

"STRAW FOR YOURE GENTILLESSE!":
MASCULINE IDENTITY, HONOR, AND DORIGEN

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During the late Middle Ages, few writers spent more time writing about women than did Geoffrey Chaucer. In story after story (whether *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Legend of Good Women*, or most notoriously, the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale), Chaucer consistently spotlights women, and many of his tales' outcomes hinge on a woman's action or lack of action. His concentration of interest in women and their actions is striking not only in contrast with a comparative lack of such interest in other male writers of the day, but also in contrast with women's actual place in medieval society, which was uncentral to say the least: few could own property, and their traditional role was to be submissive to the will of whatever man (father, husband, or God himself in the case of nuns) they belonged to. Obviously there was something congenial to Chaucer in stories about women, some way in which they were especially suited to his concerns as a writer. My article will focus on the question of what women meant to Chaucer and address it by exploring why Dorigen is such a key figure in the world of masculine honor within the Franklin's Tale.

Theories of why women figure so prominently in Chaucer's poetry have been based typically on one of two complementary idealizations. Traditionally, Chaucer's willingness to write about women has been taken as evidence that he was "euer, God wait, wemenis frend."¹ George Lyman Kittredge provides the classic example of such a reading with his influential claim that the Franklin's call for mutual love and forbearance represents the happy ending to the "marriage debate" within the *Canterbury Tales*: "For the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen was a brilliant success. Thus the whole debate has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. . . ."² This reading is based on the extended praise of the marriage in the first one hundred lines of the tale, and its view of Chaucer as a humane, detached genius influenced E. Talbot Donaldson and the entire New Critical school of Chaucer criticism.

Recently, however, feminist critics such as Elaine Tuttle Hansen have questioned this image of Chaucer and have found more anxiety than "friendliness" in his attention to women.³ Hansen's *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* pushes this argument to its logical extreme, arguing that Chaucer's interest in women springs from his own need for validation as a non-feminized poet, and that his poetry ultimately expresses a desire to keep women in their place rather than celebrate them.

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She reads the Franklin's Tale as a concerted and extremely successful attempt by the men to silence Dorigen, whose observations reveal far too clearly that the "honor" motivating them boils down to little more than sexual control of a woman. In particular, Hansen pinpoints Dorigen's statement to Aurelius,

What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf
For to go love another mannes wyf,
That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh? (1003-05)⁴

as a point in which the sexual basis of the honor games comes uncomfortably close to the surface (275-76). Her reading is quite valuable for directing critical attention to the importance of gender in the tale and is especially effective at pointing out Dorigen's distinct lack of real power, despite her high birth and the protestations of the men to the contrary. This reading ignores, however, a real desire for equal union that underlies Arveragus's vows, and the desire to partake in Arveragus's "free" marriage that motivates Aurelius through most of the tale. The men have an investment in Dorigen's freedom as well as in her submission, and this factor necessarily complicates how we see her place in the tale. Hansen's reading in fact forms a natural complement to Kittredge's: whereas Kittredge reads the tale as if it ended after the first one hundred lines, Hansen reads it as if the first one hundred lines did not exist.

The traditional and feminist readings do share one thing in common, however: both hinge on an assumption that Chaucer's interest in women has something *to do* with women. This paper starts from a different foundation altogether, the assumption that Chaucer's portrayal of Dorigen has more to do with the men of the tale than with Dorigen herself. In my reading, Dorigen is more important as a figure that reflects back on the men and their desires than as a distinct character in herself. I do not argue with critics who have found signs of potential independent action in Dorigen; in fact, it has been the virtue of recent feminist criticism both to define the terrible constraints into which the tale puts Dorigen and to find the points in which her words and actions illuminate these constraints. I merely argue that at each of these points within the tale the meanings the men impose on Dorigen predominate to such an extent that contrary action on her part remains hypothetical at best. The project of this paper will thus not be to read her character through her words and actions, but to trace instead what she means to the men and how her presence influences the course of the tale.

When we do this, it quickly becomes apparent how contradictory is Dorigen's position vis-à-vis the men, as can be seen from the radically

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different images of her that frame the story. The first image is idealistic, and forms the basis for Kittredge's reading:

Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreyned as a thral;
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal. (768-70)

This simple appeal for "libertee" for both women and men makes Dorigen's marriage to Arveragus initially seem one of the most equal marriages depicted in medieval romance. By the end of the tale, however, the situation has markedly changed:

Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now,
Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow? (1621-22)

This question ends the tale with an appeal not to liberty but to honor (who was the "mooste fre"), and leaves it up to the audience to judge a competition among three men in which Dorigen's honor has become the primary exchange token. How and why does such an enormous change take place?

The short answer to this question is that the masculine quest for status intrudes in Arveragus and Dorigen's private paradise.⁵ Feminists have already explicated the implications of the men's status games for Dorigen; in this paper I will focus on the attitude toward these games within the tale itself, which is not necessarily as straightforward as previous critics (both traditional and feminist) have assumed. Using the idea of expenditure developed by Georges Bataille, I will pick out a deep current of mistrust in the male preoccupation with "appearance" and in the ideal of honor based on this preoccupation. The tale begins, in fact, with an attempt to escape honor's bonds through an ideal marriage, one in which the couple's love frees them of the need for one to act as lord over the other. The course of the narrative records the progressive erosion of this ideal under the stress of the various men's quests for honor, until by the end only the honor competition (and only the men) are left.⁶

The Franklin attempts to make the clerk, with his illusions, the scapegoat for the decay in Arveragus and Dorigen's wedding vows, but in doing so he only reveals more contradictions in the men's pursuit of honor. This is so because all the men, not just the clerk, are preoccupied with appearances; they all seek to maintain their reputations by manipulating their images, and all are obviously linked together by their eagerness to compete with each other at tale's end. Only Dorigen has no place in this network, as her absence from the final scene makes dramatically

