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“And Gladly Wolde He Teche:” Chaucer’s Use of Source Materials in the “Clerk’s Tale”

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Masters of Arts in English

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By  
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Keywords: Chaucer, Clerk’s Tale, Griselda, Canterbury Tales

## ABSTRACT

And Gladly Wolde He Teche: Chaucer's Use of Source Materials in the "Clerk's Tale"

By

Robert R. Brandon

Few of Chaucer's works provoke such animosity as does his "Clerk's Tale." Modern critics are divided by the social and gender issues to which the tale lends itself. However, the tale was immensely popular to Middle Age audiences and was one of the best loved of the *Canterbury Tales*. Therefore, to dismiss this tale's literary values outright, as some critics have done, is a mistake. By examining the history of the Griselda story, Chaucer's use of his source materials, and the tale's placement within the *Canterbury Tales*, this thesis is an attempt to examine the tale in more culturally, religiously, and historically appropriate way.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale," which tells the story of the patient Griselda, is an important addition to a popular medieval narrative. Three of the period's most noteworthy authors, Boccaccio (1313-1375), Petrarch (1304-1374), and Chaucer (1340?-1400), each created his own version of the tale, and there were numerous other adaptations produced as well. In fact, an example of the story exists in each of the major genres of literature: poetry, prose, and drama. That the Griselda narrative received so much attention demonstrates this story's importance to medieval readers. Intending his version to be instructional, Chaucer's poem is created in rhyme royal, the meter reserved for his most didactic poems.<sup>1</sup> However, exactly what lesson Chaucer teaches in the tale of Walter's inhuman cruelty and Griselda's incredible patience is less clear. A survey of recent literary criticism shows a great divide in interpretations of this tale. Many critics see the poem as allegory, while others argue that feminist and social messages are integral to the meaning. Still others take the position that Walter is "too monstrous" and Griselda is "too pathetically human" for the tale to have any moral purpose (McNamara 184). In order to understand this complex tale, it is necessary to examine its place within the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* and the authorities that the Clerk calls upon for support. By understanding the narrator that Chaucer chose for the tale and the meanings of the many allusions and citations that the Clerk uses during the tale as well as the Clerk's rivalry with the Wife of Bath, the ultimate message of the narrative becomes clear.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer employs rhyme royal and religious pathos in many of his didactic poems. Examples of this style include such works as "The Parliament of Fowls," *Troilus and Criseyde*, "Man of Law's Tale," "Second Nun's Tale," and "The Prioress's Tale."

The tale of a woman patiently enduring her husband's tests has a long folk history. The origins of the story are unclear, but a popular notion is that the story is derived from ancient Cupid and Psyche legends. This tradition is similar in that "an otherworldly lover places upon his mortal wife requirements that, no matter what happens, she be obedient and neither show emotion nor protest" (Severs 5). However, these early versions are much simpler than the complex tale that Chaucer creates and probably share only the most basic narrative similarities to the story that Boccaccio placed within his *Decameron*. However, the narrative that Boccaccio established sets the framework that all future writers follow, and careful examination of his story makes understanding the works of Petrarch and Chaucer much easier.

Boccaccio is the first writer known to adapt the folk story of the patient Griselda into literature, and he used it as the closing tale in the *Decameron*. In it, the vassals of a popular marquis beg their lord to take a wife lest he should die without leaving an heir. Against the marquis's better judgment, he agrees to wed contingent on the fact that he choose the bride. They agree, and he selects the lovely but poor Griselda. The marquis takes this peasant girl from her humble roots with the warning that she must obey him in all things. He soon decides to put her obedience to a series of tests that strip her of her beloved children as well as her dignity. Finally, the marquis is overwhelmed by her amazing display of obedience, and he restores her children and her position. This represents the basic plot that all future writers will follow, and it is this narrative that inspired the famed moralist Petrarch, Chaucer's main source, to create his own version of the tale.

