Essay

Dorigen's Boundless Subjectivity in Chaucer's The Franklin's Tale

ROBYN A. BARTLETT AND HOLLY A. CROCKER

Dorigen's almost offhand remark, "whan ye han maad the coost so clene," changes the character of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Franklin's Tale (line 995).[1] Up to this point, when Dorigen devises the ruse to dispatch her suitor Aurelius—once he removes all the rocks on Brittany's coast one by one, she says, "*[t]hanne* wol I love yow" (997; emphasis added)—the narrative had presented a construction of marriage in which partners negotiate an equality that results from reciprocal subjection. As the Franklin affirms, "freendes everych oother moot obeye, / If they wol longe holden compaignye" (762–63). Dorigen is a submissive wife, and Arveragus is a subservient husband: "But [he would] hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al" (749). Her position is familiar, but his is not. Arveragus recognizes his departure from conventional masculinity when he tells Dorigen her control must remain concealed: "Save that the name of soveraynetee / That wolde he have for shame of his degree" (751–52). This split between public and private complicates their relationship, and it also establishes a riven subjectivity, one where a true, private, and inward selfhood is guarded and obscured by an outward, performative, and public persona.

The subjectivity Arveragus enacts is frequently identified with modernity, so much so that the philosopher Charles Taylor divides his grand temporal sweep of "dis / enchantment" between "porous" and "buffered" selves, the latter of which emerges in an Enlightenment world and functions to protect a deeper kernel of interiority: "As a bounded self I can see the boundary as a buffer, such that the things beyond don't need to 'get to me,' to use the contemporary expression. . . . This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the

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meanings of things for it" (*Secular Age* 38). In Taylor's account, buffered subjectivity arises from the need to assert control over the external world (*Secular Age* 38–39, 135). This control, as Chaucer's The Franklin's Tale affirms, is an illusion. What is more, in enacting this kind of subjectivity, Arveragus is doing something that, according to Taylor, should have been impossible in the late Middle Ages. Taylor treats buffered selfhood as an Enlightenment development (*Secular Age* 270–75 and *Sources* 143–84), but, as The Franklin's Tale affirms and as medievalists have long understood, a selfhood that protects an individuated interiority already existed in Chaucer's day (Aers; Bryan; Crocker, "Problem"; Dinshaw and Lochrie; Hanning; Patterson, "On the Margin").

Recently, however, medievalists have recognized the importance of Taylor's porous selfhood for writings of this period (Crocker, "W(h)ither Feminism?"; Newman; Sobecki). Barbara Newman, for example, drawing from Taylor, shows the variety and complexity of what she calls "the permeable self": from teacher and student to mother and child, medieval selves are created through "co-inherence," or a "being-within-one-another" (4). As a significant contribution to medieval studies, Newman's argument showcases Taylor's growing influence. For Taylor, "the porous self is vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces" (*Secular Age* 38). As Newman acknowledges, most of the relationships she tracks are not reciprocal, and they frequently naturalize a power asymmetry between subjects. For instance, the beloved's permeability encloses the lover—as if the lover were encased within the beloved—and thereby protects the lover from all external powers. In this dynamic, being open is neither possible nor desirable; the permeable self both seeks and needs buffering. Newman reveals how domination inevitably arises between *any* subjects, whether unbuffered or not, making her work crucial for understanding how bounded subjectivity challenges and even eclipses the rich cultures of permeable selfhood she studies.[2]

Building on Newman's argument, we begin by suggesting that Chaucer's The Franklin's Tale anticipates the construction of an interior, private domain of selfhood that is protected from an exterior, public arena where identities of all kinds are negotiated. Arveragus struggles to remain "fre" by means of buffered selfhood: open, malleable, and unguarded in private relationships, settled and protected in public encounters. But his challenge also shows what gets lost, or who gets left out, in bounded selfhood's construction. For, as scholars have long recognized, most of the tale does not concern Arveragus at all. After he seals his self-making compact with Dorigen, Arveragus departs, "[t]o seke in armes worshipe and honour" (811). Left behind, Dorigen must stay true while her husband remains abroad. Scholars including Alison Ganze, Elizabeth Robertson, and Mary R. Bowman have mapped the ways that Dorigen is caught in a masculinist, chivalric honor contest that suppresses her autonomy and erases her will. These interventions are crucial to the following argument, which reorients the tale's standpoint on subjectivity: instead of endorsing the bounded selfhood Arveragus works to assemble, The Franklin's Tale critiques the petty struggles of masculinist self-making that render Dorigen a disposable prop in her husband's quest to achieve what Taylor hails as a "buffered" subjectivity. Chaucer may have been forward-looking in his construction of Arveragus's subjectivity, but we maintain that his representation of bounded selfhood is negative in The Franklin's Tale.

Beyond critique, we argue that the tale forwards an ideal of subjectivity that is permeable, boundless, porous, unbuffered. Although Dorigen suffers, she valorizes a selfhood that remains unflinchingly available to others. This selfhood is open and trusting, and it meets the material world in all its ugliness and danger. Understood in this way, what scholars have called Dorigen's "rash promise" to Aurelius simply affirms how hard it is to constitute oneself in a permeable relation to all others—especially when many of those others are themselves seeking to become buffered subjects.[3] In other words, Dorigen approaches Aurelius as if it were possible to be open and direct, as if one's "entente" will be respected and honored (959). But in the world of bounded subjectivity that he and the other male characters of this tale inhabit, a world in which "entente" is often hidden, this cannot be the case.

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Though Aurelius understands her meaning only too well, he and his brother also know they can manipulate what she has said, that her "entente"—the only thing Dorigen identifies as of critical importance—does not matter. Her words to Aurelius can only be a "promise," can only be "rash," if a model of closed, dyadic selfhood governs the tale.

And while this form of shuttered selfhood is certainly at work—in Aurelius's own behavior, in Aurelius's brother's desire to "shame hire atte leeste" (1164), and in Arveragus's response to his wife's agreement with Aurelius—Dorigen offers a boundless organization of subjectivity as an aspirational cultural ideal. As such, and as the only character throughout the tale to maintain openness and honesty, she cannot anticipate the machinations entailed by bounded subjectivity—the very machinations that the other characters take for granted and even depend upon. When Dorigen considers suicide, she does more than realize that she is trapped in a masculinist game of honor. In her complaint, she includes herself in a company of women whose openness provides an important poetic counter to the model of buffered selfhood exemplified by the male characters who are distant, defensive, and dominant. By contrast, Chaucer represents Dorigen's erasure as the loss of boundless selfhood.