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clear; Aurelius even says of her near the end, "She never erst hadde herde speke of apparence" (1602). Ironically, only Dorigen has had no trade in falsity and illusion during the tale, and her absence thus leaves a hole in the ending which points out just how hollow the men's ideals of honor have become.⁷

This analysis of the Franklin's Tale represents an expansion (and redirection) of the argument in the original version of this paper, written five years ago. In that version, I found in Georges Bataille's writings surprising support for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of the basis of much English literature in the rivalry "between men." Although Bataille himself is almost entirely blind to issues of gender, when his analysis of "expenditure" is applied to a more gender-aware reading of Dorigen's position in the Franklin's Tale, it provides insights remarkably similar to Sedgwick's.⁸ Bataille defines "expenditure" as the giving away or destruction of excess goods in order to gain social prestige, a mechanism that finds its purest form in the competition between rivals to destroy the most goods in a potlatch ceremony.⁹ Bataille sees expenditure as the primary way of achieving and maintaining social distinction, a concept of which modern society has lost sight through the middle-class preoccupation with productivity: "[S]ocial rank is linked to the possession of a fortune, but only on the condition that the fortune be partially sacrificed in unproductive social expenditures such as festivals, spectacles, and games" (123). Wealth carries with it the obligation to expend it in entertaining others; only through such public acts of generosity does honor become attached to a giver, ennobling both him and the goods he expends. Bataille criticizes capitalism for transforming this system of ennobling the few into a squalid, universally-levelling consumerism that degrades all.

When we apply Bataille's theory to the Franklin's Tale, two points relating to the honor competition bear keeping in mind. The first of these is a temporary equality that the competition creates among participants. As the rivals compete, their rivalry creates a bond among them that separates them from those not wealthy enough to compete, and even more distinctly from any goods or people being "expended." For the length of the competition the homogeneous bond among the rivals sets them apart from society, and this bond persists until the emergence of a winner allows social hierarchy to reassert itself. This liminal aspect of the potlatch makes it especially conducive as a means for the Franklin's male characters momentarily to suspend differences in rank, creating the happy equality among men that ends the tale. In this way, the tale is able to end on a note that emphasizes the honor system's utopian aspects, while keeping the accompanying divisiveness at bay. The reasons

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this deceptive emphasis is necessary will become apparent only later, following detailed examination of the tale itself.

My first point implies the second, that there is no place for Dorigen within the bonds the men form with each other. In fact, Dorigen's entire conception of honor is strikingly different from what the previous paragraphs have described.¹⁰ Throughout the tale, her one concern is to preserve her bodily fidelity to her husband, as she informs Aurelius when he tries to woo her:

By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf,
Ne shal I nevere been untrewre wyf
In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;
I wol been his to whom that I am knyht. (983–86)

Aurelius's response to these unequivocal words only confirms how far Dorigen is outside the masculine loop within the tale. As I will argue in detail later in the paper, he not only disregards her feelings in this matter, he can hardly understand them; his parting words, "Madame, . . . this were an impossible!" (1009), refer to more than the impossible task she has set him. Dorigen's very existence reveals limits beyond which the men's ideals can not reach, and this impression of the men's limitations becomes ever more palpable as the tale proceeds.

I have chosen this Bataillean approach to the Franklin's Tale because, amidst Chaucer's work, it lends itself most naturally to such a reading. Signs of expenditure cluster themselves around both the teller and his story. Both the Franklin and the clerk of Orleans are associated with scenes of lavish hospitality, which, since both lack high birth, form their primary claim to social respectability. Practically all of the Franklin's description in the General Prologue is given over to the quality of his table and the lavishness of his hospitality:

Seint Julian he was in his contree.
His breed, his ale, was always after oon;
A bettre envyned man was nowher noon.
Withoute bake mete was nevere his hous,
Of fissh and flessch, and that so plentevous
It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke. . . . (340–45)

The text even links the Franklin's hospitality with his claims to nobility: "At sessionours ther was he lord and sire; / Ful ofte tyme he was knyght of the shire" (355–56). The Franklin in turn makes clear that the clerk's entertainment of Aurelius is lavish both in terms of food ("Hem lakked

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no vitaille that myghte hem plese") and of the elaborate illusions which serve as samples of the magician's skill (1185-1208). Through this unstinting generosity the clerk gives himself an air of nobility as he enters the tale; the value of such nobility is only confirmed when Arveragus and Aurelius seek it as well in their mutual sacrifice of Dorigen's favors. The search for status through generosity in large part defines both the tale and its teller, and neither can be properly understood except in reference to this concern.¹¹

At the tale's beginning, however, public status seems the least of its themes; in fact, the presentation of the idealized marriage that opens the narrative goes to great lengths to banish or confuse all traces of social hierarchies. More than anything else, this opening section tries to create a private world in which opposites can live in peace away from the demands of public life. To reinforce this separation from ordinary reality, it presents the couple in the timeless manner of a fable, not even individualizing husband and wife with names until events create the first ripples in their tranquility. To achieve this level of isolation from social pressures, Chaucer applies no fewer than three different strategies: 1) He begins his romance where romance typically ends, at the point of stability achieved after the courtship is over; 2) he attempts to reimagine love as friendship, in an effort to minimize the gender inequalities inherent in medieval courtship; and 3) he deliberately invokes traditional gender and class hierarchies in order to confuse and destabilize them, ideally leaving a space for Dorigen and Arveragus to be free and equal as friends should be. Chaucer simply could not have expended more artistry in writing against the grain of the typical dominant knight and submissive lady of romance, and this level of effort on the writer's part deserves a closer scrutiny than it has yet received.