Both Boccaccio and Petrarch chose to use the literary form of the exemplum for their stories. The exemplum was one of the most popular genres in the Middle Ages. Joseph Albert Mosher describes the purpose of the exemplum as “to furnish a concrete illustration of the result of obeying or disobeying some moral law” and notes that the trope displays “constant echoes in the works of such men as Boccaccio and Chaucer” (8 and 139, respectively).<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the genre “was to show what lengths that a quality might conceivably go” (Kittredge 131). Petrarch, who was quite fond of the trope, defines it as a “way of reading in which the reader imagines himself as the character tested by fortune in order to examine whether he could do what the character did” (Morse “The Exemplary” 60). Certainly, in the story of Griselda one could find many exemplary virtues, and one of the major debates among critics is over what virtue this tale is supposed to be portraying. Over the years, the story has been seen alternately as an example of spiritual obedience, patience, constance, obedience, munificence, and marital roles. It seems as if there are as many ways to read the story as there are readers. However, one thing we, as modern readers, must understand is that “the exemplum is quite literally about the maintenance of Christian authority in the social space of historical reality” (Scanlon 30). Because the exempla are so foreign to the modern way of thinking, it is easy to dismiss them as unrealistic. This is a great mistake, for medieval readers understood that the purpose of the exemplum is to inspire readers to emulate the examples of virtue found therein.

Recent criticism of Chaucer’s version of the tale seems to be driven by two major forces. The first of these is the feminist approach to literary criticism. Not surprisingly, there has been a strong outcry by feminist critics against Griselda’s silent obedience.

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<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in his book, Mosher notes that Chaucer uses the trope of exemplum in other tales, most notably the “Pardoner’s Tale” (8).

One such critic goes so far as to say, “Griselda fails in a woman’s first duty, the defense of her offspring,” noting that Chaucer’s tale fails artistically because of the flaws in Griselda’s character (Lounsbury 340). Another important force in contemporary criticism of the tale is “Chaucer’s Discussion of Marriage” by George Lyman Kittredge. This article has spawned numerous responses, arguing both for and against the legitimacy of Kittredge’s views. Kittredge posits that, while the stories in the *Canterbury Tales* can certainly be studied by themselves, it is a mistake to consider any of the tales without first considering the “connecting links” (130). Chaucer places his stories within a very intricate structure, and each tale exists in relation to its narrator and the surrounding tales. For the “Clerk’s Tale,” the connection is between it and the rest of the “Marriage Group,” which also includes the “Squire’s,” “Merchant’s,” “Franklin’s,” and “Wife of Bath’s Tale.” Ultimately, Kittredge decides that the “Clerk’s Tale” is an answer to the Wife’s belief that the only way to have a happy marriage is for the wife to rule her husband. By telling the story of a woman who is the “antithesis” to the Wife of Bath in every way, the Clerk shows the error of her thinking and demonstrates that any woman who follows such a path will “make her husband miserable, as she did” (140-143). Their discussion ultimately inspires the Squire, Merchant, and Franklin to tell their stories thus creating the “Marriage Group.”

Although some critics have condemned Kittredge for “misreading” the tone and irony of the Clerk, the idea that the tales exist in relation to one another seems so obvious that it can hardly be disputed (Axelrod 110). Indeed, the Clerk is careful to keep the marriage debate fresh in his audience’s mind, and as soon as he finishes his story, he addresses the Wife of Bath, proving that she is his primary audience. He says:



For which here, for the Wyves love of Bathe-  
Whos lyf and al hir secte God mayntene  
I wol with lusty herte, fresh and grene,  
Seyn yow a song to glade yow, I wene.<sup>3</sup> (1170-74)

The Clerk then proceeds to sing a song to the Wife of Bath that proves that her ideas about marriage are at least destructive and are most likely heretical.

Thus, I believe that Kittredge, and others who agree that the tale is a response to the Wife, have correctly determined the Clerk's motivation for telling the story of the patient Griselda. However, I hold that answering the Wife of Bath is only one of the Clerk's intentions for his tale. The Clerk is undoubtedly among the most intelligent and learned of all the pilgrims, proven by his advanced studies at Oxford. Furthermore, the Clerk demonstrates his genius, both in the subtle nature of his response to the Wife and in the skilled fashion through which he slips a moral tale past the Host. With this in mind, I argue that the Clerk, being the skilled speaker that he is, has a dual purpose for his tale. In telling Petrarch's story of the patient Griselda, he not only refutes the Wife's call for mastery over husbands but also strengthens Petrarch's exemplum of obedience. In this way, the Clerk is able both to defeat his opponent and teach the sort of moral lesson of which he is said to be so fond. To prove the Clerk's dual purpose for the tale, this thesis will begin by examining his source material. Illustrating the subtle changes in the story as it passed from Boccaccio to Petrarch to Chaucer will allow a glimpse into Chaucer's mind as he crafted his story. In doing so, the age-old belief that *The Clerk's* tale is an exemplum will be reconfirmed. By removing modern reader-response and gendered readings that have come to dominate criticism of *The Clerk's Tale* and focusing on the

