exposed to ironies that it becomes 'game'; the ironies and light touches become part of the serious purpose of the tale. However you look at 'The Franklin's Tale', you see 'game' and 'ernest' simultaneously. As in a Mobius strip or an Escher print, the elements blend into one another.

Making marriage work

It has been argued since 1912 that four of The Canterbury Tales are Chaucer's 'debate' on 'maistrie' in marriage, and what makes relationships and marriage work. 'The Clerk's Tale' of patient Griselda shows the woman as victim, humiliated by her husband and deprived of her children, but enduring through her virtue. 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale' reverse the roles, with the Wife firmly taking the upper hand (or uppercut) and if not wearing the trousers certainly winning her spurs. The knight in her tale is allowed marital bliss only once he has been humiliated and forced to accept that what women really want is 'maistrie'. The sublimely cynical and bawdy 'Merchant's Tale' is a demonstration of the faithlessness, lustfulness and quick-witted untruthfulness of women, who exist only to betray their husbands. If Chaucer did create this 'debate', 'The Franklin's Tale' is its end and resolution. In this tale, 'maistrie' is shared and the marriage relationship is a deep and subtle one based on trust, sharing and virtue. Arveragus and Dorigen suffer through adversity and mutability but triumph because their love is founded on ideals: 'Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe'. What Chaucer emphasises is the fact that human lives are narratives that people construct; what moral choices do is shape the ends of those narratives. 'The Franklin's Tale' is Chaucer's magnificent illustration of how to make relationships work and how to live a full moral life.

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