



“Abuse of Innocents” as a Theme
in *The Canterbury Tales*:
Dorigen as Instance

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Why is Dorigen such a wimp?¹ Why doesn't she stand up for herself? When Aurelius tells her the rocks are gone, she doesn't even go look. Why doesn't she? When Arveragus sends her off to the garden to meet with Aurelius, she doesn't even object. Why doesn't she?

My answer has three parts: (A) Dorigen is educable. (B) Yet she cannot deliberateate questions on grave ethical issues. (C) The reason is that, as a woman, she has been excluded all her life from serious ethical consideration.

Point A: Dorigen is an educable woman. Chaucer is quite clear that she can think and she can learn. First, she has learned well the complex rules and postures of courtly love, as evidenced by both the circumstances of her marriage and the marriage agreement itself. In the best courtly love tradition, her husband had to do many a labor, many a great emprise, had to suffer much "wo," "peyne," and "distresse" and had to undergo long "penaunce" before she took pity on him, and took him for her husband and her lord (V, 732).² Further, as husband, he promised her total obedience and trust, except for the "name of soverayntee," to which she responded with her promise to be a "humble trewe wyf" (729). This is idealized courtly behavior brought to life. Whether they later live up to what they intend is a different question. My point here is that Chaucer's

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Dorigen understands some very complicated behavioral rules and tries to shape her life by them.

Second, not only is Dorigen capable of understanding and trying to live by abstract behavioral rules, she is also capable of serious philosophical speculation, as evidenced by her lament to God about the rocks. That is to say, she is capable of recognizing an apparent evil in the circumstances of her own real life, and then of reasoning back to its First Cause, of thinking about the nature of that First Cause, and about the contradictions between its nature according to the *auctoritees* (all powerful, all purposeful, perfect, loving, and wise) as opposed to the actual presence of the evil unreasonable rocks. In no way, she says, do the rocks foster man, bird, or beast. Indeed, she says, they have slain a hundred thousand men. She knows the answer taught by the clerks, that “al is for the beste” (886); but, she says, I am not able to know their reasons. (“I ne kan the causes nat yknowe,” 887.) Thus, Chaucer’s Dorigen is capable of, first, understanding and trying to abide by complicated behavioral rules and, second, of serious philosophical speculation.

She is also educable in that, when faced with a problem, she knows how to search the *auctoritees* for parallel cases. Her complaint consists of 101 lines setting forth 22 different *exempla* about innocent pagan women most of whom killed themselves for the sake of their chastity (1355–1456). Before reviewing the authorities, Dorigen says that in her circumstances she knows of no succor (aid, help, rescue) “save oonly deeth or elles

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dishonour”—one of these two, she says, “I have to choose” (1359). She reviews the first three stories at length, but, as the unanimity of their agreement that suicide is her only course becomes clear, her retellings get briefer and briefer, and finally disintegrate, as she herself disintegrates, into *exempla* of extraordinarily long-suffering wives. The result of her review of the authorities is that Dorigen weeps for several days intending to kill herself until her husband comes home.

There you have Point A in my exploration of Dorigen’s wimpishness: she is an educable woman. She is capable of understanding complicated behavioral rules and attempting to live by them, as with the rules of courtly love. She is capable of sustained serious philosophical speculation, as in her lament about the rocks. And she is capable of searching through the appropriate *auctoritees* for answers to real questions.

Yet, in spite of these abilities, she is unable to reason out ethical choices for herself. In fact, she cannot even formulate clearly the ethical problem involved. She doesn’t know how. This is Point B in my argument: Although she is highly educable, Dorigen does not know how to think about conflicting moral claims. She does not understand dialectic. When Aurelius tells her the rocks are away and makes his demand upon her, her immediate reaction is that she is trapped (1341). Fortune has wrapped her in its chain (1355–56). Now, she says, I have to choose between death and dishonor, the standard moral choice for women. However, in the Franklin’s Tale, Chaucer changes the choice. Instead of keeping it

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between death and dishonor, Chaucer sets it up like a *sic et non* problem, with conflicting authorities on both sides. First, Aurelius tells her she has to sleep with him; her honor is at stake. Next, the authorities tell her just the opposite: she has to commit suicide; her honor is at stake. But then her husband, surprisingly, seems to agree with Aurelius; again she has to sleep with Aurelius because her honor is at stake. The situation calls for dialectical reasoning, not obedience, but Dorigen doesn't know how. Instead, half mad with grief, she obeys her husband and heads for the garden.

