

# The Franklin's Tale

## Emotion, Feeling, Intensity, Pleasure, and the *Franklin's Tale*

Emily Houlik-Ritchey (Emily.Houlik-Ritchey@rice.edu)

An essay chapter for the *Open Access Companion to the  
Canterbury Tales* (September 2017)

Whenever I re-read Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Marianne Dashwood's displays of grief at her suitor Willoughby's departure put me in mind of her literary predecessor in indulgent emotionality: the character Dorigen in Geoffrey Chaucer's the *Franklin's Tale*. That is a complicated opening claim. I'm suggesting that both of these literary characters don't just feel sorrow in the absence of their beloveds, but *encourage* or stimulate that emotion. In both stories, the female characters are in love with men who leave them, traveling far off in order to fulfill other obligations. Both characters respond to these departures by actively *indulging in grief*. Now why would they do that? That they are unhappy in such a situation is not surprising, but there seems, counter-intuitively, to be something pleasurable for each character in seeking out ways to grieve (or, put a slightly different way, each character derives emotional compensations from grieving). Marianne and Dorigen share a paradoxical *pleasure* in grief that Austen gently ridicules and that Chaucer treats ambivalently. This ambivalence makes Dorigen and her emotional displays particularly tricky to interpret in the *Franklin's Tale*. And this is what we will explore here: the odd pleasure of intense misery that the *Franklin's Tale* tracks, and its implications for Dorigen's place in her community. We offer this intersection of grief and relationality as a productive site for close analysis because the emotional register of this early scene of the *Franklin's Tale* frames how we understand its subsequent events.

### Tools

The way societies configure emotions changes over time, so it may seem odd to use a nineteenth century text to introduce the discussion of a medieval one. Yet Marianne's emotional state in Willoughby's absence highlights in a particularly vivid way the messy interplay of both the personal and social valences of emotion. This is something that is also present, though initially a little harder to see, in Chaucer's Middle English tale. To start, though, we need to clarify a few points about the study of emotions.

First, contrary to the binary implication of Austen's title—*Sense and Sensibility*, where Elinor is the “sensible” sister and Marianne is the emotional one—contemporary scholars of emotions actually insist that “sense” and “sensibility” work together. As Michael Hardt puts it, the study of *affect* (one of the terms used by those studying and theorizing emotions) involves a “synthesis” of “reason and the passions” (ix).[\[1\]](#) The exercise of reason is part of the process of emotional

perception and appraisal. This process of cognitive appraisal involves not only the feelings that we identify psychologically, but also physiological reactions in our bodies. To study emotion/affect, then, is to pay attention “equally to the body and the mind” (Hardt ix). Already we see that there are two binaries that we are asked to bridge in the study of emotion/affect: 1) reason and emotion, and 2) the body and the mind. Finally, there is a third dichotomy that theorists of emotion insist that we weave together, and this one is perhaps the most important for our purposes here: personal experience and social scripting of emotions.

When individuals undertake an emotional appraisal, we involve social norms in the process. Emotions are both personal and social; that is, they are at once subjectively experienced (felt at a personal level) and socially scripted (shaped and judged by communities). “Societies,” as Barbara H. Rosenwein explains, “bend, shape, encourage, and discourage the expressions of various emotions” (837). So when we study emotional expression, we must consider two complementary facets: 1) “what people consider (both consciously and unconsciously) conducive to their weal or woe”—that is, whether they judge something to be “good or harmful, pleasurable or painful”—and 2) “what possibilities cultures provide for the expression and representation of their feelings” (837). To some extent, we are taught what to feel, and how to express those feelings, by our cultures. Yet this interplay of the personal and the social is messy. In fact, all three syntheses that we must keep in mind when studying emotion—that emotions register in both the body and the mind, that they involve both reason and passion, and that they are both personal and social—resist neat partnerships. How someone is feeling (in life or in a literary text) can arise from complex configurations that are challenging to track. Society is a potent, but not all-powerful scripting force: societies are complex, with “contradictory values and models [for emotion], not to mention deviant individuals” (Rosenwein 842-43). Dorigen, we suggest, is one of these deviant literary individuals.