The first tactic Chaucer uses to open up a space of freedom for Arveragus and Dorigen is to start his romance at the end, that is, with marriage. The opening of the tale (a mere fourteen lines) gives the compressed summary of a romance plot, with a knight suffering in his love for a lady, yet finally winning her through "many a labour, many a greet emprise" (732). Only with these details out of the way does the tale get to its main concern for this opening section, which is depicting an ideal marriage in which neither partner must be subservient to the other's will. The emphasis is on the dialogue between the partners and on the compromise and accord this dialogue creates:

Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knyght
That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght,
Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie

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.....
She seyde, "Sire, sith of youre gentillesse
Ye profre me to have so large a reyne,
Ne wolde nevere God bitwixe us tweyne,
As in my gilt, were outhere werre or stryf. (745-57)

This "humble, wys accord" tends to express itself through negatives: no mastery, no strife, not even the passing of day and night is said to be able to affect their perfect agreement. For this one section of the tale, the lovers seem immune to all marks of the passing of time, and also implicitly isolated from all outside influences that could ripple the smooth flow of their ongoing dialogue. The couple are preserved in an extended but fragile moment in this first part of the tale, a moment which by definition must end once they are introduced to both the changing conditions and the social context that a narrative will necessarily involve. As we see, already the questions begin to arise: How long can this perfect accord last? Will it find a foundation to support it against the pressures a narrative must expose it to?

At first, it seems that the relationship may find a basis in the equality of friendship. After introducing the couple's accord, Chaucer reinterprets their love as a form of friendship, one that forbids from the outset any exertion of command between the two and leads naturally to a striking call for "libertee" in love for both women and men:

[F]reendes everych oother moot obeye,
If they wol longe holden compaignye.
.....
Love is a thyng as any spirit free.
Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreynd as a thral;
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal. (762-70)

This reinterpretation is quite an effective rhetorical move; with it, Chaucer is able for a moment to de-emphasize the lovers' status as man and woman (with the hierarchical divisions these roles automatically imply), and imagine instead a more equal, "friendly" relationship between the two. This passage not only represents the tale at its most idealistic, but in stating the ideal so clearly it marks the point at which the tale breaks away most successfully from the ascendancy of hierarchy that so relentlessly defines the rest of the plot.

This success is brief, however. Immediately after its call for "libertee," the verse moves surprisingly to the impersonal language of

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platitude as it describes the virtue of patience in friendship:

Looke who that is moost pacient in love,
He is at his avantage al above.
Pacience is an heigh vertu, certeyn,
For it venquysseth, as these clerkes seyn,
Thynges that rigour sholde nevere atteyne. (771–75)

Patience certainly is a fine virtue, but it marks a great step back from the carefree “libertee” that had defined husband and wife’s relationship a few lines earlier. More than this, however, patience implies a new distinction between the two partners, with one exercising patience and the other requiring it. The slow freezing of social roles this distinction implies is confirmed in the final lines of the paragraph:

And therefore hath this wise, worthy knyght,
To lyve in ese, suffrance hire bihight,
And she to hym ful wisly gan to swere
That nevere sholde ther be defaute in here. (787–90)

Husband and wife no longer are alike in desires, but are distinguished ever so slightly as the one in a position to give suffrance and the other who struggles not to require it. As we will later come to understand, Arveragus hopes to “lyve in ese” in more than his relationship with his wife through his tolerance. By granting Dorigen freedom from the submissive role his honor would customarily demand, Arveragus gains release from the anxiety of position that honor demands of *him*; her liberty within the marriage defines his own. For the moment the division between the partners is small, but its contrast to the idealism preceding it provides the first indication of the slide into traditional hierarchies that will become ever more noticeable later in the tale.

Chaucer seems aware of this drift in the relationship, for the very next verse paragraph gravitates quickly toward a playfully convoluted account of the power dynamics between husband and wife. The word play focuses primarily on crossing the poles of “lordshipe” and “servage” within the marriage, but over its course introduces other distinctions as well, such as “love” and “mariage” or “lady” and “wyf”:

Heere may men seen an humble, wys accord;
Thus hath she take hir servant and hir lord—
Servant in love, and lord in mariage.
Thanne was he bothe in lordshipe and servage.

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Servage? Nay, but in lordshipe above,
Sith he hath bothe his lady and his love;
His lady, certes, and his wyf also,
The which that lawe of love acordeth to. (791-98)

The language is virtuosic and almost willfully perverse; it conveys an impression of strong flux in the power dynamics of the relationship, a flux which nevertheless strengthens the bond uniting the two under the "lawe of love." It can hardly be insignificant, however, that this passage is directed squarely at shoring up a weakness that is already beginning to appear in the couple's relationship, and that will ultimately shatter any illusion of liberty for Dorigen. From this perspective, the playfulness of the passage takes on an air of desperation, and its shifting binaries point more toward incoherence than stability.

A great amount of effort thus results in producing only a weak and unrealized portrait of the mutual harmony the opening section aims at depicting. This lack of success casts over the beginning of the tale a dark shadow that only becomes magnified as the narrative proceeds, and that incidentally says much about the strength of the social conventions that Chaucer had to struggle against even to conceive of "libertee" within marriage. It should not, however, distract us from the important fact that this effort has been made. However limited and partial the portrait of an ideal marriage in the opening section might be, Chaucer clearly desired it enough to work hard at achieving it. The opening marks the most serious attempt in the tale to overcome its basically Bataillean pre-occupations and to conceive of an alternative. Despite this earnest attempt, though, the value of public appearances and honor begins to assert itself before the opening section can even state its alternative clearly, and emerges like a snake into Dorigen and Arveragus's garden of love.

This occurs, of course, when Arveragus (still an unnamed ideal lover) pledges total obedience to his wife, except for "the *name* of soveraynetee, / That wolde he have *for shame of his degree*" (751-52, emphasis added). In these remarkably revealing lines, Arveragus exposes the heart of the problem that will continue to haunt the tale to its end. Even within the sheltered world of the couple's early marriage, the knight cannot forego keeping up appearances and therefore must hold on to the public "name" of authority, for fear of the "shame" losing it would bring in the eyes of his peers. This concern contrasts strongly with Dorigen's counterpledge that "nevere shal ther be defaute in here"; even at this early point in the tale, Dorigen has concern for a reality, while Arveragus has concern for appearances and public standing. This is the fundamental division between the lovers, confirmed when Arveragus leaves his wife to go to

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England for "a yeer or tweyne . . . To seke in armes worshipe and honour" (809–11).

