

Ovidian Love and Magic in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*

From acknowledging Ovid as the primary source for some of Chaucer's works to finding the most obscure allusions to him in works for which he is not the main source, "the time-honored sport of source-hunting" (Hoffman 196) is not only an enjoyable game but also a profitable scholarly exercise. This paper explores Ovidian influence in *The Franklin's Tale*, a tale for which the main source is not from the Latin classics, and how that influence works in and underneath the plot taken from, among other things, Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo*. Chaucer's most important change to Boccaccio's plot is in the feat of magic required to gain the young lover his beloved: in Chaucer's version the lover must find a way to make the rocks on the coast of Brittany disappear. Kenneth A. Bleeth (1982) has pointed out that the idea may have come from Medea's powers in *Metamorphoses* 7; only by seeing the influence of Ovid's elegiac poetry throughout the poem can we observe that this innovation is intended to evoke the witches of elegy and the power they can have over both the *puella* and the lover. However, the story ends with the ultimate failure of this magic trick to secure for the poet-lover the love he wants, and Chaucer draws a distinction between his own and Ovid's definitions of love.

Ovid's influence is perceptible throughout the tale as Chaucer develops his erotodidactic theme. From allusions to Ovid's advice in the *Ars Amatoria* to characters drawn straight from the *Amores* and the *Heroides*, it is clear that Chaucer is setting his tale in the world of elegiac love. Aurelius is a handsome, song-writing squire who is pining away for Dorigen, the faithful wife of the knight Arveragus, whose marriage is one of mutual submission free of "mastery" (*maistrie*) on either side. When Arveragus leaves his wife in France to go to war across the channel in Britain, Dorigen, like Ovid's Ariadne or Oenone, takes to the sea-cliffs to weep for her absent love, and Aurelius makes his suit to Dorigen. Dorigen, trying to get rid of the unwanted suitor,

promises in jest, if Aurelius can take away the dangerous black rocks in the sea that separates her from her husband, “Thanne wol I love yow best of any man” (997). Aurelius takes this as his only hope of achieving his goal and first prays to the classical gods to perform the task by exerting magical control over the moon and waters—powers reminiscent of those of Ovid’s witches (Dipsas and others: *Am.* 1.8.6, *Med.* 40-42, *Rem. Am.* 257-258; Medea: *Met.* 7.199-200, 207, *Her.* 6.85-87). The gods having failed him, Aurelius turns to a magician. The Latin-speaking scholar-magician has been compared to Chaucer himself (Kolve 1991), but he also bears resemblances to Ovid; in both cases, he is likened to a poet—appropriate because, as K. Sara Myers (1996) has pointed out, both the witch-procuress and the poet (*Am.* 2.1.23-28) wield *carmina* as sexual power. The magician, with his books, causes (or predicts, based on tides) the disappearance of the rocks, and Aurelius asks Dorigen to keep her promise by having sex with him. Arveragus has returned in the meantime, and Dorigen, in great distress, reveals all to him. Because their marriage is based on equality, Arveragus tells her that she ought to preserve her honor by keeping her word. However, when Dorigen tells Aurelius the reason for keeping their tryst, overcome by the love he sees between husband and wife he releases Dorigen from her promise.

Aurelius, the Ovidian poet-lover, must learn that a woman’s love is not defined as sexual intercourse but as something unquantifiable “bitwix” (1532) Dorigen and Arveragus that he can only see in Arveragus’ noble and decidedly unerotic action, “his grete gentillesse | To [Dorigen]” (1527-1528). Chaucer uses the elegiac poet-lover (Aurelius) as a foil to his own view of *love*, which is fundamentally different from Ovid’s understanding of *amor*. *The Franklin’s Tale* echoes and expands Ovid’s representation of the relationship between love and the power of *carmina*—whether “magic spells” or “poetry.” Though *carmina* have a powerful erotic

influence, Chaucer says that nothing, neither man's *maistrie*, nor magic, nor poetry can force one person to *love* another.

Works Cited

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