## **Text**

So, drawing upon all of this, let’s turn to the indulgent grief that Austen and Chaucer construct for Marianne and Dorigen. What are the subjective experiences and the social scripts according to which each character grieves? And how does that affect our interpretation of each character and text? Both heroines live in societies in which the performance of one’s grief is a marker of the depth of one’s love. A “successful” performance of grief (one that lives up to both individual and social expectations) indicates an authentic feeling of love for the absent beloved. An “unsuccessful” performance of grief in such a situation threatens one’s identity and/or role within one’s community. To speak of emotional *performance* is not to say that the feelings are inauthentic. Jessica Rosenfeld, for instance, argues that medieval descriptions of emotion can be both “calculated and authentic” at the same time (107). As far as Marianne and Dorigen are concerned, I personally think the feelings are “real”—but we can still speak of emotional performances, in recognition of the ways that social meaning and individual identity hinge on displays of emotion.<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, our interpretation of Dorigen’s identity—of her place as wife, friend, love object, and, finally, pawn—depends upon our reading of her (and other characters’) emotional performances. To read for emotions in the *Franklin’s Tale* is to read for relationality, for the shape of community, as well as deviances therefrom.

## **Personal Experience and Social Pressure**

In Austen's novel, Marianne "court[s] the misery" of Willoughby's absence, seeking it out as eagerly as she has sought Willoughby as a suitor (Austen 40). For her, grief is "nourishment" and an "indulgence" (40). By obsessively seeking out the places she and Willoughby walked, flirted, read, and sang together, Marianne concentrates on her grief, maintaining it at the forefront of her attention. Her own expectations for what grief looks like define her response—one that Austen's narrator gently makes fun of in both personal and social terms:

Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. She would have been ashamed to look her family in the face the next morning, had she not risen from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it. (40) [3]

Marianne displays emotion both for herself and for her family. Her emotional state in loving and grieving is bound up with what she thinks of herself, which has *everything* to do with her sensibility to strong feelings. To satisfy her own conception of who she is, as well as to prove in the eyes of her immediate community that she loves Willoughby deeply, she performs this particular brand of disconsolate misery. This emotional sensitivity is, we might say, Marianne's defining characteristic in the novel.

In comparison, let us now consider Chaucer's description of Dorigen when her husband leaves: "[Dorigen] loveth hire housbonde as hire hertes lyf. / For his absence wepeth she and siketh, / As doon this noble wyves whan hem liketh" (FranT 816-18). Dorigen's grief arises from her love for the absent Arveragus, as these lines tell us directly. But Dorigen's grief turns out to be complex. Not only does she feel badly when he's not there ("wepeth she and siketh"), but this very misery also somehow *pleases* Dorigen. She, and apparently all "noble wyves" do this "whan hem liketh." I find this to be one of the most fascinating lines of the *Franklin's Tale* for the way it merges two claims: it is at once the designation of Dorigen's complex emotional state (pleasing grief), as well as a statement of social norms that sanction it ("as doon this noble wyves").

Chaucer's assertion that this kind of grieving is what such women *do*, folds gender, marital status, and rank into an emotive expectation. This kind of indulgent grief, it would seem, is a widespread phenomena among the group of medieval women termed "noble wives." "Noble" can be an indicator of official rank (such as the titled nobility), but it more frequently in Chaucer's work signals a behavioral code of a wider swath than just the uppermost tiers of society. "Noble" just as likely includes those who, like Chaucer himself, lived and worked near enough to the elite to read similar literature and share their cultural values, and who had wealth and education enough to put these values into practice. These codes of "noble" behavior normalize the expression of the right emotions in the right mode and at the right time. This is what Rosenwein calls an "emotional community" (842). Marianne and Dorigen do not just experience grief because they love Willoughby and Arveragus, who are now absent, but they also perform that grief in and for community structures to which they belong. Those community structures, in turn, render judgment upon the characters' social belonging and identity.

The question then becomes, to what extent do their emotional communities think their performances of grief are socially successful? Contemporary film versions of *Sense and*

*Sensibility*, a bit in contrast to Austen's narrative voice, have largely answered this question affirmatively; Ang Lee's version, in particular, emphasizes through the musical score that accompanies scenes of Marianne's grief that we are meant to sympathize with her—that is, to take her misery seriously. This has become the dominant contemporary reading of Marianne's misery: its performance on film conveys her love as worthy of our notice and sympathy. In the novel, Austen's narrator encourages us to laugh at Marianne, just a bit. The same story's emotionality registers differently in these two contexts.