Dorigen is in a real bind. Not only is she a faithful wife who wants to remain that way (Chaucer is very clear about that, 980–87), she is also a woman whose marital chastity is part of her very identity. Submitting to Aurelius is no small matter to her. And yet, even under these extreme circumstances, she cannot find within herself the ability to call a halt to the whole unsavory train of events. Why? Because she does not know how. She knows that plenty is wrong; that's why she is so upset. But she does not know how to stop the process that is going to destroy her.

Why doesn't she know how? Here comes Point C of my argument. All her life, because she is a woman, Dorigen has been excluded from serious ethical debate. She knows nothing of dialectic. She has never learned how to mediate between conflicting ethical claims; she has never learned to choose between shades of gray. “Death or dishonor” is what she has always been told; that is what her review of the pagan authorities tells her.

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Yet, “adultery or dishonor” is what both Aurelius and her husband tell her. The two solutions conflict, and neither makes sense to her. Neither solution takes her seriously as a human being in her own right; neither is interested in her innocence in this case.

For at least two thousand years, women like Dorigen had been excluded from serious ethical discussions, as either subject or object. As subject, Dorigen has been taught to leave the reasoning about the rocks, that is to say, the reasoning about the problem of evil in this world, to the clerks. “To clerkes,” says she, “lete I al disputison” (890). Her soliloquy about the rocks demonstrates that she both understands the problem and knows the clerks’ conclusion (that all is for the best); but the reasoning, the rationalizing, the whole dialectical process about the grays by which a benevolent all-powerful Creator can justly allow evil rocks in his universe has been denied to her. She says, literally, “I ne kan the causes nat yknowe” (887), that is to say, I am not able to know the reasons. Why not? Because she is a woman. No Latin. No access to the treatises. No access to serious philosophical speculation or higher education.

The process of moral reasoning, of arbitrating between conflicting ethical claims, is not a natural skill. The natural skill, or at any rate the skill one sees in the uneducated and in children, is simple binary choice—black or white, good or evil, death or dishonor. Because she is a woman, Dorigen’s ethical value as a human being has been reduced by the culture in which she lives to the state of her chastity. And, what is really pitiful in

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the Franklin’s Tale, what makes Dorigen behave as such a wimp, is that she agrees with this valuation. She doesn’t think of her own innocence. Instead, first she seriously inclines towards suicide, and second she seriously inclines towards adultery.

As object, Dorigen is again excluded from serious moral discussion in the tale, as were women throughout her culture. The Franklin excludes her from his concluding question, a question he puts only to the men in the company:

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

The word “fre” means generous, as the Franklin no doubt intends, but it also means *free* in the modern sense, i.e., not servile, not dependent, as Chaucer may also have intended. The Franklin raises the question as to which of the three men was the most generous, as indeed, to some degree they all were. Aurelius gives up his sexual claim; the clerk gives up his financial claim; and Arveragus gives up his marital claim. However, one could equally well ask which of the three was most deserving of blame? Aurelius, for example, knew all along that Dorigen had made that promise innocently,

...hir trouthe she swoor thurgh innocence,
She nevere erst hadde herd speke of apparence.
(1601–02)