The Open Subject

The Franklin's Tale's investment in the organizing boundaries of selfhood should come as no surprise. This Breton lay, which begins with a private marital compact between lady and knight, is suffused with borders: when the knight Arveragus leaves to seek fame, the coast of Brittany rims the story's action with its imposing rocks. The lady Dorigen pines for her husband, but her friends take her to a garden that recalls the *hortus conclusus* from the Song of Songs. While there, in a set piece from chivalric narrative, the lovelorn squire Aurelius is bound by an impossible task: if he removes all the rocks from the shore, Dorigen will grant him her love. Finding Aurelius desolate as a result, his brother hires a scholar-magician who will make the rocks seem to disappear. The payment for this service will virtually bankrupt Aurelius, but the promise of winning Dorigen binds him to his task. When he reveals this feat (the rocks appear to be gone, though they are not), Dorigen is aghast, complains of her fate, and then confesses to her husband, who has recently returned from questing. Instead of contesting the strictures of his wife's agreement, Arveragus insists that Dorigen fulfill the conditions she offered to Aurelius. Dorigen goes to Aurelius, devastated, but the squire is so impressed that he releases Dorigen from her promise. In turn the scholar-magician is so impressed that he releases Aurelius from his debt. The tale ends by asking the audience to decide which of the men was most "fre." From the private domain of marriage to the enclosure of a pleasure garden or scholarly study, The Franklin's Tale is invested in boundaries that might be opened. The most fundamental of these, we maintain, is the constitutive border of subjectivity itself.

With its focus on Arveragus's prowess as a knight, the tale's introduction assembles and authorizes a closed model of selfhood:

> Ther was a knyght that loved and dide his payne
> To serve a lady in his beste wise;
> And many a labour, many a greet emprise,
> He for his lady wroghte er she were wonne.
> For she was oon the faireste under soone,
> And eek therto comen of so heigh kynrede
> That wel unnethes dorste this knyght, for drede,
> Telle hire his wo, his peyne, and his distresse.
> (730–37)

Insofar as he embodies these ideals of chivalric knighthood, Arveragus inhabits a subjectivity that takes self-image—how one is seen by others—as emblematic of self-identity. "As the story proceeds," Felicity Riddy points out, "the inescapable implications of the language in which reciprocity has been defined close in on Dorigen" (63). Akin to the Bakhtinian idea of the "classical body," which is crisply delineated and culturally stabilized, the "classical subjectivity" that Arveragus presents is bounded, limited, and socially empowered (Bakhtin 26). In this paradigm, which we argue is a shaping fiction of modernity, the self is rigid, ultimately brittle: to maintain a sense of cohesion and consistency, no

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substantial changes can become publicly manifest; a continuous process of self-shaping and self-authorizing forecloses vulnerability.

And yet as subsequent critiques affirm, there is more to this story of the self than meets the public eye. The fantasy of stability and coherence, the ideal of self-mastery and self-fashioning, is undermined, nay riven, by the workings of the unconscious across private and public life. Here too The Franklin's Tale is instructive. While for many Arveragus's negotiation of a new, companionate form of marriage is an egalitarian gesture that recognizes Dorigen's agency and autonomy in their partnership, we suggest that this construction of marriage facilitates his subjectivity formation. She remains open, but only so he may become impervious to the demands of public life. Susan Crane similarly argues that "*fin amor* and romance paradigms configure male self-definition by rendering the feminine a purely imaginary category in a narcissistic process, or a terrain on which men rival one another" (239). While we are powerfully influenced by the postmodern account of subjectivity's fundamental splitting, as well as by the attention of H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., to this "disenchanted" self across *The Canterbury Tales*, this scene from The Franklin's Tale offers more than a proleptic acknowledgment of modernity's constitutive construction of the subject.[4]

Rather, in the domestic partnership established by Arveragus's proposal, a rival account of selfhood is both acknowledged (he will "upon hym take no maistrie" [747]) and suppressed ("[s]ave that the name of soveraynetee" [751]). The agreement between Arveragus and Dorigen illustrates that, as much as they will be open to influence in the private contexts of their marital relationship, Arveragus will not and perhaps cannot maintain this dynamic flexibility outside those domestic confines. When Arveragus volunteers to suspend the conditions of gender hierarchy that define not only his but also Dorigen's standing in courtly culture, he acknowledges an altogether different way of organizing selfhood, one that draws subjectivity in relational, unbuffered terms. He vows to be open with Dorigen, promising to "hire obeye, and folwe hir wyl in al" (749). Yet if his offer sounds like an arrangement of secret agency, in which a woman's independence is credited and her autonomy is enabled within the confines of patriarchy (Mann 116–17), we follow the recent interventions of Holly A. Crocker, who rejects the idea that women can become equal within patriarchy (*Matter* 259–61; "Feminism" 94). Instead, elite men (like Arveragus) promise women freedom within a system they control ("W(h)ither Feminism?" 361–63). As the following analysis of Dorigen demonstrates, this is a freedom that ultimately excludes women—quite explicitly in The Franklin's Tale (the tale's question, "Which was the mooste fre?" [1622], makes no room for Dorigen).