So what of Dorigen? Her grieving requires, first, a lot of work in a very particular mode that corresponds to her "noble" status as the wife of a knight. Let's consider the next line of Chaucer's tale: "She moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pleyneth" (FranT 819). What a string of verbs! Being miserable is very active in the Middle Ages, if one is a noble wife. Her grieving requires *work*. Consider the final verb, "pleyneth" in particular. This Middle English term does not signal whining or criticism, as we understand "complain" today, but refers to a particular mode of giving voice to misery. "Pleynen" references the eloquent expression of grief—often related to love-longing. The point of it is to speak out our hurt and so demonstrate both the depth of our feelings and our nobility of spirit in being able to so express them. Chaucer gives us not only an impressive catalogue of verbs for medieval grieving here, but he shows Dorigen drawing upon an established mode of expression for medieval love-longing as she does it. "Pleyn[ynge]" usually falls to the enamored lover who has not yet won over his/her beloved. Its dynamics are most frequently heterosexual, with the male lover most often voicing the complaint. A common feature of these complaints includes the lover's description of the physical as well as emotional ailments arising from love-longing. Dorigen's symptoms of grief: weeping, sickening, mourning, sleeplessness, wailing, fasting, and "pleyn[ynge]," are all extremely conventional ways to grieve in this mode. Anyone who wanted to convince a late fourteenth century "noble" audience that s/he was deeply in love would likely model their emotive performance according to these shared standards.

Given this alignment of Dorigen's grief with existing social expectations, it may come as a bit of a surprise when Dorigen's emotional community resists her performance. The tension between the conventionality of Dorigen's emotional performance and the very different expectations that her friends seem to have, raises questions regarding Dorigen's emotional, and therefore communal, identity. Chaucer's phrasing suggests, as I've already mentioned, that the *way* Dorigen grieves is entirely expected of her role and rank in society, and therefore in keeping with the emotional expectations of her community. And yet, Chaucer also shows us that Dorigen's friends do a lot of work trying to console her, to stop this emotional performance in its tracks:

Hire freendes, whiche that knewe hir hevye thoght,  
Conforten hire in al that ever they may.  
They prechen hire, they telle hire nyght and day  
That causeles she sleeth herself, allas!  
And every confort possible in this cas  
They doon to hire with al hire bisynesse,  
Al for to make hire leve hire hevynesse. (FranT 822-28)

Dorigen's emotional community tries to mitigate her performance of grief in a full-blown, massive consolation effort. Chaucer phrases the comfort that her friends offer in the language of extremes: they try *everything* possible, they preach *night and day*, they frame consolation itself as a matter of *life and death*. "This is no reason to kill yourself!" runs their urgent argument. What is it, exactly, that they object to? We might take a cue from this intense language and propose that Dorigen's friends believe Dorigen takes her grief to excess. Chaucer's narrator gives us some reason to agree with them: "Desir of his [Arveragus'] presence hire so destreyneth / That al this wyde world she sette at noght" (FranT 820-21). Is this *too much* grief? By what criteria are we, as readers, to judge Dorigen's emotional displays: by her own assessment, or by her friends'? When the two don't align (as they seem not to do here), which one should we, as readers, privilege? To the extent that emotion is a social as well as personal phenomenon, what does this social resistance mean for the precarity or security of Dorigen's place in her emotional community? And what effect might Dorigen's social precarity or security in turn have upon Dorigen's assessment of her options later on when the tale reaches its crisis?

Chaucer encapsulates the social pressure to be tranquil that Dorigen's friends exert upon her in a metaphor that is perhaps my favorite image of the poem: an engraved stone. He writes:

By proces, as ye knowen everichoon,  
Men may so longe graven in a stoon  
Til som figure therinne emprented be.  
So longe han they confort hire til she  
Receyved hath, by hope and by resoun,  
The empretyng of hire consolacioun, (FranT 829-34)

