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“artes that been curious”

Questions of Magic and Morality in Chaucer’s “The Franklin’s Tale”

Kaitlin Coats

Geoffrey Chaucer’s “The Franklin’s Tale” treats its magical events at one moment with unquestioning faith in their reality and at the next with insistent doubt, at one moment as “artes that been curious” and at the next as “nat worth a flye” (1120, 1132). The tale’s events repeatedly cause us to question magic’s validity: after her husband, Arveragus, leaves to pursue honor abroad, Dorigen snubs the pining Aurelius by invoking the absolute nonexistence of magic. She’ll love him, she tells Aurelius facetiously, if he can make the black rocks off the Breton coast disappear and thus ensure the safe return of Arveragus’s ship. Yet the plot’s climax, in which the rocks do actually disappear from view, attests that Aurelius’s literal interpretation of Dorigen’s comment does not accept the possibility of the occult without reason. The rocks vanish, but the means by which they do so is unclear: Aurelius calls upon the gods and their astrological powers while his brother asks a scholar for help. Neither the Franklin nor Chaucer himself ever indicates whether either of these magical methods proves effective. Although magic drives the plot, Chaucer never lets us

know the nature of the magic in the tale. In the case of the disappearing rocks, is what we see what we get?

Many have attempted to explain the rocks' disappearance, but the question has not yet been put to rest by any semblance of critical consensus. J. S. P. Tatlock, one of the first to look carefully at the magic of "The Franklin's Tale," dedicates himself to the astrological details of the rocks' disappearance without bothering to prove the act legitimately magical to begin with. Later critics hesitate to validate the magical disappearance so quickly: D. W. Robertson (276) and Chauncey Wood (245-59) believe that Aurelius's prayer for the rocks to be covered by a high tide (1055-61) is what actually causes the rocks to disappear, while Anthony Luengo goes so far as to brand the magic a mechanically engineered stage performance. No theory has yet had the clarity to settle the problem of the vanishing rocks. In fact, medieval Europeans themselves could not easily solve magical problems. Historian Richard Kieckhefer holds that the nuances in the various classifications of magic were complex enough to produce a general hesitation among the lettered class either to support or to condemn magic completely (16-17). Medieval Europe hardly knew what to make of a practice defined by mystery, and Chaucer, ever the trickster, does more to aggravate that frustration than to put it to rest.

The range of answers in both medieval and modern scholarship ought to cause us to reconsider the nature of Chaucer's treatment of the magical question. It seems to me that Chaucer's magic is self-consciously confusing. Examining the turbulent collection of medieval attitudes toward magic and the various types of magic that elicited those attitudes will illuminate Chaucer's magical confusion as a purposefully organic rendering of his world. Therefore, I will begin with a brief historical analysis of medieval magic before moving to its fictional analogue in "The Franklin's Tale." After establishing Chaucer's indistinct treatment of magic, I will examine how it generates a mistrust of supposed natural reality, which lends itself to the questioning of another assumed reality, namely, the tale's ethical scheme. Thus, I argue, Chaucer transplants magical dichotomies from his social milieu into the setting, characters, and action of "The Franklin's Tale," deliberately vacillating between belief and skepticism, truth and illusion, and nature and sorcery; with that vacillation, Chaucer creates a divide between perception and reality, which in turn undermines the tale's purported moral system.

The root of the tale's moral and magical questions is its tangled cultural backdrop, for magic was unstable and difficult to define and a major source

of questioning in Chaucer's world. Kieckhefer conceives of medieval magic as a series of "crossroads" between religion and science, popular culture and learned culture, and fiction and reality (1), a scheme that suggests the scope of magical influence. Perhaps medieval magic's most central polarity, though, was that between good and evil. Good magic was commonly termed "magyk natureel" since it aligned itself with the natural world. In this scheme, the spheres of the universe were thought to impart healing and other constructive powers on certain natural objects. Scientifically and astrologically inclined types of "magyk natureel" might rely on God as nothing more than the coincidental mover of the spheres. Other varieties leaned on divine power more directly: many incantations were expressed in prayer, or at least in magical mixes of religious-sounding language. The Wolfsthurn handbook, a medieval household management guide, includes this chant for removing a speck from someone's eye, adopted from a legend of Saint Nicasius: "Thus I adjure you, O speck, by the living God and the holy God, to disappear from the eyes of the servant of God N., whether you are black, red, or white. May Christ make you go away. Amen" (qtd. in Kieckhefer 3). Evidently, the line between magic and miracle was blurry, at best. In such innocent practices of magic, people could remedy their problems in harmony with God, science, and nature. Yet just as God had the spiritual power to produce good in conjunction with people's magical practices, so did evil forces have the power to derail that system and influence nature themselves. The practitioner of evil magic—who, in theory, could be anyone at all—had only to invoke a demon correctly in order to make it do his or her bidding. The so-called Munich handbook contains sinister formulae for practices such as obtaining a woman's love or sparking hatred among friends, both of which rely on the conjuring of demons in elaborate and sometimes gory procedures (Kieckhefer 7). Two relatively similar magical guides, then, could invoke drastically different powers, all of which fall under the realm of medieval magic.