By using the domestic as a space where the fraught, riven, and contingent elements of his character might be hidden from view, Arveragus works to maintain a public front of empowered, seamless subjectivity. Yet when he reaches out to Dorigen, he briefly inhabits a relational, conditional, and provisional selfhood that would be complete only through a radically reflexive commingling with his wife.[5] Arveragus understands that this form of relationality has the power to redraw the very boundaries of selfhood; when he puts conditions on his arrangement with Dorigen, designating limits for when or giving explanations for why he will be open or closed to her, he refuses the promise of porous selfhood that The Franklin's Tale recognizes and even champions. But Dorigen neither recognizes nor is limited by this refusal. Instead, though many of her attributes reflect those pressed upon women in misogynistic cultures—"attention, care, sympathy, respect, admiration, and nurture" (Manne 22)—the tale nonetheless presents these as constituting a distinct mode of subjectivity. As Crocker argues, these qualities benefit men in medieval domains, but they also offer a foundation for a different organization of selfhood ("Vertu" 175). In other words, when such qualities are taken on their own, valued as ideals that might be inhabited for their own sake, they furnish the shaping contours for an alternative construction of selfhood.[6] In our reading, The Franklin's Tale acknowledges this rival account of subjectivity; the tale's ensuing difficulties arise because of the ways that men seek to deny, ignore, and destroy this open formation of selfhood to

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maintain their own public, closed, and authoritative versions of subjectivity. At the same time, Dorigen's boundless subjectivity is held up as The Franklin's Tale's ideal, and the threats to it are exposed as broader harms by the tale's end.

The boundless subjectivity that Dorigen embodies is both vulnerable and generative. After Arveragus leaves—taking on a public role as knight—Dorigen continues to derive her selfhood primarily from her missing husband, whose absence "wepeth she and siketh, / As doon thise noble wyves whan hem liketh" (817–18). As Glenn D. Burger suggests, her weeping and sighing reflect "the kind of love-frenzy we associate with the male courtly lover" ("Who" 438); other scholars helpfully explore the fidelity and concern that derive from her wifely role.[7] However, her behavior also stems from the boundless selfhood structuring her relationship with Arveragus. Understood in this way, her grief illustrates the suffering that animates an open selfhood, especially when the partner with whom she supposedly shares a mutually constituting subjectivity is absent, maybe forever lost. Newman's theorization of medieval coinherence captures the relationship between Arveragus and Dorigen, but The Franklin's Tale demonstrates how the permeable self underwrites a public, impervious subjectivity identified with chivalric masculinity.

Yet, as Dorigen's subsequent behavior demonstrates, the permeable self can take on its own stature, becoming oriented to the world in an open, boundless relationship. Focus on the "grisly rokkes blake" (859) launches Dorigen into sadness because she embraces the flexible coinherence she enjoyed with Arveragus, even after friends encourage her to reorient herself. Emily Houlik-Ritchey argues that Dorigen's reaction to the rocks reveals the "neighborly strangeness" of human-nonhuman relationships (135); for Gillian Rudd, Dorigen's reaction to the rocks reveals her "androcentric" worldview (142–43). We would argue, though, that her view is not androcentric so much as open: she gazes on the rocks and sees them for the threat they are. Like Cord Whitaker, who interprets the rocks' blackness as a site not of desolation but of potential (217–18), we suggest Dorigen opens herself to a world of boundless relationality. She does not simply turn away, closing herself off from a world where open subjects might forge coconstitutive relationships. And when she confronts her loss, the generative potential of her unbounded selfhood becomes manifest. As a subject of vulnerability, Dorigen fosters a new connection to the world, one that is as transformative as it is radical—she suffers on account of a common finitude, but in doing so, she avoids the petty illusions designed to legitimate a selfhood that remains impervious to all others. Dorigen's openness to Arveragus becomes an orientation to the world at large, which she does not step away from simply because he is absent.

Dorigen's turning toward the world is most obviously evident in her response to the rocks on the coast, the existence of which troubles her beyond their potential to destroy her husband.[8] As George Edmondson maintains, "What troubles [Dorigen] so about the rocks is that they simply are" (242). Developing this line of reasoning, the rocks' inert solidity provides an important vista upon Dorigen's selfhood and worldview:

> Another tyme ther wolde she sitte and thynke,
> And caste hir eyen dounward fro the brynke.
> But whan she saugh the grisly rokkes blake,
> For verray feere so wolde hir herte quake (857–60)

Of course, she notices the rocks insofar as they present a possible barrier to Arveragus's safe return. However, her response to them does not explicitly focus on this threat but on the fear and wonder they inspire in general ("verray feere").[9] The passage also calls attention to her view of them "fro the brynke," both suggesting the possibility of an imminent fall and, by extension, illustrating her (and all humans') fragility in relation to the threatening material world.

In her ensuing prayer to God, she similarly takes up an unbounded perspective on her world and its myriad losses:

> But, Lord, thise grisly feendly rokkes blake,
> That semen rather a foul confusion
> Of werk than any fair creacion
> Of swich a parfit wys God and a stable,
> Why han ye wroght this werk unresonable?
> For by this werk, south, north, ne west, ne eest,

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> Ther nys yfostred man, ne bryd, ne beest;
> It dooth no good, to my wit, but anoyeth.
> Se ye nat, Lord, how mankynde it destroyeth?
> An hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde
> Han rokkes slayn, al be they nat in mynde,
> . . . . . .
> But wolde God that alle thise rokkes blake
> Were sonken into helle for his sake!
> Thise rokkes sleen myn herte for the feere. (868–93)

As her subsequent behavior shows, Dorigen is co-mmitted to the world as a tangible domain where joy and harm constitute a selfhood connected to all others. Her lament makes it abundantly clear that she is concerned not with how the rocks look but with their status as created matter.[10] Her repetition of material categories underscores this point: "rokkes blake," "werk," "creacion," "bodyes," and "sonken." Her lexicon is relentlessly embodied and focuses attention on material existence—of rocks and of people. In the passage above, she repeats "werk" three times, underscoring both creation itself and the constant process of matter encountering other matter. She deplores the rocks' existence, but, importantly, she does not deny this existence. What is more, the passage frames her concerns broadly, far beyond her distress at Arveragus's absence and the problem the rocks pose for his safe return.

In other words, Arveragus's absence prompts Dorigen to assume a boundless permeability with all others, nonhuman as well as human, through a realization of shared vulnerability. The problem with the rocks is that they do no good to any living human, bird, or beast. They are impediments that block or wreck boundless relationality. Her understanding makes space for a different formation of subjectivity, one constituted from a common openness to material harms. While she narrows in on anthropocentric concerns—"Se ye nat, Lord, how mankynde it destroyeth?"—she does not mention Arveragus but attends to a broader connection to the world. Of course, she fears for her husband. But all the same, her language unrelentingly focuses on the leveling power of the material world, of these rocks, which have slain "[a]n hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde." In Dorigen's reckoning, all of humanity is fragile and impermanent. If the rocks prevent free contact, they also consolidate a common vulnerability uniting people and things, rocks and humankind. When Dorigen opens herself to these faceless, destroyed multitudes, mourning a common human fragility that cannot be dispatched, she faces the nightmare that Arveragus's masculinist, buffered subjectivity is designed to resist and even foreclose. Dorigen rejects such illusions; her anguish reflects a world in which there are no guarantees.

In fact, she openly acknowledges a central threat to the chivalric world occupied by Arveragus: dying and being forgotten. Arveragus travels to England to seek "worshipe and honour" (811), suggesting that he values being known. "Honour" designates both "respect" on the one hand and "fame" and "good repute" on the other ("Honour," def. 2a). But Dorigen articulates the possibility (the likelihood, even) that those who perish are "nat in mynde." She assumes this forgetting as a matter of course. The rocks and their threat, both to life and to worldly fame, are intrinsic to her open selfhood; she has no buffer of protection, but this lack also means that she meets the world on its own terms. She believes that bad things happen. She does not respond as the courtly wife, insofar as she does not presume that Arveragus's worthiness, his chivalry, and so on guarantee his safety, or her identity. She has not forgotten him, but his stature does not determine her selfhood, either.

Instead, in embracing the vulnerability their marriage introduced, Dorigen adopts a fragile, boundless selfhood that is increasingly unconnected to the companionate enclosure she enjoyed with Arveragus. The openness this connection entails cannot dismiss the physical threat of the rocks, and it extends to and includes the possibility not only of death but also of fading from narrative and history. Paradoxically, in this moment of preemptive grief and panic, Dorigen inhabits the boundless subjectivity that Arveragus cannot compass. She relates to a world in which her vulnerability and openness are shared and in which she recognizes the world for what it is: one of beauty but also danger; one in which death is possible. In this way, Dorigen sees things as they are, not as she wishes them to be.

In sum, this episode illustrates Dorigen's investment in what is real and concrete. She does not, in the

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manner of Aurelius, identify rhetoric or magic as solutions to her problem, for these only mask actual dangers. They conceal the threat; they do not destroy or overcome it. As we suggest above, openness to the world also means vulnerability to its destructive potential: where there is love, there is always the possibility and even promise of deep pain. In a manner of speaking, and in a tale governed by and responding to narratives of illusion, entente, and truth, Dorigen is the only one who does not bend the truth; she is also the only one who both sees and accepts reality. Though Aurelius does so for a moment—"this were an inpossible!" he cries in response to her ironic entreaty to remove all the rocks, stone by stone (1009)—he rejects this truth because it is too painful and entails too much suffering. He prays to Apollo, begging the god to deliver him from reality through some kind of miracle; when none is forthcoming, he embraces illusion and deception instead—the slippery rules governing a buffered way of being in the world.

Dorigen's friends are a part of the same rigid world Aurelius and Arveragus inhabit. On the one hand, the habits of sociality they encourage offer intimacies that are collectively constitutive: "And often with hire freendes walketh shee" (848). But on the other, they do not comprehend the basis of her suffering, cautioning her "[t]hat causelees she sleeth hirself, allas!" (825). Consequently, they work to reorient her disposition: "So longe han they conforted hire til she / Receyved hath, by hope and by resoun, / The emprentyng of hire consolacioun" (832–34). They seem to suggest both openness and sociability; but they do not want her to remain alone, and they do not make room for the openness underpinning Dorigen's response to the threat the rocks pose. Though Dorigen's friends comfort her, they also deny the terms of her sorrow, terms they all in fact share: the promise of death and the fear of fading from memory. Dorigen's sorrow is hardly "causelees," but she is the only one boundless and vulnerable enough to admit it. If her focus on the "grisly rokkes blake" (859) results in Dorigen's acknowledgment of life's precarity, her friends' efforts to pull her away from the "brynke" disclose a desire to see the world as only life-giving and generative. They are, as the saying goes, living in a fantasy, a courtly fantasy of selfhood and sociality.

The tale's courtly world is one of verdant fecundity; it is no accident that after she meditates on grisly rocks, Dorigen sojourns to a flourishing garden. In bringing her there, Dorigen's friends draw her toward another instantiation of bounded selfhood: social, courtly, and distinctly masculine. Indeed, in the tale's use of the *hortus conclusus*, the garden's cultivated structure is yet another arena for masculine self-fashioning, since it is in this garden that Dorigen encounters Aurelius. Once again, Dorigen is asked to become the fertile ground upon which a public, bounded version of (masculine) selfhood might flourish. This time, however, there is no promise of mutual regard or coconstitutive vulnerability. Chaucer's garden, because it calls attention to itself as planned, as bounded, as a careful product of the "craft of mannes hand" (909), is a departure from the tale's borrowings from Boccaccio.

In both *The Filocolo* and *The Decameron*, when the lady demands a May garden in January, it is designed to thwart her very public pursuer. Unlike Dorigen, whose moves are spontaneous, improvised, and frequently labeled "rash," Boccaccio's lady is an accomplished courtly player who knows how to dispatch an unwanted suitor. Critics including R. R. Edwards contend that Dorigen is diminished in comparison with her counterpart in Boccaccio, and it is true that Dorigen moves less deftly within this courtly domain (162–63). It is worth noting, however, that Dorigen finds herself within an actual May garden: "And this was on the sixte morwe of May" (906), where, the tale emphasizes, "May hadde peynted with his softe shoures / This gardyn ful of leves and of floures" (907–08). The doubled setting depicts Dorigen as doubly beset, for her friends as much as Aurelius pressure her to gratify a courtly fantasy that suppresses the material contingencies that produce human vulnerability. If Boccaccio's winter garden seeks to overcome a common finitude (magic can make the garden bloom notwithstanding the cycle of death), Chaucer's courtly characters take a more practical approach: Aurelius knows his ability

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to hide the deadly rocks will allow him to inhabit a version of chivalric masculinity that Dorigen's open character will augment as well as empower.

In the garden, the chivalric logic of The Franklin's Tale is subject to critique insofar as the tale uncases the harms of the agential, dominant, and public selfhood that men across this tale labor to achieve. More is at work, however, than critique; in the garden scene, Dorigen's boundless selfhood develops beyond the reciprocal vulnerability Dorigen forged with her husband. She takes her marriage agreement as a given (Johnson 203), but she inhabits a position of openness on her own, without reference to any other. Dorigen has already acknowledged that she cannot control the ills of the world, including the harm the rocks might cause. She prays (to God, not Apollo) that the rocks might cease to exist, but she never asks for them to be hidden or merely obscured from view. She evinces a deeper knowledge of material hazard, and this awareness grants her a freedom of selfhood that affects her response to Aurelius. She does not suspect Aurelius's behavior, because, as her actions across the tale affirm, she has no reason to believe there is a rift between conduct and character. He is her neighbor (961). She knows him "of tyme yoore" (963), and "nothyng wiste she of his entente" (959). She assumes, in short, that the way he presents himself is consonant with his inner life. Why would he hide his true self or make his motives unavailable?

Instead of revealing Dorigen as woefully naive, hopelessly rash, or morally self-absorbed, her discourse with Aurelius foregrounds a different version of subjectivity, permeable to and shared with human and nonhuman influence alike. Her friends may draw her away from the rocks, but they do not dislodge her fundamental understanding of a shared vulnerability that opens selves to one another. She is therefore shocked when Aurelius reveals his "entente" and, as soon as she knows it (982), rejects his bid for her affections. For Dorigen, shifting the conversation back to entente signals her thinking from a place of porosity and deep connection: she rebuffs Aurelius's entente, and she believes that her own entente will matter, too. But Aurelius reveals the dexterity and subterfuge underpinning his approach: "no thyng dorste he seye" (943), the narrator says, repeating "dorste" three more times in the next eleven lines (949, 952, 954). That he "dares" say nothing implies that to respond would be dangerous, would risk opening up his bounded self, porously engaging with Dorigen's "entente." Aurelius's difficulty reflects his knowledge of the discursive rules governing the chivalric, bounded world in which he, Dorigen's friends, and Arveragus live. In this world, entente does not necessarily matter at all.

If the tale presents Dorigen's porous selfhood as a virtuous ideal, then it also affirms that her porosity comes with a cost. The feminist theorist Nancy Tuana observes that porosity is thick, interactive, messy: it is "viscous," in her words, allowing different forces to "leave . . . effect[s] in the bodies and psyches [they] touch . . . " (203). Though Dorigen rejects Aurelius forcefully once she knows his "entente" (982), she still does not revert to the discourse of a world beholden to the dictates of rigid selfhood. She "in pley" tells Aurelius what scholars have so often discussed (988): that if he

> remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,
> . . . . . .
> I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene
> Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,
> Thanne wol I love yow best of any man;
> Have heer my trouthe . . . (993–98)

Her joke is in some ways serious, given that the tale has already presented her grave distress at the rocks' physical reality and at the threat they pose to the subject formation she has devised with Arveragus.[11] But more importantly, her focus is still on the real, material world, in which transporting rocks amounts to physical labor: Aurelius is to remove them one by one. What is more, *he* is to execute this feat and no other—"whan *ye* han maad the coost so clene," she specifies (995; emphasis added). Her terms are unambiguous, and they both know he cannot meet them. As Aurelius responds, dejectedly, "this were an inpossible!" (1009); he does not "attempt in any way to fulfill the task she sets for him" (McEntire 150). His initial answer registers engagement with the real, material world around them, however briefly; and as Dorigen adds, "For wel I woot that it shal never bityde" (1001). With her skeptical demand, Dorigen

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scandalizes the domain of the agential subject who completes impossible tasks to achieve heroic honor. Like the "inhuman partner" identified first by Jacques Lacan and then by Slavoj Žižek, she pinpoints with her promise the lady's role in ultimately revealing the riven, fragmented selfhood that seeks to pass itself off as complete, coherent, and socially empowered (Lacan 149–50; Žižek 90). When Dorigen asks the impossible, she identifies the bounded self as an untenable fantasy.

Dorigen and Aurelius's exchange oscillates between the world governed by the social conventions of chivalric discourse, by the dictates of a rigid and bounded selfhood—a world that depends on performance and domination and that often entails harm to the vulnerable—and a domain created by Arveragus and Dorigen, a world open to possibility, protective of vulnerability, and mutually respectful. But Arveragus's return illustrates the intractability of such a world:

> Arveragus, with heele and greet honour,
> As he that was of chivalrie the flour,
> Is comen hoom, and othere worthy men.
> O blisful artow now, thou Dorigen,
> That hast thy lusty housbonde in thyne armes,
> The fresshe knyght, the worthy man of armes,
> That loveth thee as his owene hertes lyf. (1087–93)

In foregrounding the centrality of Arveragus's knightly identity, this passage anticipates the events of the tale's end. Here the Franklin emphasizes the very qualities of chivalry that Arveragus privileges: "honour," "chivalrie," being "worthy." He is also "lusty," a "fresshe knyght." Even when the passage nods to their love relationship—Dorigen has her husband in her arms—it juxtaposes that relationship to Arveragus's knightly prowess in a fashion that affirms, as Tison Pugh observes, Dorigen's loss of power as she transforms from courtly lady into elite wife (162). The end rhyme "armes" and "armes" undermines Arveragus's marriage promise and suggests, however implicitly, his commitment to control and self-determining individualism. This is not the open subjectivity entailed by a couple's unity ("in thyne armes"), but rather the carefully defined subjectivity inhering in his public role as an arms-bearing knight ("of armes"). Arveragus has claimed aspects of the porous self only in the service of a bounded subjectivity—this passage demonstrates the extent to which his proposal for a private arrangement with Dorigen is a way of opening his selfhood only in very controlled ways.

Dorigen and Arveragus's radical marriage agreement ultimately falters in the context of the bounded, self-determining subjectivity governing the tale's chivalric world. The demands of radical vulnerability prove to be too much to sustain. At the same time, radical vulnerability is presented as the apex of human subjectivity. After all, the inflexible subjectivity that requires saving face is what nearly obliterates the mutual concord and respect that Dorigen and Arveragus establish at the tale's beginning. By the tale's end, Aurelius and the clerk demonstrate flexibility and compassion—and though their behavior is inspired by Arveragus, it is also clearly presented as surpassing his in imaginative sympathy. And at least in part, this generosity derives from Aurelius's ability to see what is real and accept what Dorigen intended from the beginning.

