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The Themes of Love, Freedom, and Responsibility in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

In reading Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one finds a debate forming around the question of marriage and the roles of the woman and man involved in the relationship. The reader discovers in the stories *The Miller's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Prologue*, that love is not always considered the center upon which a marriage must be based. With the newly evolving idea of romantic love, though, Chaucer asserts that if a marriage is to be strong, love must be at its center. The reader discovers in *The Franklin's Tale*, the assertion that if love is supposed to be at the center of a marriage, each partner must have his freedom preserved for love will not remain in an oppressive relationship. With this freedom, though, the reader discovers that responsibility is crucial, for unless one is free not only to do what one wishes, but also to take responsibility for these actions, then it is impossible to retain personal integrity and the respect for oneself and others that is necessary in a truly giving relationship.

In *The Franklin's Tale*, the reader immediately discovers that the relationship between Arveragus and Dorigen is established on the firm base of love, respect and freedom. Although Dorigen takes Arveragus "for her housbonde and hir lord, Of swich lordshipe as men han over hir wives," the reader quickly discovers that this marriage will not be based on the traditional marriage vows. As stated, Arveragus immediately presents freedom and equality to his new wife: "Of his free wil he swoor hire as a knight That nevere in al his lif he day ne night" Ne sholde upon him take no maistrye." Again hir wil, ne kithe hire jalouslye, But hire Obeye and folwe hir wil in al, As any love to his lady shal." With this, Dorigen is overjoyed, promising to be a true and faithful wife. Thus, Dorigen takes Arveragus as "hir servant and her lord" Servant in love and lord in marriage."

The basis for this belief in freedom is revealed by the voice of the narrator within *The Franklin's Tale* when he states, "For oo thing, sires, sauilly dar I saye: That freendes everich other noot obeye, If they wol longe holden compaignye. Love wol nat be constrained by maistrye: Whan maistrye comth, the God of Love anon Beteth his winges and farewell, he is goon!" In order to remain lovers for long, each must give the other respect and freedom. Love will not, he says, be constrained by force. When oppressive force does occur in a relationship, the partners will be unable to respect one another and true, devoted love will then disappear.

Freedom does not only bring happiness and respect to the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen, but also creates complete trust. As a knight, Arveragus must journey to England to battle and win honor, leaving his wife behind. In his absence, Dorigen "moorneth, waketh wailleth, fasteth, plaineth," because of her great desire for the presence of Arveragus. During this time,

Dorigen's friends attempt to cheer her by taking her on walks and picnics in gardens. Here she speaks with Aurelius, a squire who has fallen in love with her. Declaring his love he cries, "Have mercy, sweete, or ye wol do me deye." To this Dorigen replies, "Ne shal I nevere been untrewed wif, In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit. I wol be his to whom that I am kniȝt. Although Dorigen refuses to be untrue to Arveragus, she does grant Aurelius one condition under which she will love him "best of any Man." This condition, she states, is to "remeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon, Thet they ne lette ship ne boot to goon." Not believing that this task is possible, Dorigen grants this condition to Aurelius as a form of what may be called wishful thinking. Because of her great love for Arveragus and her fear in losing him, she wishes that the treacherous black rocks might be gone from the sea, removing, then, danger of shipwreck on his return. When Arveragus returns, the rocks have not been removed and he does not question his wife over her actions during his absence. His complete trust is demonstrated by the lines; "No thing list him to been imaginatif If any wight hadde spoke whil he was oute To hire of love; he ne hadde of it no doute: He nought entendeth to no swich matere, But daunceth, justeth, maketh hire good cheere." This trust both stems from the freedom allowed by husband and wife and allows husband and wife to grant freedom to one another.

While Dorigen and Arveragus live in happiness, Aurelius becomes grief-stricken because of his love for Dorigen. Aurelius is incompartated for more than two years because of Aurelius takes pity on her and her husband deciding, "as freely as he sente hire me, As freely sente I hire to him again." With this act of pity and gentility, Aurelius frees Dorigen from her compact, allowing her to again return to her husband while her freedom and integrity remains intact.

Through a craftily woven story, Chaucer challenges some traditional wedding vows' demonstrating that love, not coercion must be at the center of a strong marriage. Chaucer asserts, using the story of Arveragus, Dorigen and Aurelius, that in order for a marriage to be centered around love, each partner must grant the other freedom and, with this freedom, responsibility. Only when one is responsible for their own actions can personal integrity remain strong. Only then is one able to freely love.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Franklin's Tale*, *Canterbury Tales*. lines 70-71.

Chaucer, lines 73-78.

Chaucer, line 120.

Chaucer, lines 89-94.

Chaucer, line 147.

Chaucer, line 306.

Chaucer, lines 312-314.

Chaucer, lines 321-322.

Chaucer, lines 422-425.

Chaucer, lines 663-666.

Chaucer, lines 670-673.

Chaucer, line 686.

Chaucer, lines 750-752.

Chaucer, line 789.

Chaucer, lines 797, 807.

Chaucer, lines 651-652.

Chaucer, lines 923-925.

Chaucer, lines 932-933.

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