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from the *Canterbury Tales* come from the third edition of *The Riverside Chaucer*.

sources and structure of Chaucer's work, this thesis is an attempt to reorient the critical framework in a more historically appropriate way. Chaucer's audience loved the exemplum as a genre, and "The Clerk's Tale" is a perfect example.<sup>4</sup> Let us begin with the first link in the Boccaccio-Petrarch-Chaucer chain. The *Decameron* is the foundation upon which Chaucer's tale is built, and in many ways, the "Clerk's Tale" echoes the themes of the original.

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<sup>4</sup> The popularity of the exemplum as a genre is demonstrated by its widespread usage and collections of exempla were common. Chaucer's other exempla include "The Friar's Tale" and "The Pardoner's Tale".

## CHAPTER 2

### BOCCACCIO'S GRISELDA: AN EXEMPLUM OF LOVE

Although it seems unlikely that Chaucer had direct access to Boccaccio's work, it is the basis around which his source, Petrarch built his work. Therefore, the final story of *Decameron*<sup>5</sup> is an important analogue for Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale," and study of the sources of the "Clerk's Tale" must begin with this story. In examining this story's impact on Chaucer, critics often speculate upon exactly how much of Boccaccio's work he knew. Obviously, he used the *Teseide* in his reworking of the story of Troilus and Criseyde, and it is certain that he used the *Filostrato* as a source for some of the "Knight's Tale." However, the question of whether Chaucer had direct access to the *Decameron*, while very important, remains a matter of conjecture. One certainty is that Petrarch read at least part of the *Decameron* and translated its last tale from Italian to Latin. Ultimately, Petrarch's translation of the story became Chaucer's primary source. Exactly how much of the *Decameron* that Petrarch read is an important question when discussing his reworking of the Griselda tale, for in Boccaccio, just as in Chaucer, the story of Griselda's humility, although potent on its own, works in relation to the *Decameron* as a whole. The most reliable source on the extent of Petrarch's familiarity with the *Decameron* is Petrarch himself.<sup>6</sup> In the letter to Boccaccio that accompanied his translation, Petrarch says:

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<sup>5</sup> This essay uses the Stanley Appelbaum edition of the Italian text and the John Payne translation for the English. Interested readers might also investigate the Musa-Bondella for an alternate translation. The convention of scholars of medieval literature is to quote from the original text and provide English translations in the footnotes. This thesis will follow this convention.

<sup>6</sup> In this essay, unless otherwise noted, all comments about the content of Petrarch's writing come from *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, which is edited by Robert M. Correale.

Excucurri eum, et festini viatoris in morem, hinc atque hinc  
circumspiciens, nec subsistens...At quod fere accidit eo more currentibus,  
curiosius aliquanto quam cetera libri principium finemque perspexi.<sup>7</sup> (109)

From this, it seems certain that Petrarch must have, at the very least, read Boccaccio's "The Author's Introduction" and tales I.i and X.x. The fact that these three parts work in connection to one another and that Petrarch surely read each one makes them very important in understanding the Griselda's story's impact on Petrarch.

Indeed, the value that medieval authors placed upon structure is an element missed by many modern readers. That the *Decameron* consists of ten stories a day told over the course of ten days and that each day's leader chooses a theme for the day illustrates the importance of structure in this work. However, the structure of the *Decameron* goes far beyond this. Therefore, careful consideration of the Griselda story's place inside the structure of the *Decameron* as whole is necessary before examining the plot of the tale itself.