Illusion and the Agential Subject

The tension between inflexibility and vulnerability vanishes for the central portion of the tale, however, and agential subjectivity in fact enables Aurelius's, his brother's, and the clerk's duplicity. It makes their stage show possible and allows it to succeed. In this world, illusion is what matters, the way things seem to be.[12] To wit, appearances are Arveragus's primary concern once he learns of Dorigen's predicament. And it is the primary concern of Aurelius, too: he no longer concerns himself with physically removing the rocks, as Dorigen had challenged him to do. Instead, the goal is, if not to force her to "holden hire biheste," then to "shame hire atte leeste" (1163, 1164). Wan-Chuan Kao has shown the central importance of shame to this tale, suggesting that shame is both instrumental ("Conduct" 105) and a "foundational force" (107), operating as a regulatory fiction that upholds Dorigen and Arveragus's marriage contract. We suggest something slightly different: in the tale, shame does not uphold the marriage contract

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so much as enable Arveragus's and Aurelius's construction of their own agential identities. Shame comes into play, in other words, precisely when Dorigen leans for support on a marriage promise that would obviate shame; and shame is yoked to the rigid expectations of the chivalric world Arveragus occupies. That bounded subjectivity rules the day is made evident when Arveragus withholds his "entente": "He nolde no wight tellen his entente" (1492). Unlike Dorigen, who makes her entente clear to Aurelius, Arveragus recognizes the attendant dangers of exposure in a bounded, agential, masculinist world. Like Aurelius, "no thyng dorste [Arveragus] seye" (943).

But even before Arveragus affirms that he will uphold his own agential selfhood regardless of the cost to his wife, the tale presents three characters whose primary focus is on this inflexible way of being in the world. By means of what Rebecca Davis calls "recombinative materiality" ("'Of Spicerye'")—a kind of poetics that takes and makes something of "fals and soth compouned" (Chaucer, *House of Fame* 2108)—the tale's men seek to substantiate a buffered formation of subjectivity by means of a deceptive illusion. For our purposes, however, the point is simpler: this clerk, and Aurelius and his brother, invest their time not in determining how Aurelius will remove the rocks themselves, but rather in constructing an elaborate illusion that simultaneously depends on and strengthens their buffered subjectivities. In seeking to obscure the rocks, their illusion also seeks to hide what Dorigen has revealed as fundamental threats to the chivalric master narrative: death and being forgotten. Their plan demonstrates, almost too neatly, how little truth matters in the context of a bounded courtly culture where honor and appearance are paramount. It makes no difference whether the rocks are in fact gone—it matters only that they seem to be removed, that the clerk constructs an "illusioun" (1264) by which Dorigen "and every wight sholde wene and seye / That of Britaigne the rokkes were aweye, / Or ellis they were sonken under grounde" (1267–69). These lines emphasize the power not only of illusion but also of what people "seye." How things appear and what people say overtakes a tale that began, instead, with the vulnerable bond between two people, with the precarious admission that the world is a dangerous place and that humans are but one sort of the many fragile creatures within it.

That appearances matter most to the men in this tale is disclosed by the Franklin's commentary on the clerk's success: "But thurgh his magik, for a wyke or tweye, / It *semed* that alle the rokkes were aweye" (1295–96; emphasis added). The rocks are not really gone; the clerk has created an "illusory wonder" (Kao, "Body" 25). Yet Aurelius behaves as though he believes the menacing boulders have disappeared, approaching Dorigen when he "knew that ther was noon obstacle, / That voyded were thise rokkes everychon" (1300–01); he informs a stricken Dorigen that "wel I woot the rokkes been aweye" (1338). Much hinges on the words "voyded" and "aweye": "voided," in this case, would seem to suggest that Aurelius has kept his word: "to clear or rid a place of" something ("Voiden," def. 5a). So, too, the meaning of "aweye" is simple, even straightforward. To say there is "noon obstacle" can be both literal (the rocks are in fact gone) and metaphoric (Dorigen cannot gainsay Aurelius's claim). But none of these lines convey the reality of the matter, as Dorigen herself almost seems to know: "For wende I nevere by possibilitee / That swich a monstre or merveille myghte be! / It is agayns the proces of nature" (1343–45). Her vocabulary here is significant, too, bespeaking her commitment to what is concrete: only a marvel or wonder—a miracle, really—could effect such a change in the natural world.[13] She does not register the language of illusion or manipulation; rather, Dorigen continues to interact with the world as if she can trust what she sees, as if fidelity to material reality is what matters.

These three men—Aurelius, his brother, and the clerk—know differently, and so they manipulate Dorigen by holding her to the rigid standards of wifely subjectivity. They put her in her place, so to speak. She has been operating under the assumption that she can communicate clearly, truly, and that she will be accepted and understood. Instead, she is a tool: for Arveragus, for Aurelius, even for the clerk, to establish their own bounded, agential identities in a world that does not easily allow anything else.[14] As a result, when Dorigen acts on her own behalf—mocking Aurelius's ridiculous overture, for

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example—her words are easily subsumed into a world of rigid subjectivities, in which her desires only enable and construct the roles of the men around her. When critics call her promise "rash," they merely evaluate her adherence to a public, social selfhood that the tale's men relentlessly pursue. When her words are taken in this context, she cannot really mean that she will never assent to Aurelius's desires.

Yet condemning her vow's inefficacy or absurdity prioritizes the formation of a subjectivity that is publicly rational and transparently intentional. Her own expression is entangled within the "persistent speech" of those men who interpret her words in service to their own self-stylings (Bennett 142; see 167–71). For a brief moment, when she bandies words with Aurelius in the garden, she exerts her will as a vulnerable, open, flexible agent. But this moment serves both Aurelius (he can manipulate it to get what he wants and thereby fulfill his discursive role as squire and chivalric suitor) and Arveragus (who can force Dorigen to service Aurelius and maintain his honor as a knight). In other words, the men in this tale shoehorn Dorigen back into the carefully scripted role everyone "out in the world" understands her to occupy: that of a subservient, courtly wife (even though she does not accept her part in this social drama).