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Yet he was perfectly willing to take advantage of her innocence if he possibly could. Not exactly praiseworthy behavior, one might say. Likewise, the Clerk knew all along that he was participating in a fraud in order to debauch a virtuous woman, but he was perfectly willing to do so for his thousand pounds of gold. Not exactly principled, one might say again. And similarly, Arveragus apparently³ orders his wife to keep her rash promise so as to keep her “trouthe,” in spite of her obvious reluctance, in spite of their wedding vows, and in spite of his promise never to impose his “maistrie / Agayn hir wyl” (747–48). Again, not exactly the behavior of a respectful and loving husband. In short, the Franklin solicits praise for the very gray behaviors of these three men. One could just as easily solicit their blames. At the same time, he is conspicuously silent about Dorigen. Because she is a woman, Dorigen is apparently not an appropriate object for moral reasoning. Yet she is the one who suffers the most, she is the one the authorities would sentence to death or defilement, and, of them all, she is the only real innocent.

So, that is my three-part answer to the question, “Why is Dorigen such a wimp?” She is a wimp because, although she is highly educable, she has never learned how to mediate between conflicting ethical claims. The reason she has never learned is that, as a woman, all her life she has been systematically excluded from serious moral reasoning. According to the authorities she knows, the only ethical problem she is ever likely to

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face has to do with her chastity, and in the event that is threatened, well, better dead than bed.

That Chaucer was “ever a friend to women” is by now a truism. One reason is that he is willing to take women seriously, that is to say, he is willing to put them in an ethical context and make them just as problematic ethically as are his men. The Prioress and the Wife of Bath are at least as interesting as any of his male figures—the one a flawed Mary figure, but with the nature and extent of her flaws endlessly debatable; the other a virtued Eve figure, but again, with the nature and extent of her virtues unresolvable. The Second Nun, at least in my opinion, is only now beginning to receive the attention she deserves. Further, not only is Chaucer willing to take women seriously, he is willing to take seriously the authoritative role models with which women were indoctrinated: the Clerk’s Tale presents us with the testing of a model wife according not only to a supposedly idealized Clerk, but according also to most of the traditional Christian *auctoritees*. The Franklin’s Tale, somewhat in parallel, presents us with the authoritative pagan views on the testing of model wives. That Chaucer finds these cultural role models for women wanting is obvious; that he finds them worthy of serious ethical consideration by his readers is another reason he has traditionally been recognized and respected as a notably feminist writer.

The title of this paper posited an “Abuse of Innocents” theme running throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. I think this is true. In fact, I think it is a motif

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that runs throughout Western literature. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Nurse Ratched badly abuses Billy Bibbit. In *Great Expectations*, Mrs. Joe brings Pip up, heaven help us, “by hand.” In *Tom Jones*, tutors Square and Thwackum do their best to make Tom’s childhood miserable. Ophelia and Desdemona do not deserve their fates, nor, at least in my opinion, does Criseyde. Throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer writes of innocence and innocents betrayed. In Part I of the Knight’s Tale, Palamon speaks of cruel gods who “giltelees tormenteth innocence” (I, 1314). In the Man of Law’s Tale, while apostrophizing the wicked sultanness, the narrator says that in her was bred everything that could “confounde / Vertu and innocence” (II, 362–63). In the Physician’s Tale, in the course of advising governesses on their duties, the narrator warns that, “Of all tresons sovereyn pestilence / Is whan a wight bitrayseth innocence” (VI, 91–92). In the Clerk’s Tale, in the Second Nun’s Tale, in the Prioress’s Tale, the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale, the Melibee, the Squire’s Tale, and Parson’s Tale, Chaucer speaks of innocence and innocents. He uses the term in four ways: (1) innocence of guilt, resentment, evil thought, or wicked deed; (2) innocence of years; (3) innocence of sexual experience; and (4) innocence of knowledge, of experience of the world.

My focus here has been on this fourth kind of innocence—innocence of knowledge of the world—specifically, in the Franklin’s Tale, innocence of experience with appearances (1602), with problematic

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people and thorny ethical issues. The MED’s definitions of this kind of innocence speak of “guileless” persons, “unsuspecting” persons, “naive, simple, or foolish” persons, and “inexperienced” persons. By the MED definitions, Dorigen is an innocent. In addition to being educable, Chaucer has characterized her as guileless, unsuspecting, naive, and inexperienced.