"The Author's Introduction" sets the narrative and structural framework for the *Decameron*. In it, Boccaccio gives an incredibly detailed description of the plague that struck Florence in 1348. Perhaps because the scene is so graphic and would have been fresh in the minds of his contemporary readers, Boccaccio begins with a warning to his audience. He explains that:

Questo orrido cominciamento vi fia non altramenti che a' camminanti una  
montagna aspra e erta, presso alla quale un bellissimo piano e dilettevole sia

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<sup>7</sup> "I skimmed through the book like a hurried tourist, glancing here and there, but not stopping...like most such skimmers, I considered the beginning and the end of the book more closely than the rest."

eposto, il quale tanto più viene lor piacevole quanto maggiore è stata del salire e dello smontare la gravezza.<sup>8</sup> (3)

He then begins his description of a world ravaged by a pestilence so severe that it has modified the whole social order. He relates stories of “E erano alcuni, li quali avvisavano che il viver moderatamente e il guardarsi da ogni superfluità avesse molto a così fatto accidente resistere: e fatta lor brigata, da ogni altro separati viveano” while others “in contraria opinion tratti, affermavano il bere assai e il godere e l'andar cantando a torno e sollazzando e il sodisfare d'ogni cosa all'appetito che si potesse e di ciò che avveniva ridersi e beffarsi esser medicina certissima a tanto male”<sup>9</sup> (10). In the face of the plague, the social behavior of Florence’s people polarizes. Some avoid all contact with others, while others give themselves over to their every lust without fear of the repercussions. Because of the plague, the citizens of Florence changed their lifestyles, and even “E in tanta afflizione e miseria della nostra città era la reverenda autorità delle leggi, così divine come umane, quasi caduta e dissoluta tutta per li ministri e essecutori di quelle, li quali, sí come gli altri uomini, erano tutti o morti o infermi”<sup>10</sup> (11).

Several historians support the idea that the plague caused changes in Florence’s social structure. These changes affected many areas of Florentine life: the balance of power, the distribution of wealth, and the lifestyle of the people. Few escaped unscathed, and as Gene Brucker notes, the plague “seriously disrupted the social and economic order

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<sup>8</sup> “This horrible beginning will be like the ascent of a steep and rough mountainside, beyond which there lies a most beautiful and delightful plain, which seems more pleasurable to the climber in proportion to the difficulty of their climb and their descent.”

<sup>9</sup> “some people who thought that living moderately and avoiding all superfluity might help a great deal in resisting this disease, and so, they gathered in small groups and lived entirely apart from everyone else...” and “Others thought the opposite: they believed that drinking too much, enjoying life, going about singing and celebrating, satisfying in every way the appetites was the best medicine for such a disease.”

<sup>10</sup> “The reverend authority of the laws, both divine and human, was in all manner dissolved and fallen into decay, for, like other men, the ministers and executors of the laws were either dead or sick...”

and, to a lesser degree, the political structure” (48). He describes an economically devastated Florence in which shops closed, taverns were abandoned, and food became a scarce commodity (48). A contemporary of Boccaccio, Marchionne Stefani, is reported to have said, “Blessed is he who could find three eggs in a day’s search of the city” (qtd. Brucker *Studies* 49). This economic crisis was compounded by the loss of markets and the subsequent bankruptcy of Florence’s two greatest mercantile houses, which left an economic vacuum that lasted for a decade (55). The social disruptions were just as disturbing as entire families were destroyed by disease and starvation. The records of the courts report “widespread social disorganization” as law broke down because of a lack of enforcement (Becker 167). The totality of the plague’s impact on the social structure is illustrated by the number of stories in which “parents abandoned children and husbands their wives; entire families fled in the night, leaving stricken relatives to die unattended” (Brucker *Studies* 49).

After his brief but disturbing portrait of the plague, Boccaccio relates the story of a group of seven noble women who flee the city in an attempt to protect their health.

One of them, Pampinea, notes that there is no reason to stay in a city where:

...se di quinci usciamo, o veggiamo corpi morti o infermi trasportarsi da torno, o veggiamo coloro li quali per li loro difetti l'autorità delle pubbliche leggi già condannò a essilio, quasi quelle schernendo per ciò che sentono gli essecutori di quelle o morti o malati...<sup>11</sup> (11)

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<sup>11</sup> “...if we leave the church, either we see dead or sick bodies being carried all about, or we see those who were once condemned to exile for their crimes by authority of public law making sport of these laws, running about wildly through the city, because they know that the executors of these laws are either dead or dying...”