Medieval Europeans called the differences between these powers into question much more than they did the reality of supernatural events. There were, of course, mechanical tricks and staged productions of magic, but in the medieval mind the truly suspect magical act had the possibility of being not deceptive, but demonic. While ceremonies like those of the Wolfsthurn and Munich handbooks made their involvement with God or demons explicit, others identified directly with neither; more often than not, people simply guessed whether a supernatural event was good or evil. The ambiguity of some magical

practices left many people unsure how to tap into the opportunities that “magyk natureel” afforded without risking demonic magic along the way. In the early Middle Ages, magic was almost exclusively associated with demons (Flint 13). Even for St. Augustine, whose conversion to Christianity centered around a supernatural voice telling him to “take up and read” scripture (*Confessions* 152), all magic was demonic:

For people attempt to make some sort of a distinction between practitioners of illicit arts, who are to be condemned, classing those as “sorcerers” (the popular name for this kind of thing is “black magic”) and others whom they are prepared to regard as praiseworthy, attributing to them the practice of “theurgy.” In fact both types are engaged in the fraudulent rites of demons, wrongly called angels. (*City of God* 383)

For Augustine, in other words, there was no good magic, only evil magic; any unnatural and unexplainable act by humans was pure witchcraft rather than a miracle, a supernatural event explainable by the fact that it originated solely from God. Most followed Augustine’s views in the early Middle Ages; slowly, however, as scientific knowledge amassed, people began to shed their skepticism in favor of curiosity. As they wondered what sorts of benevolent divine powers could be tapped into via human interactions with the created world, medieval Europeans began to accept that “magyk natureel,” supernatural events occurring at the hands of humans rather than directly from God, could be valid (Kieckhefer 12). Gradually, magic made its way into areas of religious practice and even academic study, but its demonic shades never completely departed. While popular consensus allowed for belief in “magyk natureel,” intellectuals agreed only begrudgingly, cautious not to overlook any danger of demonic influence (Kieckhefer 16–17). Medieval Europeans considered every supernatural event explainable—by God, by demons, or, occasionally, by trickery—but the trouble was working out the specifics of explanation. The divide between divine and demonic in the magical framework left most confused.

This uncertainty about magic surfaces in “The Franklin’s Tale” even at a simple scan of the plot. Aurelius raises the issue of magic versus miracle by pleading to the gods; his brother introduces the issue of actual disappearance versus illusion by hiring a clerk; the gods and the clerk present the issue of divine versus demonic by being dual forces. Chaucer strives to prove that the rocks disappear through “magyk natureel,” but he leaves none of these proofs unmatched by hints of illegitimacy. Language, character, setting, astrology, and

theology all present the disappearance of the rocks as valid. Chaucer pairs each piece of evidence, though, with equally strong suggestions that the magic is bogus or dark, leaving us to wonder what to make of the magic—or “magic”—of the tale.

Chaucer’s language manifests the magical question within the magician’s identity. Consider, for example, his epithets: some are decidedly negative, particularly Aurelius’s brother’s reference to magicians as “tregetoures” (1141), which reduces the clerk’s magic to mere courtly entertainment: “For ofte at feestes have I wel herd seye / That tregetours withinne an halle large / Have maad come in a water and a barge” (1142–1144). If the magic is just an amusing trick, the magician is just a jester. Yet, repeatedly calling him a “philosophre” and a “clerk” (1561, 1119), the Franklin gives the magician a subtle association with learning and theological knowledge. From such a trustworthy character, how could the magic disappearance of the rocks be perceived as either counterfeit or demonic? Luengo finds a way. He claims that the terms “philosophre” and “clerk,” when placed alongside the term “magicien” (1184, 1241), “reflect the Franklin’s inability to distinguish between scientific and supernatural skills” (4). Considering the sheer number of times these titles are used, it seems clear that they are Chaucer’s means of drawing attention to the academic tone of the magic. However, Luengo’s analysis indicates the range of interpretive possibility implicit in the tale. We have here an example of the confusion that the dichotomies in medieval magic caused and, evidently, still cause. We cannot be sure whether the Franklin believes the magician to be a knowledgeable practitioner of his supernatural art, a misguided student dabbling in science, or a mere entertainer.

Chaucer further aggravates the question of the magician’s character by giving him a position at the university at Orléans, a major fourteenth-century center for the study of astronomy (1118, n.). The university provides the perfect setting for hiring the clerk: it links to the controlled, sanctioned astrological study of “magyk natureel,” but not to its demonic underbelly. Furthermore, the magician is not alone in his endeavors, nor does he embark upon those endeavors with less-than-noble intent: “yonge clerkes that been lykerous / To reden artes that been curious / Seken in every halke and every herne / Particuler sciences for to lerne” (1119–1122). Whether magic is among the “sciences” that the university has officially sanctioned, however, is not so clear after all, for Aurelius’s brother recalls that his old classmate “Al were he there to lerne another craft, / Hadde prively upon his desk ylaft [a book of magic]” (1127–1128). The image of a young

man secretly hunched over something like the Munich handbook by night is not reassuring, whether he is the same clerk who executes the disappearance of the rocks or not. The university's location, too, incriminates it. According to Kathryn L. Lynch, "The Franklin's Tale" has something of the exotic unknown in its far-away setting: "[I]n this tale Orleans to the south comes to represent a world not that far from the Muslim world of the more distant Middle East, a source of relativism and illusion—of 'monstre' or 'merveille' (line 1344) that can temporarily obscure even the most solid rocks of home" (547). By its invocation of the unnatural and menacing picture of the non-Christian East that was so common to the medieval English mind, the university at Orléans devolves from a solid institution of learning to a source of the darkly mysterious.

Just as we may question whether Orléans actually aligns itself with the Christian God, we may likewise feel theological pause from the circumstances leading up to the moment the rocks disappear. The tale's pagan setting prevents it from working entirely within Christianity, but the way in which Aurelius beseeches Phoebus to influence the planets suggests that Aurelius adheres to a theological system almost identical to medieval England's. We need only to substitute "God" for "Apollo" and "Phoebus" in order to see that Aurelius's prayer is perfectly devout:

He seyde, "Appollo, god and governour
Of every plaunte, herbe, tree, and flour,
That yevest, after thy declinacion,
To ech of hem his tyme and his seson,
As thyn herberwe chaungeth lowe or heighe,
Lord Phebus, cast thy merciabe eighe
On wrecche Aurelie, which that am but lorn." (1031-1037)

Aurelius's prayer cites divine control over the earth, a tenet central to "magyk natureel." The very fact that the prayer comes to fruition by the end of the tale suggests to an audience of medieval European Christians that the true power behind the action is the Christian God, thinly veiled under the name "Apollo," but veiled nonetheless. Again, the setting is pagan, which would have produced some discomfort in a medieval European audience. In a cultural context in which people were nervous to engage in magic before being certain of its position within the Christian God's control, the total lack of the Christian God in Aurelius's plea is wildly uncomfortable. Most disturbingly, his request is not

granted until a magician enters the process; the prayer does not see fulfillment without human aid.

Note that every assuring magical detail has its carefully matched correlative doubt. At this point, it is clear that “The Franklin’s Tale” presents the magical problem without a solution. Chaucer provides us with this magical question as a lens through which to view the moral choices of his characters. Chaucer’s brand of magic is volatile; it teaches us never to trust what we see in the world. Just as in the case of magic, morality in “The Franklin’s Tale” is designed to provoke an endless strain of questions that destabilize the world of reality that is physical and reality that is contingent on promises. Through the language of magic, illusion, and perception, Chaucer draws our attention to the ethical implications of a landscape in which rocks can disappear by uncertain means.

The major ethical decisions of the characters in “The Franklin’s Tale” elevate “gentillesse,” or nobility and graciousness, and the keeping of one’s “trouthe,” or promise, as the figureheads of the tale’s moral scheme. Dorigen and Arveragus begin the tale with their marriage vows, pledging their “trouthe” that they will be equally dominant over and subservient to each other—Aurelius will be her master in appearance, but nothing more (744–759). Dorigen fulfills her role as a dutiful spouse by lamenting her husband’s departure to seek honor abroad and worrying about his safe return (806–821). When Aurelius approaches as a supplicant for her love, Dorigen spurns him with her promise that she will love him provided that he remove the “grisly feendly rokkes blake” (868) that threaten the safe return of her husband. Albeit facetiously, Dorigen has pledged her “trouthe” (998), and Aurelius takes this offer seriously; hence, the disappearance of the rocks. Dorigen finds herself caught between two “trouthes,” sworn to both marriage and adultery. Arveragus tells his wife to follow through with her promise to Aurelius—for “Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe” (1479)—but forbids her from letting anyone find out what she has done (1472–1486). Aurelius, however, desiring to act with the same level of “gentillesse” that he sees in Arveragus’s actions and in Dorigen’s commitment to her promise to Aurelius, pledges his “trouthe” not to hold Dorigen to her word (1526–1544); with a parallel act of “gentillesse” the magician forgives Aurelius of his debt for the rocks’ disappearance (1607–1619). Thus, each character contributes to the ethical makeup of “The Franklin’s Tale” by upholding its pillars of “trouthe”-keeping and “gentillesse.”

But in a world in which even solid, sturdy rocks can disappear, how much do promises mean? And when magic’s theological inclination is suspect, how

can an act be deemed moral or immoral with any confidence? In light of the uncertainty of magic, then, the tale's moral "reality" comes into question. In their adherence to their pledges of "trouthe," the characters of "The Franklin's Tale" give heed only to the surface-level words of a promise and not to the intentions behind it; they give heed, in other words, to a promise's appearance rather than to its reality. The Franklin's brand of "gentillesse" similarly embodies the magical ethos of perception versus reality. Each character that performs a "gentil" act does so solely in order to be *perceived* as "gentil"—in fact, the whole incident of the tale's telling is born of a desire to assert "gentillesse," for Chaucer himself, in "The Squires Tale," has just been challenged by the Host of the pilgrimage to Canterbury, "Straw for youre gentillesse!" (695) Thus "trouthe" and "gentillesse" seem to be deeply concerned with appearances, but, as the characters have learned through their experiences with the disappearing rocks, appearance often has very little to do with reality.

Dorigen's moral reality crumbles most significantly under the question of magic. In her over-fastidious "trouthe"-keeping, she shows a tendency to relate only to what is immediate; it is by this literal reading of the world that she allows her marriage to suffer for a joke and her happiness to dwindle at the sight of the rocks. Because she reacts to what is nearest to her, she relies on her perception of the external world for her contentment. The rocks form both the center of her despair, as physical manifestations of the danger that might threaten Arveragus, and the foundation of her trust, as the objects on which her flip-pant promise relies. Lamenting the creation of the rocks, Dorigen accuses God in "The Franklin's Tale," saying, "Se ye nat, Lord, how mankynde [the creation of rocks] destroyeth?" (876), expecting divine purpose to be manifest in her physical surroundings. Dorigen attempts, as Carolyn Collette notes, "to project her world view, literally her sublunar perception of the nature of things, into the realm of eternal stability" (398). Later, when the disappearance of the rocks proves the world illusory, Dorigen's reality unravels. Her reliance on her perception makes her as unstable as the disappearing rocks on which she fixates.

With linguistic delicacy, Chaucer solidifies Dorigen's ethics as a question of perception versus reality. Collette observes a heavy dose of perception-related words highlighting Dorigen's too-literal reading of the world. For example, it is the sight of the rocks and the ships—not the abstract thought of her husband in danger—that leads her to lament:

Another tyme ther wolde she sitte and thynke,
And *caste hir eye* downward fro the brynke.

But whan she *saugh* the grisly rokkes blake,
 For verray feere so wolde hir herte quake
 That on hire feet she myghte hire noght sustene.
 Thanne wolde she sitte adoun upon the grene,
 And pitously into the see *biholde*. (857–863, emphasis added)

When Dorigen sets her eyes on the “rokkes blake,” her sorrow starts anew. Although Arveragus has already been absent for a time, only the physical perception of the rocks, the sign of the potential dangers her husband may encounter, consummates her fear.

W. Bryant Bachman, Jr. attributes Dorigen’s sight-based cares to her connection to Boethian philosophy, a fitting analysis, since her speech in lines 865 to 892 harkens directly to Book 4 of the *Consolation of Philosophy* (865–893, n.). Boethius, who believes we must find happiness internally rather than from the outside world, provides an alternative to Dorigen’s sorrow that she simply cannot grasp. Bachman sees the entire external world as an illusion in Boethian philosophy: one may never trust that what appears to be reality is, in fact, reality, for Fortune may redirect her course at any time. So, to Bachman, “the narrative’s action, the emotional force of Dorigen’s fear for her husband’s safety, and its philosophical Boethian demand to transcend the very limitations that define man as man, to disbelieve, if necessary, the evidence of one’s own senses” (60) create the ethical tension in “The Franklin’s Tale.” Because Dorigen’s grief depends on how the rocks appear physically, fearing that the rocks may eventually vanish causes her not to trust quickly in whatever happens to be before her eyes.