Dorigen seems to feel acute pressure to conform, as well as exhibiting strong resistance to such communal emotional scripting. Chaucer represents the social pressure to feel consoled as a force strong enough to carve rock. And, on the flip side of this metaphor, Dorigen's grief is as hard and unyielding to the social pressure of consolation as rock. The emotional point of contact between Dorigen and her community is (literally!) the proverbial rock and hard place. The description of stone and chisel to describe these competing emotional forces signals the difficulty of assessing the emotional outcome of consolation. On the one hand, we have the definitive-sounding claim that such engraved consolation "hir grete sorwe gan aswage; / She may nat alwey duren in swich rage" (FranT 835-36). But if that is the case—if the consolation has indeed been "receyved"—then where does her infamous outcry against the sea rocks come from (FranT 828, 857-93)? And what of her emotions in the pleasure garden (FranT 901-24)? How might we understand Dorigen's trajectory through these places, both when she is alone and when she is in company, by reading for emotion?

I am always in awe at the vexed scene of emotional endurance and social pressure that Chaucer invokes in this early part of *The Franklin's Tale*. Our overall point is that Chaucer allows us, simultaneously, to trace not only the dominant patterns governing how Dorigen experiences and performs emotion, but also the ways in which those performances break down, failing to register clearly to her friends (and perhaps to us as readers). Our questions for you are, how are we asked to judge the emotionality of this and the other fraught contexts within the poem? Which interpretive directions offered by Chaucer do you find most compelling, and why?

## Gender and Emotion

We briefly mentioned gender as a factor of emotional expectations earlier in this essay; we return to it now because the cultural production of emotion in the English Middle Ages had a particular take on gender. Holly Crocker lays out some of this thinking for us. Crocker uses the term “affect” rather than emotion, because she wants us to pay attention to the indebtedness of medieval thinkers to classical philosophic traditions that employed that term (it comes from the Latin *affectus*).<sup>[4]</sup> Crocker explains that medieval intellectuals identified four main affects—fear, love, sadness, and joy—and saw them as “fundamental elements of the sensitive soul” (226). Experiencing these affects was a positive thing, but only so long as they were sufficiently controlled by reason.<sup>[5]</sup> In this vein of medieval thinking, the ideal person used reason to control their emotions.<sup>[6]</sup> Reason itself was gendered in these same philosophic traditions, so that it was quite simple for medieval writers to “align[] masculinity with reason and femininity with affect” (230). So, generally-speaking, a strong tradition of thought in the Middle Ages—one Chaucer would have known—saw men as more likely to be rational and women as more likely to be emotional. It is important to remember that this is only a general trend, and we should beware of oversimplifying it (especially where Chaucer is concerned).

As Crocker helps us to see, the general association of femininity with emotionality and masculinity with rationality led medieval thinkers to conclusions also about agency: they argued that “masculine power derives from reasoned control, while feminine influence emerges from affective submission” (234). If you’ve read the *Knight’s Tale* you’ve seen an example of this affective technique in the submissive weeping that the women use to influence Theseus. (If you haven’t yet read that tale, be on the look out for this strategy when you do!) What this theory supposes, in effect, is that women *as women* were thought to have a particular capacity to advocate for what they wanted through submissive emotional appeals to (usually) men. It also means that any character, whatever their gender, who uses this technique of submissive emotive persuasion are more likely to be aligned with femininity than with masculinity. On the flip side, men *as men* were thought to have the power to achieve their goals when they reasonably controlled their affect—which is not to say they were dispassionate, but rather that their agency depended upon not being *overwhelmed* by affect. But again, the expression of these ideas in literature is often much messier (and therefore more interesting) than the theory alone would seem to allow. Given these gendered trajectories of thought in Chaucer’s day, what further insights can you glean regarding the state of Dorigen’s, Aurelius’s, Arveragus’s, and the clerk’s emotions?

## Transformation

### Questions for Discussion

1. Where and in what capacities does Chaucer show Dorigen submitting to men in this tale? How does she seem to feel about that? What sort of influence or agency does she gain and/or surrender in these moments?
2. To what extent do either Arveragus or Aurelius seem to be in control of their emotions (and emotional performances) in this tale? To what extent are these emotional performances socially successful?