In an effort to escape this disintegrating society, the nobles decide to flee into the country. Three men soon join the women, and their self-imposed exile begins. However, one of the men recognizes that the group cannot merely lock themselves away in their country house. He notes that “e per ciò o voi a sollazzare e a ridere e a cantare con meco insieme vi disponete (tanto, dico, quanto alla vostra dignità s'appartiene), o voi mi licenziate che io per li miei pensier mi ritorni e steami nella città tribolata.”<sup>12</sup> (23). Unless they are willing to engage in normal social activity, which the plague has destroyed in Florence, they might as well return to the city. Dioneo seems to believe that without social interaction, life is meaningless. Pampinea agrees but reminds him that “Ma per ciò che le cose che sono senza modo non possono lungamente durare”<sup>13</sup> (23). Acknowledging the wisdom of her words, the group decides to choose a leader each day to oversee their activities and establish the order that was lacking in Florence. With their social group properly organized, “li giovani insieme con le belle donne, ragionando dilettevoli cose, con lento passo si misero per un giardino, belle ghirlande di varie frondi facendosi e amorosamente cantando”<sup>14</sup> (25). They spend their time talking, singing, dancing, and, it is implied, lovemaking until finally Pampinea, their chosen queen, decrees that each must tell a story. In this way, Boccaccio sets-up his narrative framework by contrasting the horror of the disintegrating social order of Florence with the blissful organization of the nobles’ paradise.

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<sup>12</sup> “either you will address yourself to make merry with me (as much, let me say, as your dignity permits) or give me leave to go back to my cares and live on in the afflicted city.”

<sup>13</sup> “things that are without order may not long endure.”

<sup>14</sup> “the young men together with the beautiful ladies, go straying with slow steps, about a garden, blithely conversing and diverting themselves with weaving godly garlands and singing amorously.”

Thus, the opening structure of the *Decameron* establishes a social context for the work, and it is therefore important to keep each story's social dynamics in mind.<sup>15</sup> However, "The Author's Introduction" is just one of the structural devices that Boccaccio employs in the *Decameron*, and the exact nature of his intended structure has been the subject of great critical debate. Despite, or perhaps because of, being very "general in its conclusions," Ferdinando Neri published one of the most satisfying structural theories in the 1930s (Papio 50).<sup>16</sup> Neri notes, "The *Decameron* is an intensely coherent work that depends not on the frame fiction for unity but on a planned transition from a negative pole (an aggressive day) to a positive one (an exemplary day)" (qtd. Papio 51). Thus, the fact that Boccaccio placed the story of Griselda, the final story of the final day, directly across from the story Ciappelletto, the first story of the first day, is important in understanding either work. Of course, there are other theories regarding Boccaccio's arrangement of the novellas, and although the nature of his intended structure remains an area of conflict, it is undeniable that structure is an important aspect of the *Decameron*.<sup>17</sup>

The first story of the *Decameron* contrasts strongly to the Griselda story. Where the latter is a story of love and selflessness, the former is one of greed and deceit. It tells the story of Ciappelletto, who "egli, essendo notaio, avea grandissima vergogna quando uno de' suoi strumenti, come che pochi ne facesse, fosse altro che falso trovato"<sup>18</sup> (29).

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to remember that by social dynamics, I refer to the way in which people interact and not some political context. Marvin Becker explains, "the youthful Boccaccio is devoted to a social rather than a political ideal" (*The Decline* 37).

<sup>16</sup> Neri's original essay was written in Italian. The excerpts discussed above are from a translation by Michael Papio found in his essay "Patterns of Meaning in the *Decameron*."

<sup>17</sup> Other notable theories by Italian critics also translated by Michael Papio include Ugo Branca's belief that the "stories illustrate an ideal moral journey that begins with vice...and ends with virtue" and Ferdinando Neri's conjecture that "Day 10 is the moral correction of the first day" (50 and 53 respectively). Again, Michael Papio translated these Italian critics into English.

<sup>18</sup> "being a notary, he thought it a very great shame when any of his instruments, though he didn't draw many, was found other than false."



Where Griselda is a model of virtue, Ciappelletto is the perfect sinner. He sins for enjoyment, and he has no shame for his deeds. At the behest of his master, Ciappelletto is sent to Burgundy to collect debts, and while there he falls ill. After discussing Ciappelletto's wickedness, the men with whom he lives decide to bring him a priest so that he might confess his sins, but Ciappelletto uses this as another opportunity for deception. Ironically, his false confession is so inspiring to the priest that Ciappelletto is made a saint. Indeed, Ciappelletto impresses the priest so much that at the funeral he is used as an example to reprove the people who were listening for their wrongdoings. In this way, a wicked man's life becomes an exemplum of purity for the people of Burgundy. