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4/29/16

"In pley thus seyde she": Dorigen and the "Ethic of Intention" in *The Franklin's Tale*

Perhaps the most quoted and debated line of *The Franklin's Tale* is the final question posed by the Franklin himself regarding the generosity of his characters: "Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" (V 1622).[1] However, what has only recently been given more critical attention in the tale is not its open ending, but its open beginning. Namely, critics have shifted their gaze towards analyzing the ambiguity of Dorigen's pledge and how the tale attempts to justify the moral consequences that it yields. While focus has ranged from understanding the pledge in terms of gender relations to the more complex context of "trouthe," I plan to examine it through the lens of Peter Abelard's[2] "ethic of intention" to demonstrate that not even the Franklin offers a foolproof model of marriage and honor in his tale.

Thus, while *The Franklin's Tale* ostensibly serves as an ideal portrait of marriage and "gentillesse" in comparison to their previous handlings by the Wife of Bath, the Clerk, and the Merchant, the moral force of the tale is actually diminished in that it is contingent upon the dubious circumstances of Dorigen's pledge to Aurelius. In its effect, the pledge creates a series of conflicts of interest between Averagus, Aurelius, and the magician, thus opening the necessary space for them to exercise their respective acts of "gentillesse" towards each other. However, based on how its "ethic of intention" is framed, Dorigen's promise to Aurelius does not *justify* the ensuing conflict of interests, as it was not made in earnest. This lack of justification, then, not only renders Dorigen unaccountable for her pledge, but also threatens the moral framework of the tale as a whole.

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[1] All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer,* ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston 1987).
[2] One of the most important logicians, philosophers, and theologians of the 12th century, Peter Abelard founded many of what today are the basic tenets of Christian morality. Aside for principally being known for his love affair with Héloïse d'Argenteuil, Abelard's *Ethics* was crucial in its development of *intentionalism* for evaluating the moral worth of actions (King).

Before examining how Dorigen's pledge is framed in terms of an "ethic of intention," it is necessary to clarify the foundational principals that characterize Abelard's ethics. The central argument Abelard postulates in his *Ethics* runs as such: "the agent's intention alone determines the moral worth of an action" (King). In other words, the object of this so-called "ethic of intention," as opposed to consequentialism, is to remove the factor of *deeds* in considering an action's moral value. As a result, those who commit unethical acts by coercion or ignorance are not held morally accountable—for it is understood that their *intentions* were not aligned with their *deeds.*

On a more literal level, Abelard's "ethic of intention" can also be understood in terms of the agent's sincerity. As Chaucer demonstrates in *The Friar's Tale*, it is only those who swear in earnest (the summoner; the old woman) whose oaths are taken as such. In this way, Abelard's ethical philosophy works well to evaluate moral worth by focusing on what elements go into an act rather than the potential results said act yields. Hence, Abelard evades the *post hoc* logical fallacy of defining moral acts by their outcomes. As it applies to Dorigen's pledge, this method of assessing moral worth plays directly into how her honor can be assessed as she makes the pledge, debates whether or not to keep her word, and finally obeys Averagus' command to do so.

Chaucer's first major employment of Abelard's "ethic of intention" occurs in the relationship between the summoner, the demon, the carter, and the old widow in *The Friar's Tale*. In the tale, Chaucer juxtaposes two situations (the carter and the demon; the old lady and the summoner) to demonstrate that swearing should only be taken into serious consideration to the extent that it is done in earnest. In the first case, after they pledge brotherhood, the summoner and demon overhear a carter swear at his horses and cart when they get trenched in the mud: " 'The devel have al, bothe hors and cart and hey!' " (III 1547). Yet, before the summoner can convince the demon to act on this swearing, the demon explains:

> ‘Nay,’ quod the devel, ‘God woot, never a deel!
> It is nat his [the carter’s] entente, trust me weel.
> Axe hym thyself, if thou nat trowest me;
> Or ells stynt a while, and thou shalt see’
> (III 1555-58).