Arveragus is not the only one prone to such concerns, for in large part the relationship to public honor defines what it means to be a man within the tale. As Susan Crane points out (30–31), both Arveragus and his rival Aurelius typically are defined comparatively, in relation to publicly defined norms of courtliness. Two of Crane's examples will suffice to make the point: as Aurelius is introduced, the tale describes him as a squire who "syngeth, daunceth, passynge any man / That is, or was, sith that the world bigan" (929–30); likewise, when Arveragus returns from the wars he is described not simply as the flower of chivalry, but in comparison to a courtly ideal, "[a]s he that was of chivalrie the flour" (1088). Socially defined ideals affect the very rhetoric of description within the tale; in a world so fundamentally status-conscious, both knight and squire would run the risk of having no identity whatsoever if not placed in relation with other men. In this context it becomes clearer why Arveragus's desire for public reputation is so powerful it can intrude even as he tries to create, in his marriage to Dorigen, a place independent of such concerns.

These male identifications also help motivate Aurelius in his love for Dorigen. From the moment he sees her at a party, Aurelius's extravagant love seems to result as much from envy for Arveragus as from desire for his wife. When Aurelius pleads with Dorigen for sympathy, for instance, he revealingly does so by identifying with his rival:

I wolde that day that youre Arveragus
Wente over the see, that I, Aurelius,
Hadde went ther nevere I sholde have come agayn. (969–71)

Dorigen herself perceives this bond between husband and suitor but cannot understand it, for as she refuses Aurelius she asks,

What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf
For to go love another mannes wyf,
That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh? (1003–05)

This pointed reminder of Arveragus's place as the husband indicates sharp insight on Dorigen's part, and also the distance between her outlook and that of the men. As Dorigen points out, Aurelius is literally attempting to take Arveragus's place by wooing her, but as Aurelius's own words reveal, he does so out of a deeper desire to *be* Arveragus. By intruding himself into the marriage, Aurelius hopes to share (at least

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symbolically) in the freedom from comparison that marriage grants to the knight. Such motives have little to do with the concern for personal fidelity that Dorigen has already expressed in her vows to Arveragus, and her emphasis on the physical bond she shares with her husband recalls this fact. Throughout the tale, Dorigen remains committed to keeping faith to both husband and marriage; it is the actions of the men, beginning with Arveragus himself, that create the ongoing strain which their relationship undergoes.

And the Franklin does not shrink from showing that this strain on the marriage results in suffering for all concerned. Dorigen's sufferings begin as soon as Arveragus departs for England:

She moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyneþ,
Desir of his presence hire so destreyneþ
That al this wyde world she sette at noht. (819-21)

As I have noted, she is allowed no place within the tale beyond her marriage, so Arveragus's departure must necessarily seem like the end of her world. She quickly fixes on the "grisly rokkes blake" (859) of the Brittany coast as a symbol of the terrors of her separation from Arveragus and prays desperately that God remove them lest they wreck her husband's ship. Dorigen is not the only one who suffers during her husband's absence, though. Aurelius suffers extravagantly from the moment that he sees Dorigen at a party, languishing for "[t]wo yeer and moore" (940) before he can confess his desire to her, and then being thrown into the depths of despair when she refuses him. At first even Dorigen's promise "in pley," that he may have her if he removes the black rocks that threaten her husband's safety, is little comfort, until the illusions of the clerk of Orleans allow him (at least apparently) to bring about her impossible demand.¹² When this happens even Arveragus is put in a painful position, and he expresses his pain in a dramatic scene that I will deal with later in my argument. All of this suffering creates a strong impression of the turmoil that the men's actions have created within Dorigen and Arveragus's marriage, and it sets a negative tone for the tale as a whole.

Only when the clerk of Orleans and his illusions enter the story, however, does the Franklin find a suitable scapegoat to account for the presence of so much suffering. At first Aurelius prays to Apollo to cover the black rocks with the tide, but when the god proves unresponsive he and his brother turn to the clerk to hide the rocks by illusion. Earlier I mentioned the lavishness of the clerk's hospitality as he entertains the two; he is no less lavish in the visions he creates for them, nor is the Franklin any more reserved in describing the scene. The clerk escorts

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the brothers into his house, entertaining his guests with a series of wonders, beginning with hundreds of deer slain in a fabulous hunt through the forest and leading to a vision of Aurelius himself dancing with Dorigen. At this dramatic point, the clerk dispels the illusions with a clap of his hands, and the Franklin comments,

And yet remoeved they nevere out of the hous,
Whil they saugh al this sighte merveillous,
But in his studie, ther as his bookes be,
They seten stille, and no wight but they thre. (1205–08)

The contrast between the ever-shifting marvels of the visions and the plain room that has nonetheless been there all along emphasizes how airy and unnatural the visions are. The scene reveals appearance in its most basic form to be a glamorous lie which covers over the more prosaic realities that call it into being.

The Franklin drives this point home with his outspoken condemnations of the clerk and his magic, and in so doing distances himself and the other men as far as he can from the illusionist's deceptions. He refers to the clerk more than once as a "tregetour" or simple conjurer (1141, 1143), reducing the clerk's complex knowledge of astrology to the ability to create stage illusions. Even the huge project of making the rocks vanish is denigrated as "swich an apparence or jogelrye" (1265), a mere illusion or sleight of hand. The Franklin has more substantial ammunition in his arsenal than denigration, however. His most damaging charge frames the clerk's astrology as part of the superstition of the pagan past, condemning it as

swich folye
As in oure dayes is nat worth a flye—
For hooly chirches feith in oure bileve
Ne suffreth noon illusioun us to greve. (1131–34)