Although Dorigen begins her complaint by lamenting that she must choose "deeth or elles dishonour" (1358)—invoking the very terms these men use to define her—she is ultimately unwilling to accede to these alternatives. Earlier critics have missed this point entirely, characterizing her adaptation of Jerome's *Adversus Jovinium* as affective excess. But as scholars have acknowledged more recently, this hundred-line series of twenty exempla demonstrates the dire straits in which Dorigen finds herself, allowing her to work through a litany of bad options. While the earliest figures in Dorigen's complaint commit suicide to protect their chastity, later examples present different possibilities, culminating with heroines such as Alceste, who, as David Raybin argues, is one of several "women who chose life as well as chastity" (74). The choice of death or dishonor, as Gerald Morgan acknowledges, gives way to a series of exempla endorsing women's chastity, fidelity, and honor. These and other recuperative readings of Dorigen's complaint furnish a crucial acknowledgment that, in Raybin's words, "Dorigen, like the noble final exemplars, may choose to follow on her own terms the path of life" (74). Yet as these scholars admit, emphasizing Dorigen's freedom to make her own choices does not resolve her predicament, nor do such analyses account for late figures in Dorigen's catalog, particularly Portia and Laodamia, both of whom commit suicide after their husbands die.

These critical gaps remain because defenses of Dorigen's complaint against earlier scholars who maligned her affect, as we discuss above, align her with the same agential, individualist selfhood pursued by the tale's men. While such a gesture is arguably egalitarian (women can and do achieve bounded, buffered subjectivity), these critical defenses fail to acknowledge the challenge to buffered selfhood animating Dorigen's complaint: there, just as in her responses to the rocks and to Aurelius, she assumes a selfhood that is open to all yet bound to none. Though she begins by articulating the terms of a bounded subjectivity, her persistent questioning—"Why sholde I thanne to dye been in drede?" (1386); "What sholde I mo ensamples heerof sayn[?]" (1419)—suggests a fundamental resistance to the system she is nevertheless caught in, recalling her own answers to them, voiced in her address to the rocks: Why *shouldn't* she be afraid to die, given that death entails destruction, separation, and forgetting? Critics have dismissed her questions as part of an overwrought rhetorical performance, but her lengthy catalog does more generative work for Dorigen than anyone admits. Given that her complaint takes up over ten percent of the tale, she has ample time to commit suicide were she simply considering that course of action. Instead, in her complaint, Dorigen critiques the chivalric world while she mines these exempla for alternatives to the masculinist, buffered subjectivity governing this domain.

Across her complaint, Dorigen also makes something of the tradition of women's suffering, using this expansive collection of feminine worthies to create a subjectivity that does not require sacrifice

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to the exigencies of patriarchy. Even as she challenges the patriarchal limitations imposed by Aurelius, his brother, and the tregetour, she establishes a subjectivity that reappropriates many of the qualities that Jerome associated with women: Penelope's faithfulness, paired with Alceste's willingness, taken together with the chastity of Arthemesie, Teuta, and Bilyea, along with the refusal to remarry by Rhodogune and Valeria. These women represent a long-suffering, life-sustaining form of vulnerability as the source of a new selfhood. Dorigen imagines herself alongside these women: the open selfhood she envisions includes this literary and mythological catalog. By the time she goes to fulfill the compact with Aurelius, she takes a decidedly different path than women such as Laodamia and Portia. Instead of being a moment of self-destruction, her return to the garden exposes Aurelius's dishonor, as well as Arveragus's disgrace: both men would reinscribe Dorigen into a patriarchal world that demands the violation of women in the service of their own, buffered selfhood. It is only Dorigen who remains free from such corruptions.

The tale ends with a masculinist contest of freedom and gentilesse, underscoring a gendered disparity and the failure of coinherent, vulnerable identity. Arveragus assumes Dorigen's suffering as his own ("As I may best, I wol my wo endure" [1484]), using this moment to showcase his own strength of will.[15] Dorigen falls away entirely, as scholars have noted, and the question becomes status-based (knights, squires, and clerks). Yet, as we suggest, these categories are all forms of rigid selfhood jostling for position relative to one another.[16] What happens here is that the Franklin adds attributes to the fixed identities of squire and particularly clerk: gentilesse and the possibility of freedom. Of course, these additions suggest something of the malleability a more open and vulnerable subjectivity would promise, of being open to the possibilities of compassion and acting out of care for another. But the discussion of "gentilesse" does not ultimately end with these options. Instead, the Franklin's question—"Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" (1622)—asks the pilgrims to consider whether freedom inheres in certain bounded identities more than others. It does not consider that, broadly speaking, freedom—a very difficult word indeed—might inhere most in the very porous arrangement that Dorigen and Arveragus establish at the tale's beginning and that she makes her own once Arveragus abandons their marital reciprocity.

The Subject of Marriage

The Franklin's Tale presents the consequences of turning away from a subjectivity defined by openness and flexibility. Dorigen's marital unhappiness rises as Arveragus undermines their covenant; when Dorigen meets Aurelius, she displays her acute distress when she exclaims, "as my housbonde bad, / My trouthe for to holde—allas, allas!" (1512–13). Even here, Dorigen remains open, unable to follow Arveragus's insistence that she "[n]e make no contenance of hevynesse, / That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse" (1485–86). Aurelius experiences "greet compassioun" and "routhe" in response to both Dorigen's suffering and Arveragus's worthiness (1515, 1520), releasing her from the so-called promise. In this exchange, the tale presents but also critiques the rigid modes of being that Arveragus and Aurelius take for granted. In what ways, the tale asks, does rigid self-formation leave devastation in its wake? Is this formation of selfhood sustainable if it relies on harming others? The Franklin obliquely suggests that illusion is not to be trusted, recalling Crane's point that, in his marginalized identity and in "important narrative respects, the Franklin is himself Dorigen" (243). With his outsider status, the Franklin has the potential to see what is happening, to understand the limitations of romance, of gender, of bounded subjectivity. One might go so far as to argue that, at the beginning of his tale, Arveragus and Dorigen's way of speaking is "bare and pleyn" (720), that the tale's artifice—its boundedness, its rigidity—is the subject of direct critique. We conclude, instead, that The Franklin's Tale reveals the cultural destruction of open subjectivity; it illustrates the difficulty of upholding a boundless relationship between self and other if one partner still cleaves to an agential, individualist way of navigating the world.