The demon’s assurance that it was “nat his [the carter’s] entente” in swearing reinforces the idea that oaths can only be taken seriously if sworn sincerely. Further, beyond the demon’s belief that the carter was not earnest in his swearing, a few moments later, once the horses dislodge the cart from the mud, the carter exclaims: “ ‘Heyt! Now,’ quod he, ‘ther Jhesu Crist yow [his horses] blesse’ ” (III 1561). Clearly, this second swearing in praise of the horses voids their defamation in the first, confirming that the carter was never actually earnest, only venting his momentary frustration.

In the second case, when the summoner attempts to extort the old widow, her swearing is sincere. After the widow explains that she lacks even the mere “Twelf pens” (III 1604) to pay him, the summoner angrily swears: “ ‘Nay thane,’ quod he, ‘the foule feend me feeche / If I th’excuse, though thou shul be spilt!’ ” (III 1610-11). However, even if the summoner is not in earnest in this particular case, the widow’s reply is unmistakably so:

> And whan the devel herde hire cursen so
> Upon hir knees, he seyde in this manere,
> ‘Now, Mabely, myn owene mooder deere,
> Is this youre wyl in ernest that ye seye?’
> ‘the devel,’ quod she, ‘so fecche him ere he deye,
> And panne and al, but he wol hym repente!’
> (III 1624-29).

In comparison to the carter, this oath has two conclusive marks of sincerity: the widow is “Upon hir knees” and the devil verbally confirms her as earnest. As a result, both this oath and the summoner’s previous pledge of brotherhood with the devel (III 1405) result in his swift damnation (one surely not lacking in poetic justice).

It is important to note that the juxtaposition of the carter and widow's oaths is not designed to condone casual profanity; rather, it seeks to demonstrate the difference between sincere and insincere swearing. Thus, while *The Friar's Tale* primary concern is the anti-fraternal slandering of the summoner, it also frames a useful method to interpret oaths elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, namely *The Franklin's Tale.*

The template of the "ethic of intention," as laid out in *The Friar's Tale*, testifies to Abelard's claim that the moral worth of swearing is based not on what one professes, but whether or not they do so in earnest. This very same template applies to Dorigen's pledge to Aurelius in *The Franklin's Tale*. Consider the passage just after Dorigen rejects Aurelius' proposal:

> But after that in pley thus seyde she:
> 'Aurelie,' quod she, 'by heighe God above,
> Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love,
> Syn I yow se so pitously complayne.
> Looke what day that endelong Britayne
> Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,
> That they ne leette ship ne boot to goon—
> 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.'
> 'Is ther noon oother grace in yow?' quod he.
> 'No, by that Lord,' quod she, 'that maked me!
> For wel I woot that it shal never bityde.
> Lat swiche folies out of youre herte slyde…'
>
> (V 988-1002).

Initially, this pledge seems quite ambiguous. It is framed with the phrase "in pley thus seyde she," but at the end Dorigen declares it to be her "trouthe, in al that evere I kan." She tells Aurelius to "Lat swhiche folies [of winning her love] out of youre herte slyde," but as medieval romance scholar Susan Crane notes, in the context of medieval literature of courtship, Dorigen's refusal also "parallels the resistant lady's demand that her suitor perform extraordinary deeds *in order to win her love*," (64, italics mine).

However, while Crane's assessment may hold true to some degree, in the context of Dorigen's previous marriage to Averagus, and more importantly, in the context of just how extraordinary the deed she demands of Aurelius is, it is clear that her tone cannot be anything but in jest. For even if Aurelius did manage to meet Dorigen's condition for her love, it still remains that the very condition itself is couched in an expression of her desire for the safe return of Averagus. From her own perspective, then, Dorigen's pledge is no more than a clever adynaton designed to repel her suitor, just a playful way of saying "when pigs fly." She only puts the hyperbolic condition forward because "wel [she] woot that it shal never bityde." Her heart is still with her husband. Her intent is insincere.