Not only are the clerk's creations illusory, but they are also outdated in the era of truth that Christ has inaugurated in the world. Judging from the Franklin's tone, though, and especially from his disingenuous (given his detailed description of the clerk's calculations) denial of knowledge about astrology, the subject of magic seems of more current concern than the Franklin is willing to admit. In fact, as the clerk casts his illusion over the rocks, the Franklin seems hardly able to restrain himself, denouncing the magician for creating "his japes and his wrecchednesse / Of swich a superstitious cursednesse" (1271–72). The Franklin obvi-

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ously sees the clerk and his illusions as the ones most responsible for the sufferings which Dorigen and Arveragus undergo; the question remains, however, how much of this responsibility must be shared by the men whose actions have drawn him into the tale.¹³

The clerk is, after all, not so different from the other men as the Franklin would have us believe. It is Aurelius who agrees to pay the thousand pounds to make the rocks vanish, for instance, and who hopes to gain undeserved favors from Dorigen by means of the illusion; the squire must thus be held at least as guilty as the clerk in profiting from tricks and pretences. On an even more basic level, the clerk is linked in the same chain of masculine identification that binds Arveragus and Aurelius together so strongly, and that finds its ultimate expression in the cascade of generosity that ends the tale. Just as Aurelius identifies with Arveragus in courting Dorigen, so the clerk's "routhe" for Aurelius motivates him in his work above and beyond any question of payment:

This subtil clerk swich routhe had of this man
That nyght and day he spedde hym that he kan. . . . (1261-62)

And just as Arveragus's sacrifice of Dorigen to Aurelius causes the squire to "doon a gentil dede" by withdrawing his claim, so the clerk responds in kind by giving up the money he had demanded from Aurelius, thus securing for himself a place in the competition to be "mooste fre." The clerk is inseparably part of the network of male identifications within the tale, and no amount of scapegoating on the Franklin's part should disguise this fact.

It seems inevitable that this would be so, for the clerk's manipulation of illusion is far more emblematic of masculinity in the tale than is generally noted. As my reading of *Bataille* demonstrated, the quest for status is all about manipulating appearances by refining conspicuous acts of valor or generosity into the gold of social renown. Only through such superficial actions do men solidify and maintain their connections with one another, thus maintaining their senses of who they are. In this way, the magician's illusions actually emblemize the search for "worship and honour" that draws Arveragus away to England, or the desire to assume Arveragus's place that motivates Aurelius as he pursues Dorigen.¹⁴ The entire male network takes its share of the blame for the sufferings the characters endure in the tale, but the Franklin chooses the clerk as a scapegoat because his traffic in "apparence or jogelrye" reveals the masculine pursuit of show in its most despicable extreme.

Once we realize that all the men contribute to the conflict in the tale, we can see that the conflict is built, not on individual characters

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and their actions, but on a basic tension between private and public forms of identity, between liberty and honor. As we saw, emphasis in the first section of the tale is on defining a marriage based on liberty, in which both partners can stand as individuals freed from external coercion. From the moment Aurelius enters the tale, however, focus shifts to the bonds linking various men and, through the Franklin's denunciation of magic, to an implicit criticism of the artifice used in maintaining these bonds. These poles represent nothing less than incompatible worlds in conflict, a private world of individual freedom and the public world of honor and obligation. As only Arveragus negotiates between these two worlds, the conflict is ultimately his, between his own needs for independence versus status.

The story up to this point has revealed the limitations of each of these two worlds: the marriage cannot provide Arveragus with the social identity necessary in his dealings with external society, while the emphasis on appearances in public life produces such disreputable figures as the magician. Clearly what the tale needs to achieve is a symbiosis of these two realities, one in which personal liberty is not in opposition to public esteem. Symbolically speaking, the tale needs to envision a time in which the clerk's magic does not work at odds with Dorigen's and Arveragus's marital vows. Only such a resolution could adequately dispel the tension between individual and society that propels the tale forward.¹⁵

Unfortunately, as the tale reaches its climax Arveragus proves unable to bring about such a resolution. Instead, he ends the division between private and public identities by ending the last vestiges of personal autonomy in his marriage to Dorigen. When Dorigen tells him of her promise to Aurelius and its fulfillment, he at first seems to react well to the news, and even jokingly asks her, "Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?" (1469). This patter is only the prelude, however, to a dramatic speech that requires quotation in its entirety to deliver its full effect:

"Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay!
For God so wisly have mercy upon me,
I hadde wel levere ystiked for to be
For verray love which that I to yow have,
But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save.
Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe"—
But *with that word he brast anon to wepe,*
And seyde, "I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,
That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,
To no wight telle thou of this aventure —"

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As I may best, I wol my wo endure—
Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse.”

(1474–86, emphasis added)

The speech is strikingly structured, divided neatly by Arveragus's sudden eruption into tears, and the drama of the outburst deserves as much comment as the violent assertion of a husband's authority that follows it. With this gesture, even Arveragus proves susceptible to the agony of conflict that is such a constant presence in the tale. The seeming inevitability of his losing honor in this situation spurs him to his first (and only) emotional display. The crisis reveals that, despite the desire for independence that his relationship to Dorigen had satisfied, Arveragus still lives primarily in a world of men, and in the face of a sudden loss of reputation all merely personal desires will be instantly abandoned. Of course, it is Dorigen who will have to pay the higher price for protecting his public name, since she will have to bear the pain of breaking faith with her husband against her will as well as the torment of concealing this disgrace forever afterward. Arveragus could not have exercised more thorough "maistrie" if he had intended to become a household tyrant, and we can only speculate on the new state of their marriage if events had come to pass as he foresaw.

Critics have generally not noted, however, how negative the consequences of his outburst will be for Arveragus himself. For him (and for the rest of the men as well) the ending is far from the misogynist paradise which Elaine Tuttle Hansen describes. His use of coercion on Dorigen ends not only her last vestiges of "libertee" but his own as well. His marriage is no longer a refuge of personal independence, but simply the final extension of the network of authority and submission from which he had long kept it isolated. Once the ideals of the marriage have disintegrated, all that is left for him or the other men of the tale is an endless preoccupation with maintaining status. In light of the tale's systematic emphasis on the suffering this preoccupation has caused, such a world hardly seems a happy prospect even for those who benefit from it most.