3. What relationship might we weave between Dorigen's two emotional speeches in this tale (FranT 857-93 about the sea rocks; and FranT 1355-1456 about dishonor and suicide)? What is the social function of emotion in each of these scenes? What do you make of Arveragus's absence during these two particularly emotional speeches?
4. Descriptions of emotion in literature tend to locate us predominantly in the realm of the mind. Recalling that scholars of affect/emotion wish to trouble the body/mind binary, what traces of *embodied* affect can you find in this tale? (For example: losing control of parts of the body, the onset of tears, growing suddenly pale, fainting, etc.) How does the embodied representation of emotion converge with or diverge from its mental registers?

## Projects

1. Analyze the gendered dynamics of emotional displays in love complaints within or across Chaucer's tales. For instance, Aurelius's song in lines 943-52 of the *Franklin's Tale*; or Arcite's love for Emelye in the *Knight's Tale* (especially lines 1220-50 and 1355-79); or Emelye's reaction to Arcite's death in the *Knight's Tale* (lines 2817-2826); or Nicolas's and Absolon's expressions of love for Alyson in the *Miller's Tale*. How socially successful are these expressions of emotion?
2. If submissive emotional displays by women are the most conventional means by which they convince certain men to alter their plans in the *Canterbury Tales*, what are we to make of very different ways other women in the tales achieve agency? Analyze the gendered power dynamics at play within the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* or at the conclusion of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* (I'm particularly thinking of the hag's lecture to the knight on their wedding night) in light of both current and medieval perspectives on emotion.
3. Analyze displays of emotion across the *Canterbury Tales* to assess the way they cross binaries of body and mind, emotion and reason, self and community, or masculinity and femininity. For instance, you might explore Custance's emotional states and displays throughout the *Man of Law's Tale* and formulate an argument about the kind of relationship that the tale constructs between emotion, gender, and agency. Alternatively, you might analyze how the various reactions of grief to Arcite's death in the *Knight's Tale* engage *all* of these registers, though the tale does not grant them all equal space (see especially lines 2817-52 and 2882-86). Whose emotions are privileged, and why? What registers of emotion are privileged, and why? Finally, you might concentrate on the various arguments that arise among the pilgrims (most spectacularly, between the Reeve and the Miller, the Summoner and the Friar, the Pardoner and the Host).

## Works Cited:

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*, in *Jane Austen: The Complete Novels*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1981. 3-178.

Crocker, Holly A. "Affective Politics in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*: 'Cherl' Masculinity after 1381" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 225-58.



Hardt, Michael. “Foreword: What Affects are Good For” in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. ix-xiii.

Rosenfeld, Jessica, “Envy and Exemplarity in *The Book of Margery Kempe*” *Exemplaria* 26.1 (2014): 105-21.

Rosenwein, Barbara H. “Worrying About Emotions in History” *The American Historical Review* 107.3 (2002): 821-45.

Trigg, Stephanie, “Introduction: Emotional Histories—Beyond the Personalization of the Past and the Abstraction of Affect Theory” *Exemplaria* 26.1 (2014): 3-15.

**Notes:**

[1] Scholars sometimes prefer the term “affect” to “emotion” as a signal that they’re talking about this synthesis and about the body’s capacity to affect and be affected by others. The hard core affect theorists are, in the end, talking about something “beyond emotion,” to which emotion is connected, but not reducible. It is fascinating work, but that vein of it is beyond the scope of this essay.

[2] It is also possible, of course, for someone who does not really feel an emotion to imitate that emotion, to deceive or to otherwise fulfill social obligations. This is one of the reasons that scenes like these, with Marianne and Dorigen, become vexed, even if we read their grief as genuine.

[3] And because this is her perspective, Marianne misunderstands her sister Elinor’s heartbreak. In a similar situation of loss Elinor represses all emotional performativity such that her family misreads Elinor’s outward tranquility as a *lack* of affection for Edward (see, for instance, Chapter 37).

[4] We should note that this is not the way all theorists define or use the term “affect.” If you want to learn more, we recommend Stephanie Trigg’s introduction to the ways all of these terms have been used (affect, emotion, feeling, passion, sentiment). Trigg’s overview also pays particular attention to what terms have been most commonly used for the study of medieval literature.

[5] Ancient and Medieval Philosophers saw a division between emotion and reason—a division, we must keep in mind, that current theorists of emotion have generally rejected.

[6] Look back at the moment where Dorigen finally receives “the emprenting of hire consolacioun” (834): she receives it, Chaucer says, “by hope and by resoun” (833).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