The question naturally arises, is this kind of innocence—innocence of worldly knowledge—a good thing? The Prioress seems to think so. So does the Physician in his tale of little Virginia. For Chaucer, however, rather than a virtue, as these two seem to think, this kind of innocence seems to indicate a defect, a deficiency, the lack of a natural good that pertains to all human beings. Chaucer is not alone in not valuing this kind of innocence. Aquinas, for example, regarded knowledge as a good thing. In his system, the more knowledge one has, the closer one is to God. By this kind of reasoning, innocent ignorance is not a good; and in the *Summa* he holds that some ignorance is culpable because it can be the cause of sinful behavior, as it almost is in the Franklin’s Tale (Ia2ae, 76, 1 & 2). The same is true for Chrétien: Perceval’s innocence about appearances, about problematic people and convoluted ethical issues is not a good thing. It is a defect. In the course of losing it, he becomes a better human being.

Perhaps Chaucer is suggesting in the Franklin’s Tale that this kind of innocence is not a good thing for women, that women like Dorigen should be taught to reason things out rather than conditioned to obey. In

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brief, Dorigen is a woman of intelligence, some education, and fidelity. Yet she is, apparently, psychologically unable to reject or even question the outrageous ideas of the men in her life, not Aurelius demanding her favors, not Arveragus telling her to submit, and not the pagan *auctoritees* advising her to commit suicide, all of them claiming her honor to be at stake. For a woman like Dorigen to undergo the kind of suffering she undergoes because of a casual promise made naively in the conviction of its real-life impossibility—is this not evidence of a deficiency, a lack of common sense, an inability to protect her own integrity? Further, she is grown woman, yet she doesn’t even go to see if the rocks are really gone. Is this not evidence of an incapacitating innocence, a debilitating naiveté? Indeed, in the Christian context in which Chaucer was writing, and speaking now in terms of last things, how can women rightfully be judged as moral creatures, as all the *auctoritees* agree they will be judged, if all of their lives they are systematically excluded from learning the complicated process of serious moral reasoning (as the clerks exclude women in Dorigen’s lament over the rocks, as the pagan authorities exclude women in Dorigen’s complaint, and as the Franklin excludes women in his closing question)?

Dorigen is the emotional center of the Tale. The reader is encouraged to empathize with her throughout, with her grief, her pain, and her helplessness. I think Chaucer is also encouraging the reader to question the medieval social practices which kept women like

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Dorigen innocent and obedient, and thereby kept them easy prey for the Aureliuses of this world, and worse.

Notes

1. For comment on Dorigen, see especially Germaine Dempster, “Chaucer at Work on the Complaint in the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *MLN* 52 (1937), 16-23; James Sledd, “Dorigen’s Complaint,” *MP* 45 (1947), 36-45; Donald C. Baker, “A Crux in Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*: Dorigen’s Complaint,” *JEGP* 70 (1960), 56-64; Janemarie Luecke, “Dorigen, Marriage Model or Male Fantasy,” *Journal of Women’s Studies in Literature* 1 (1979), 107-21; Effie Jean Mathewson, “The Illusion of Morality in the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *MAE* 52 (1983), 27-37; Ann Thompson Lee, “‘A Woman True and Fair’: Chaucer’s Portrayal of Dorigen in the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *ChauR* 19 (1984), 169-78; J. A. Burrow, “*The Canterbury Tales* I: Romance,” in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 114-20; Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer, Feminist Readings*, Humanities Press International, 1991, 111-20; David Raybin, “‘Women, of Kynde, Desiren Libertee’: Rereading Dorigen, Rereading Marriage,” *ChauR* 27 (1992), 65-86; Mary R. Bowman, “‘Half as She Were Mad’: Dorigen in the Male World of the *Franklin’s Tale*,” *ChauR* 27 (1993), 239-51.