Nonetheless, it would not be accurate to characterize the victory of honor within the tale as a purely negative event. Once its demands are no longer in conflict with the desire for individual freedom, the men's competition for status quickly begins building the harmonious bonds among them which their rivalry for Dorigen had previously kept submerged. This new concord can be felt in the parallel dialogue as squire and clerk react to what they perceive as Arveragus's generosity. When Aurelius obligingly gives up his claim on Dorigen, he comments,

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Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede
As wel as kan a knyght, withouten drede. (1543-44)

Likewise, as the clerk in turn gives up his payment, he looks back on Arveragus and Aurelius's example and exclaims,

... God forbede, for his blisful myght,
But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede
As wel as any of yow, it is no drede! (1610-12)

The self-conscious way in which the men look on and approve of each other's "gentil dedes" expresses a newfound camaraderie and unity of goal among them; here at the end of the tale, this fellow-feeling does much to erase the impression of the sorrows that have led to this point. The Franklin ends his narration gracefully, inviting his audience to participate in considering who is the "mooste fre" while he decisively concludes his own contribution: "I kan namoore; my tale is at an ende" (1624).

And yet his tale is not at an end, for certain disturbing factors remain. The Franklin's question, for instance, calls for an answer; the note of male solidarity on which the story ends is a temporary one at best. Bataille's theory, as well as the course of the tale itself, indicates that the men's pursuit of honor divides them even as it acts as the bond among them. The final but temporary lull does not transform the conflict and suffering that have featured so strongly in the tale but merely keeps them momentarily at bay. For this reason, uneasiness continues to lurk beneath the apparent harmony of the tale's conclusion.

Much more disturbing, however, is the fact that the apparent harmony, like Aurelius's claim on Dorigen, is built on a foundation of sand. The audience, aware that Arveragus's sacrifice of his wife is motivated by desperation rather than generosity, and aware as well of Dorigen's devotion to her husband, may have reason to find his actions abominable rather than noble. The Franklin himself recognizes that such a reading is likely, but can offer no more than a weak defense for the knight's actions:

Paraventure an heep of yow, ywis,
Wol holden hym a lewed man in this
That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie.
Herkneth the tale er ye upon hire crie.
She have better fortune than yow semeth;

Englade

And whan that ye han herd the tale, demeth. (1493-98)

Certainly Dorigen does not finally have to sacrifice her fidelity to her husband, but this is due to a fortunate misreading of Arveragus's intentions rather than to those intentions themselves. The important fact remains that Arveragus puts Dorigen in jeopardy in the first place, not that it works out well in the end. In the face of this concern, the Franklin can do little more than rush the couple offstage with the hasty assurance that "In sovereyn blisse [they] leden forth hir lyf" (1552).

Even this awkward solution, however, leaves Dorigen as an uncomfortably significant absence at the end of the tale, an omission that inexorably reveals how unjustified is the men's final satisfaction with their honor. Her absence points out one final time Dorigen's lack of a place within the honor system the men hold so dear, and the failure of the marriage bond which she had so powerfully symbolized to the men. Her absence is a reminder, even amidst the men's contentment, that the honor they have retained has little to do with personal virtue; only Dorigen has consistently acted out of selflessness, and only she has been genuinely willing, for her husband's sake, to sacrifice personal honor. Most of all, Dorigen's absence indicates how hollow the men's honor finally proves, for honor that does not reflect virtue is artificial indeed by the tale's standards. In giving away his wife to save his reputation, Arveragus has instead discredited the entire masculine ideal of honor, showing it to be mere pretence, appearance without substance.

Possibly the tale could not help but end this way, since it does so because of its failure to think beyond the limits of the point of view of its men. From the moment early in the tale when Arveragus wins her, Dorigen has been important only as she reflects back on her husband's identity. In the opening section, her liberty within the marriage defines Arveragus's own; Aurelius courts her as a means of symbolically sharing in Arveragus's autonomy and prestige; and finally Arveragus commands not only that she sacrifice her body to keep her word to Aurelius, but also that she sacrifice her ideal of honor (based on personal, bodily fidelity) for an incompatible masculine ideal (based on obligation and self-sacrifice). The tale portrays her as outside the world of masculine values yet nevertheless connected to it through her man.

As I noted earlier, only the treatment of Dorigen as a true outsider, one whose viewpoint could repair the deficiencies within the men's world, could bring the tale to a satisfying resolution. This does not occur, for although at every point she is key to the men's desires, at no point is she allowed to exist as a complex character in her own right. She speaks within the tale, and in fact her expressions of fidelity and of suffering

feature prominently. Once she has spoken, however, it is the men who act, and their actions are little affected by her words; as we have seen, even her categorical rejection of Aurelius cannot prevent him from continuing to court her. In such circumstances, she is allowed little scope to question the men's actions or to develop her own contrasting viewpoint, and is thus in no position to resolve the men's conflicts by putting them into a new perspective. Hansen is right to argue that the men keep Dorigen contained throughout the tale, but this containment ultimately does even the men more harm than good.

The Franklin's Tale thus presents a far more bleak portrait of male bonding than is generally noted. Perhaps Harry Bailly himself expresses the most telling reaction to this tale even before it begins, when he exclaims, "Straw for youre gentillesse!" in his vexation with the Franklin's ruling concern (695). It would be wrong, however, to ascribe the tale's failures entirely to the Franklin—his retreat at the end of the tale from exploration of troubling social issues to support for the status quo is a typically Chaucerian maneuver, one visible not only in the Retraction to the *Canterbury Tales* but also (as David Aers argues) in *Troilus's* ascent through the spheres.¹⁶ At the end, as within the tale itself, the links between men are too close for any to hold himself aloof.