It is significant that the central image of the magical dichotomy is also the center of Dorigen’s dilemma: Chaucer uses the rocks as a passage between the worlds of magical and moral instability. In light of Bachman’s argument, a transformation occurs when Dorigen discovers that the rocks have disappeared, contrary to her reliance on the illusion of the physical world. Chaucer uses an intentionally magical phrase to convey the irony of the episode: “she astoned stood” (1339). Thus, in a way, Dorigen herself becomes “stone”. Dorigen has turned into her own hindrance, as the black rocks were before. This magical transfer of stone from the rocks to Dorigen herself mirrors Dorigen’s recognition of the shift of moral responsibility from the rocks to her own character. When Aurelius brings news of the rocks’ disappearance and Dorigen’s belief in physical stability is thereby shattered, she is forced to realize the Boethian

philosophy that only one's own attitude, not the external world, can give—or limit—happiness. Fittingly, Dorigen at this moment does not actually see the clear coast with her eyes or rely on her view of the world to understand the truth. She is now the “monstre” and “mervaylle”; she is the one “agayns the proces of nature” (ll.1344–1345). In one ironic moment, the responsibility has shifted onto her shoulders. The “astoned” pun situates what Dorigen considers the cause of her sadness within her personal agency. Thus, the language of the tale's magical event unravels Dorigen's seemingly virtuous actions.

Arveragus, like his wife, draws heavily on perception rather than reality for his contentment. In Arveragus's case, though, he relies on others' perception of him. When Arveragus decides to leave in order “[t]o seke in armes worshipe and honour,” the Franklin tells us that “al his lust he sette in swich labour” (ll.811–812); evidently, for Arveragus, reputation comes first. So it is that Arveragus keeps “the name of soveraynetee,” despite his promise of subservience to his wife, “for shame of his degree” (ll.751–752) and that, when Dorigen's rash promise puts their marriage in jeopardy later, Arveragus pairs her “trouthe”-keeping with secret-keeping:

I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,
That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,
To no wight telle thou of this aventure—
As I may best, I wol my wo endure—
Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse. (ll. 1481–1486)

Through this threat of death to his wife, should she let anyone know of her forced relationship with Aurelius, Arveragus reveals just how important it is to him that his cuckoldry stay secret. His attention is too focused on his public appearance, allowing his decisions to revolve around the reputation his marriage gives him rather than his private interactions with his wife. Arveragus's commitment to his wife's “trouthe,” although holding to the tale's apparent moral system, therefore involves little character or dedication to ethics.

Arveragus attempts to solve the moral dilemma of his wife's double promise by executing a sort of magic trick of his own, making the blemish in his marriage disappear from public view. The theme of perception versus reality, so prevalent in the language of magic, makes its way into the marriage narrative as well. The pact in the beginning, in which Arveragus promises Dorigen that he will treat her as an equal, seems—only seems—in the best interest of the

husband and wife. The Franklin unconsciously brings in the language of sight to point out that this marriage may not be quite what it seems: “Heere may men seen an humble, wys accord” (791). What the public cannot see is the discord that comes from the later breaking of this agreement. In Aurelius’s mind, the marriage pact is designed to *seem* stable; but the rocks seemed stable, too, and they have disappeared. Through magic, Chaucer shows us that the “gentillesse” of an honor-seeking knight cannot be the full makeup of moral truth.

In “The Franklin’s Tale,” Chaucer brings us to a morality whose definition is as elusive as that of magic. The characters’ decisions, just as magical acts, might be genuine or feigned, good or evil. The uncertainty of magic brings moral depth to each character’s situation, showing that the first layer of perception is not always the truest or most upright. We may also come to this realization through the act itself of reading the tale. Its narration and ending presents a cheery veneer that suggests that all is well. But the tale is not quite as simple as it proclaims itself to be. Rather, it presents a complex chain of contradictions, designed specifically to lurk threateningly underneath the surface. If we aren’t looking closely, we might miss the uncomfortable details, such as Arveragus’s death threat to his wife. By the end, in which every character experiences an unnatural and hastily-constructed happy ending, we have learned, like Dorigen, to trust ourselves, rather than the artificial resolution of the tale, for moral reality.

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