To secure this reading of Dorigen's oath, it is worthwhile to clarify how an earlier framing of the oath complicates, but ultimately fails in suggesting its potential sincerity. Before Dorigen makes her pledge to Aurelius, she makes a similar prayer alone to herself:

> But wolde God that alle thise rokkes blake
> Were sonken into helle for his [Averagus'] sake!
> Thise rokkes sleen myn herte for the feere.'
> Thus wolde she seyn, with many a pitous teere.
>
> (V 891-894).

The "pitous teere" suggests an earnest plea. In the General Prologue, the Friar promises that he can still grant absolution even to those who do not weep: "For many a man so hard is of his herte, / He may nat wepe, althogh hym soore smerte. / Therfore in sted of wepynge and preyeres / Men moote yeve silver to the povre freres." (I 229-32). Hence, to the medieval understanding, weeping was a clear sign of repentance and sincerity. Yet, although Dorigen's prayer may appear to convey the same message as her later pledge, a closer look reveals that the particular subject upon which she swears differs slightly in each case. This difference, albeit subtle, ultimately spells the difference in Dorigen's sincerity between the plea and oath, respectively.

In the first case, Dorigen prays earnestly that the rocks be sunk; in the second, she swears *her love to Aurelius if* they be sunk (which she believes to be impossible). Thus, even if she truly wants the rocks to be cleared from the shore, her complete disbelief in such a feat being accomplished renders her second pledge insincere. Moreover, her shock and subsequent lament at realizing that Aurelius did indeed clear the rocks from the shore—" 'Allas,' quod she, 'that evere this shoulde happe!' " (V 1342)—reinforces the notion that she never made her promise seriously. Finally, that she "wepeth, [and] wailleth, al a day or two" (V 1348) surely outweighs the "pitous teere" mentioned before. In terms of its overall framing, then, Dorigen's pledge to Aurelius does not read as earnest, and thus, does not need to be honored.

In Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo*, which is considered the nearest analogue to *The Franklin's Tale*, the debate following the tale between Menedon and Fiametta over which of the three men acted in the "greatest liberalitie" introduces an additional argument against the Wife's pledge. However, in articulating her posture against the pledge, Fiametta goes beyond discrediting it on grounds of insincere intention, and instead attacks it in a more fundamental context: the Wife's previous matrimonial oath to her husband:

> But the wife forsomuch as she is a member of her husband, or rather one body with him, could not justly make such an oth, withouth the will of her husband: and yet if she did make suche an oth, it was nothng, because the first oth lawfully made, could not with reason be derogate by any following…Now then the woman cannot sweare, and if she doo sweare (as we have saide) she sweareth for a thing unlawfull, and so contrarie to the former othe [of her marriage], it ought not to prevaile.
>
> —Boccaccio, *Il Filocolo*

Therefore, *even if* the wife was earnest in her oath to Tarolfo (Aurelius' counterpart), such an oath was by nature invalid. Moreover, in *The Franklin's Tale*, Averagus' command of Dorigen to keep her word is inherently contradictory, for by honoring her second oath, she will break her first—and between marriage and adultery, one wonders little which oath should take precedence.

Even if it were granted that Averagus' commanding Dorigen to honor her second oath dissolved her ties to her marriage, such an argument does little to resolve the underlying problem of conflicting "trouthes." For in terms of universal application, if "trouthe" is left to the fickle dictates of the patriarchal rule, then it ceases to be universal. This is to say, the only way to solve the problem of conflicting categorical imperatives is to expose one of them as never truly being categorical. Hence, Dorigen and Averagus' marriage cannot be legitimately annulled under any other grounds than the claim that their marriage was illegitimate from the start. Since this is surely not the case, it follows that from the outset, Dorigen's pledge to Aurelius *must* have been invalid. Averagus says that "Trouthe is the hyeste thing that man may kepe," (V 1479) but fails to consider that some "trouthes" rank higher than others.

Ironically, as much as this same question of "trouthe" clarifies this interpretation of Dorigen's pledge, it also complicates it. Another way to challenge the insincerity of the pledge is to ask the simple question: If Dorigen did not make her pledge in earnest, why does she suffer such anxiety upon realizing its conditions were met? Why does she feel the pressure *to honor* it?