The tale's failures, however, provide rich insight into the interplay between honor and masculine identity, and they especially reveal the male pursuit of honor to be a more complex and dynamic subject than has been customarily assumed. Few have recognized the disruptive force of anxiety within men's sense of self, and fewer still have discussed the pursuit of status as a source of such anxiety. The tensions revealed in the Franklin's Tale lead to a number of questions related to honor and nobility, questions that could open vast new territories for critical thought. How, for instance, do the conflicts between individual and public identities play themselves out within the *Canterbury Tales* or Chaucer's earlier works? How powerful were these aristocratic preoccupations with honor in influencing what it meant to "be a man" of another class? And are conflict and anxiety always the preeminent features of "being a man?" The study of medieval masculinity is still exploring its limits as a discipline, and so far, the question of honor anxiety has been a corner that has gone almost completely unnoticed. Riches are there to be found in this moldy recess, however, and perhaps only a ray of light is needed to make the corner dazzle.¹⁷

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Notes

¹ Gavin Douglas, *Eneados*, qtd. in Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1357–1900*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1921) 1: 72.

² "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Oxford UP, 1959) 215.

³ Hansen presents her argument in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992). For readings of the tale in line with Hansen's views, see Angela Jane Weisl, *Conquering the Reign of Femeny: Gender and Genre in Chaucer's Romance*, Chaucer Studies 22 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), which argues that Dorigen's centrality and containment within the Franklin's Tale express the position of women within the romance genre as a whole, and Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1990), which finds Dorigen the "least free" character in the tale.

⁴ *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987). All citations from the Franklin's Tale will be taken from this edition.

⁵ There are two strong presentations of this point of view. The first is found in Anne Thompson Lee, "'A Woman True and Fair': Chaucer's Portrayal of Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 169–78, in which Lee points out that "marriage would be better all round if wives could count on their husbands not spending too many years away at the wars" (177). She even inverts the tale's masculine conception of honor by arguing for *Dorigen* as the "mooste fre," since Chaucer knows that only generosity and practicality such as hers can form a workable foundation for a marriage. The second appears in David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1980) 160–69. Aers gives perhaps the most generous possible reading of the tale by arguing for it as a highly reflexive study of the problems of striving for utopian love in a decidedly non-utopian world. He sees the desire for mutual love as genuine, and argues that Chaucer consciously depicts the struggles such love must face against the received hierarchical notions that structure all of the characters' thoughts (including Dorigen's). Hansen's thoughts on the subject complement these positive readings. Her analysis powerfully conveys the idea that creating a happy ending for the tale depends on covering up the sexual implica-

tions of the men's honor games and is not shy about laying responsibility for this cover-up at Chaucer's door. My paper aims at expanding the notion of these "sexual implications" to include the men in the tale as well as Dorigen, and in the process finds Chaucer perhaps not so firmly in control of his subject matter as the above readings argue.

⁶ The portrayal of honor within Chaucer's works is a surprisingly under-researched area. In 1973 D. S. Brewer published "Honour in Chaucer," *Essays and Studies* ns 26 (1973): 1-19, a useful introductory study of the subject to which I will have occasion to refer later in this paper. Subsequently Alcuin Blamires ("Chaucer's Reevaluation of Chivalric Honor," *Mediaevalia* 5 [1979]: 245-69) and Peter Brown and Andrew Butcher (*The Age of Saturn: Literature and History in the Canterbury Tales* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991] 60-64, 106-13) have also written on the topic, both focusing on Chaucer's attempts to redefine honor in terms of virtue rather than aggression or breeding. I have found no studies other than these, however, and none of the above address the anxiety and suffering associated with honor that is the basis of this paper's argument.

⁷ As Brewer notes, "External reputation would be nothing if it did not impute and by intention confirm internal virtue, however often mistakenly" (3). It is unfortunate that this inner virtue is only perceptible through outward appearances, especially within a tale in which the Clerk of Orleans's illusions reveal how often appearances can be made to lie. This bind leaves the men in an anxious situation, and as we shall see, anxiety and suffering are the hallmarks of the tale.

⁸ On expenditure and its function in creating status, see Bataille's essay "The Notion of Expenditure," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985) 116-29. On the workings of literary male bonding, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: Male Homosocial Desire and English Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985). See in particular the introduction (20-31), in which Sedgwick describes how women in English literature repeatedly function as the means of bringing together and mediating between male rivals.

⁹ These expended "goods" could include slaves sacrificed as part of the potlatch ceremony. Bataille sees sacrifice as the purest (and as the name implies, most sacred) form of the spectacle of loss. His essay "The Sacrifice" (*Visions of Excess* 130-37) describes how religious sacrifice sanc-

tifies the victim by raising him or her above the level of the grossly physical; in the potlatch ceremony, sacrificed slaves form part of the sacrificer's property (and therefore of his identity), and their loss elevates the sacrificer in purely earthly ways. This analysis becomes distinctly troubling when the one "sacrificed" is not a slave, but a supposedly independent person such as Dorigen. Do the men in the tale have a right to sacrifice Dorigen as they do? As we will see, this question undermines all of the men's generosity at the end, and opens grave questions about the honor they have apparently achieved.

Bataille derives his idea of expenditure from Marcel Mauss's study *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Society*, trans. I. Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967). Because of the space limitations of this paper I will cite only Bataille's essay, but the original Mauss essay is worth examining both for itself and for the use which more recent researchers (such as Patricia Fumerton) have made of it.

¹⁰ This contrast between Dorigen's ideals of honor and those of the men is one of the most incisive (and frequent) observations in feminist readings of the tale. For the most thorough exploration of the topic, see Mary R. Bowman, "'Half As She Were Mad': Dorigen in the Male World of the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 27 (1993): 239–51. Susan Crane emphasizes Dorigen's reactions to, and attempts to resist, the men's romantic misperceptions of her in *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994) 61–66. For further readings on Dorigen's character in relation to the men, see Lee 170–71 and Hansen 270–77.