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2. All quotations are to the edition of John H. Fisher, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977.

3. “Apparently” because whether or not Arveragus actually insists that Dorigen keep her oath is, in my opinion, debatable. Married people often misunderstand each other, even with the best of intentions. Whether or not Arveragus insists depends on one’s interpretation of *shul* in “Ye shul youre trouthe holden, by my fay” (1474). This can be an order, as Dorigen takes it (1512-13). Or, it can be merely an acquiescence on Arveragus’s part to a decision he believes Dorigen has already made. Returning home, finding her distraught, and listening to what she says she has sworn, Arveragus mistakenly concludes that she has already decided to fulfill her oath, that that is the reason she is so upset, and, responding in accord with their marriage agreement, he agrees to follow “hir wyl” (749) even in this. That is to say, rather than ordering her to hold her trouthe, he is accepting/acquiescing to/reassuring her about what he thinks she has already decided to do. ME *shulen* is a notoriously slippery modal. The MED gives 21 pages to it. Among other things, it was used to express an order *and* it was used to express agreement with what is appropriate or right. Chaucer’s use of it here, in line 1474, takes advantage of its ambiguity: it enables him to show both of them abiding by their separate understandings of the marriage contract: Arveragus following her will in all (749), and Dorigen

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obeying as his “humble trewe wyf” (758) when she heads for the garden.

The ambiguity in Chaucer’s line 1474, and thus the misunderstanding between Dorigen and Arveragus, has been hidden, unfortunately, by the punctuation in some editions of lines 1483-86. Immediately after acceding to Dorigen’s decision and (he thinks) agreeing with her that “Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe,” Arveragus bursts out weeping, as well he might since Dorigen’s apparent decision to keep her rash promise has put him in a terrible position. He forbids her on pain of death from telling anyone about this, i.e., he unequivocally *orders* her to keep the final clause of their marriage agreement reserving him the ‘name’ of sovereignty. Then he says,

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

(1484-86, Fisher)

Thus Arveragus, this knight who values truth above all else, is promising that henceforth he will live a lie. Not only will he endure his own woe as best he can, he also promises Dorigen that he will “make no contenance of hevynesse,” not for his own sake, but so that no one will deem or guess harm of her. What this means is that henceforth, every moment of every day, he will have to guard the expression of his face and take care that it never betrays the grief that will be coming and going in his mind and heart. Whenever in public he is with

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Dorigen or looks at her or even thinks of her, or has to talk to or hear about Aurelius, or hears stories about neighbors or unfaithful wives, or listens to courtly love romances or marriage vows or jokes about cuckolds, he will have to control his countenance. Henceforth, whenever he hears the word “trouthe,” he will have to steel himself not to betray his own innermost thoughts. He will have to be always on guard. Never again will he know freedom of facial expression, the comfort, the security, of belief in his own total honesty. Never again will he be able to feel that he possesses truth. Fisher and Donaldson punctuate as above, as Chaucer wrote, so that it is Arveragus who will “make no contenance of hevynesse.” Unfortunately, Robinson, Baugh, and the new *Riverside* set the previous line off with dashes and thereby turn it into an aside: Arveragus lamenting his own woe. The result is to make Arveragus order Dorigen to “make no contenance of hevynesse.”

...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.
(1481-86, *Riverside*)

That is, without the added punctuation Arveragus promises to conceal his own feelings to protect Dorigen. With the punctuation, Arveragus orders Dorigen to

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conceal her feelings in order to protect him. Possibly this added punctuation explains the severe condemnation Arveragus has received from some critics for lack of feeling for Dorigen and overconcern with his own reputation.

Reading the whole passage in the way that I am suggesting—that Arveragus believes Dorigen has already decided to keep her vow and is seeking only his agreement that it is the right thing for her to do (*shulen*), and without the misleading editorial dashes—Arveragus’s actions become more coherent: He keeps all the terms of their marriage contract, and he gives up his truth so that his wife may keep hers.