The answer, according to Alison Ganze, lies in the complex meaning of the word "trouthe." In her essay, *Dorigen and Honor in the Franklin's Tale*, Ganze explores the vast semantic field of "trouthe," ultimately settling on a dichotomy between "inner virtue" and "wordly reputation" (313) in how the word's understanding governs Dorigen's behavior. Not surprisingly, Ganze contends that Dorigen's actions, like those of the other characters in the tale, are driven by the latter sense of the word. However, while Ganze correctly argues that "It is this reduction of *trouthe* to repute that leads to the central dilemma in the tale, [making] readers uneasy with its resolution," (314) she leaves the exact nature of this unease—that is, the moral close of the tale, untreated.

Ganze's argument, while true, is only useful insofar as it provides a basic operative manual for the characters in the text. However, to understand *why* the final acts of "gentillesse" yield such an uneasy response, it takes more than the rather platitudinous observation that "between inner virtue and the outward appearance of virtue…it is outward appearances that ultimately prevail" (327). Instead, by reviewing these final acts of generosity through the lens of Abelard's "ethic of intention" as well as in the context of Dorigen's false pledge, this unease can be accounted for through the deeper moral complexity that ends the tale. In order to truly understand the intricacies of the ending, it is necessary to understand their framing in the beginning.

On the one hand, the acts are redeeming, for they were done with earnest intentions. Averagus, in a manner that calls into doubt his earlier oath to forever "obeye [Dorigen], and folwe hir wyl in al," (V 749), commands her away with the full understanding that she will sleep with Aurelius; Aurelius, recognizing this generosity, matches his Averagus' selflessness by releasing Dorigen from her oath to *him* with the understanding that he will lose both his love and his fortune: " 'Allas!' quod he, 'Allas, that I bihighte / Of pured gold a thousand pound of wighte / Unto this philosopher!' " (V 1559-61). Finally, the magician completes this chain of benevolent requitals by refusing to accept payment from Aurelius with the understanding that he will never be compensated: "Sire, I releesse thee thy thousand pound," (V 1613). Clearly, that each act of "gentillesse" was done with the understanding that it would not be met with equal generosity testifies to the impossibility of any ulterior motives in performing them.

However, on the other hand, the acts themselves only occurred by virtue of Dorigen's false pledge. Thus, if the earlier ethical dilemma of how "trust begetting trust" is only resolved in exposing one of them as a "false trust" (that of Dorigen and Aurelius), then *The Franklin's Tale* must offer a satisfactory answer to a more pressing question if its moral framework is to remain

intact: are its acts of "gentillesse" predicated upon the space opened up for them by a false pretense? Herein lies the complexity of the final three gestures of generosity in the tale. Likewise, it is here where the moral force of the tale is mitigated, for accepting that Dorigen's oath was necessary for the later acts of the men means that in spite of their good intentions, the genesis of their "gentillesse" was a morally dubious act.

It is perhaps too harsh to conclude that the framing of the final acts of the three men with Dorigen's pledge utterly discredits the intended moral of the tale. In fact, it is quite possible that Chaucer *intentionally* complicates the ending through framing techniques to suggest that as a story travels across the spectrum from exempla to reality, the closer it gets to the latter side, the more entangled and qualified its moral must become. Thus, although *The Franklin's Tale* fails to *fully* achieve the ends it sets out in the beginning, it nonetheless offers a progressive gesture towards egalitarianism in marriage and the honor of "triumph over tragedy" not seen in its companion tales.

Ironically, it is by this very failure to deliver a clean moral that results in its greater affinity with what is most human. Just as the three men are moved by the each other's honorable deeds in desperate circumstances, the reader is implicitly asked to share in the same passion. In the end, where the tale falls short in its reach for the ideal, it is redeemed in its embrace of the real, a compromise culminating in a story that skillfully navigates the gray area between the two and in doing so shows that even a problematic resolution can still be poignant.

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