The rest of the so-called marriage group of tales demonstrates the costs of agential, "buffered" selfhood—the kind of individuality that theorists

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present as historically inevitable, even when they also acknowledge the sufferings of those selves designated as "other."[17] If Chaucer benefitted from a formulation of a subjectivity that elevated a group of what Anne Middleton influentially calls "new men," his poetry anticipates the damage that an absolutist formation of individualist subjectivity would inflict: not only does Chaucer present January as deluded and Walter as tyrannical, he also depicts their respective partners as monstrous and victimized at once.[18] It matters little that the "triumph" of this model of the subject was associated with a woman, the "Boold" Wife of Bath (General Prologue 458).[19] The account of Alison's successive marriages provides variations on the forms of abuse required to stabilize and maintain a bounded, "disenchanted" selfhood. The Clerk's disavowal of Walter's behavior ("I seye that yvele it sit / To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede" [Clerk's Tale 460–61]) at least recognizes that there might be another way of establishing relationalities. Instead of seeking "maistrie" (Wife of Bath's Prologue 818), as can be seen in the loathly lady story adapted to suit the Wife of Bath's translated (from the enchanted to the nonenchanted) world ("But now kan no man se none elves mo" [Wife of Bath's Tale 864]), partners might achieve a fluid, intersubjective, and boundless negotiation of self-sharing (Mann 114–21). That this relationality falls apart in The Franklin's Tale does not undermine its radical promise; instead, foreclosing unbounded subjectivity calls attention to the tricks, subterfuges, and the "magyk natureel" (Franklin's Tale 1125) that authorizes buffered selfhood through a set of cultural enchantments.

Notes

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1. All quotations from Chaucer's works are from the *The Riverside Chaucer* and are cited by line number.

2. Akbari offers an important reading of the porous selfhood structuring European fantasies of Islam (57).

3. Dorigen's "rash" promise is a critical commonplace, so much so that most critics no longer acknowledge its status as an interpretation (Edmondson; Williams). Calabrese argues that "[w]e need not prove that Dorigen's promise is rash; everyone, including her, knows this" (261; see 263–65), but as Pitcher avers, "[c]learly, Dorigen means to dash the hopes of Aurelius rather than to encourage him" (88). On contract law and rash promises, see Green 293–335; Johnson.

4. As Pitcher comments, "The turn to psychoanalytic theory in reading pre-modern texts . . . has meant the abandonment of the Middle Ages as the *fons et origo* of unified subjectivity" (79). In his reading, Dorigen is the clearest example of a divided self in The Franklin's Tale. On identity and the divided self, see also Ganim 225; Scala, *Desire* 20–25.

5. This is the queer potential of companionate marriage, the totalizing admixture that critics including Burger ("Becoming," "'Pite,'" and "Who") and Lipton have noted in late medieval representations of marriage.

6. Bartlett's essay "Learning to Live in Communities" demonstrates that medieval confessional discourse presents intersubjectivity and porous subjectivity as ethical ideals; her current book project, "The Porous Subject: Domestic Confession and Neighbor Love in Late Medieval England," develops this analysis.

7. As McEntire similarly argues, "Dorigen's response to his absence . . . is less that of a wife than of a courtly lover" (149). Ganze maintains that Dorigen is concerned more with her public-facing honor than with her "personal identity as a 'humble trewe wyf'" (314). In this reading, Dorigen explicitly accepts and participates in the system that benefits Arveragus and Aurelius. We suggest, instead, that Dorigen presents a model for being in the world that effectively surpasses the masculine and buffered values the tale presents.

8. Both Cohen and Houlik-Ritchey characterize the pull of stone as a force that affirms the world's hold over its inhabitants.

9. On Aurelius's brother as "scripting an affective futurity" of shame through wonder, and Dorigen's reaction to the rocks as wonder, see Kao, "Body" 32.

10. Riddy describes the rocks as both natural and "supernatural" (57–58).

11. On this aspect of Dorigen's "rash promise," see Ganze 318.

12. McEntire demonstrates that Chaucer's changes to Boccaccio foreground (and in many cases introduce) illusion.

13. See Williams 106.

14. Scala argues that Aurelius models himself on Arveragus throughout his courtship of Dorigen ("'Ysworn'"). We maintain this is because Aurelius seeks the selfhood Arveragus appears to have mastered.

15. Crocker's *Matter of Virtue* traces an endurance model of heroism, but Harris observes that in Chaucer's works the verb "enduren" frequently describes women in forms of subjection, sometimes violation, that negate their will.

16. On status and gentilesse, see Carruthers; Crane; Riddy; and Meyer-Lee. On Dorigen's marginalized status, see Crane 246; Hansen 270–83; McEntire 155; and Riddy 58, 64–65.

17. On Eleanor Hammond, George Lyman Kittredge, and the "marriage group," see Scala, "Women."

18. Middleton identifies the Franklin as a representative of "new men," a group she characterizes as ambitious and as concerned to "appear worthy in public" (17). Edwards suggests

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the tale charts "the freedom of the interiorized, mercantile subject to negotiate and act in his best interests" (160).

19. Patterson in *Chaucer and the Subject of History* assumes only one model of the subject, whose agency, self-awareness, and individualism Chaucer captures in his representation of Alison of Bath.

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Abstract: This essay argues that in Chaucer's The Franklin's Tale, Dorigen develops a selfhood that remains unflinchingly available to others. While the tale's men pursue a closed selfhood subtended by chivalric expectations for heroic masculinity, Dorigen's porous selfhood represents a different, vulnerable ideal. Dorigen's selfhood is open and trusting, and it meets the material world in all its ugliness and danger. Throughout her promise and her complaint, Dorigen maintains a subjectivity that is open to all and bound to none; her difficulties, we argue, arise not from naivete but from the ways in which the buffered, chivalric world disallows and even destroys other formations of selfhood. Although Dorigen recedes by the tale's conclusion, her boundless, permeable subjectivity is held up as The Franklin's Tale's ideal, and the threats to it are clearly exposed as broader harms by the tale's end.

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