¹¹ Unlike much of the Chaucer criticism that has followed E. Talbot Donaldson's 1958 edition of *Chaucer's Poetry*, my argument assumes *no* ironic distance between the Franklin's attitudes and those of Chaucer, at least on the topics that concern this paper. Uncertainty about honor is simply too constant a presence in the tale not to trace its way back to the author and his insecurities. I will thus assume that the confictory attitudes toward masculine honor within the Franklin's Tale are Chaucer's own, and that the Franklin's indeterminate social status between peasant and gentry makes his an especially appropriate voice to express this conflict.

¹² Dorigen's playful promise to Aurelius is perhaps the most deceptive moment in the Franklin's Tale. On the surface, it appears that Dorigen has made a catastrophic mistake that allows Aurelius to continue seeking her favors, but Crane points out (63) that nothing Dorigen could

have said would have prevented this result. The constraints of the romance genre make it all but inevitable that even her original flat refusal of Aurelius will be interpreted as a prelude to acceptance; even without the loophole that his literal interpretation of her promise opens, Aurelius would likely have persevered until he found another way to win her. The promise *is* still a key moment in the tale thematically, however. Not only does it emphasize Dorigen's constant devotion to her husband, but its impossible demand requires a magical solution. Dorigen's promise thus opens the way for the Franklin's extended denunciation of magical illusions, which in turn brings to light the most disturbing questions about masculinity within the tale.

¹³ As I indicated earlier, my choice of associating honor exclusively with appearance and artifice departs from the traditional reading of honor, which characteristically stresses the priority of internal virtue over external trappings. Brewer notes the apparently "Janus-faced" quality of honor, but then goes on to affirm the underlying unity beneath the duality: "On the one side honour looks towards goodness, virtue, an inner personal quality; on the other side [it] looks towards social or external reputation, to marks of dignity. . . . [However,] [e]xternal reputation would be nothing if it did not impute and by intention confirm internal virtue, however often mistakenly" (2-3). The Franklin's Tale, though, reveals how slippery virtue becomes when every man must try to manipulate externals for his own benefit. The men must on the one hand act in a way that reflects well on themselves, and on the other try to see through other men's actions to the realities underneath. As I noted earlier, with his lack of noble blood the Franklin is even more prone to feel the anxieties of this situation than the men of his tale; given this situation, it is not hard to see why the clerk and his illusions spark such violent emotions in the Franklin.

¹⁴ Crane's analysis of the relationship between magic and honor in medieval romance is worth mentioning here, for it resonates curiously with my present argument. Crane describes how clerical magic "addresses the tension between a private desire for autonomy and a chivalric community that assigns identity in relation to others" (150) and notes that in general it does more to focus attention on this conflict than to resolve it. As we have seen, these statements apply equally well to the Franklin's Tale as a whole: Aurelius's failure to share magically in Arveragus's autonomy foreshadows Arveragus's own failure to resolve the conflict between private and public identities later on. The tale shows a remarkable consistency of theme on both the small and the large scale.

Crane's comments also make clear that the tension between private and public masculine identities is far from unique to either Chaucer or the Franklin's Tale, but is one of the characteristic concerns of medieval romance as a genre. Such an idea has become evident only in the wake of feminist scholars such as Crane, and it indicates the need for more studies of medieval masculinity that can take advantage of feminist insights. If women in medieval literature have traditionally been obscured by critics identifying too strongly with a male protagonist's point of view, the complexities of masculine identity have been obscured as well in the process.

¹⁵ Interestingly, the situation is much different in the story from Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo*, which serves as Chaucer's source for the Franklin's Tale. My comments on *Il Filocolo* are based on the translation by Donald Cheney with the collaboration of Thomas G. Bergin (Garland Library of Medieval Literature ser. B 43 [New York: Garland, 1985]).

Boccaccio's plot is almost identical to Chaucer's in broad outline, but its focus and its attitude toward honor are nonetheless remarkably different from Chaucer's version. Boccaccio's story occurs in book 4 of *Il Filocolo*, during a long digression when a group of young people gather in a garden to pass the time by presenting and judging a number of *questiones d'amore*. The story is a witty, legalistic conundrum in which all the men act honorably, leading to a spirited debate of the question, "quale di costoro fosse maggiore liberalità?" ("which of these showed the greatest generosity?" [4:31; 261]). Chaucer made a number of changes and insertions to this material, changing the focus of the story from the suitor's quest to the strain put on the couple's marriage and considerably darkening the portrayal of magic. Overall, Chaucer's tale represents a much more disillusioned attitude toward both honor and masculinity than does Boccaccio's; an examination of the roots and significance of this difference would make a fascinating project.

For a more detailed overview than this footnote can provide of the similarities and differences between the two versions, see Douglas A. Burger's useful descriptive essay, "The Cosa Impossibile of *Il Filocolo* and the Impossible of *The Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction*, ed. Leigh A. Arrathoon (Rochester, MI: Solaris, 1986) 165-78. This article also contains an account of the considerable evidence for *Il Filocolo* as the direct source of the Franklin's Tale and should be referred to for more information on this topic.

¹⁶ See David Aers, "Masculine Identity in the Courtly Community: The Self Loving in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *Community, Gender, and Indi-*

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vidual Identity: English Writing 1360–1430 (London: Routledge, 1988) 117–52. This essay probes the anxiety underlying medieval masculinity and is a key element of the theoretical environment that has made my argument possible. Not surprisingly, Aers also finds the ending of the Franklin's Tale to be at odds with the complex analysis of masculinity and love that has preceded it. See *Creative Imagination* 168: “[T]he Franklin's final question is a misleading and comic trivialization which abandons the poem.”

¹⁷ I am indebted to my teachers Claire Sponsler and David Wallace, whose courses provided invaluable help in fleshing out earlier versions of this paper, and to Jon Wilcox, whose interest led to its being presented at the annual meeting of The Medieval Association of the Midwest. I owe deeper and more personal debts to my colleague Beth Crachiolo and to my wife Tamar Kaplan, both of whom provided the ongoing feedback and encouragement that drove this paper to completion.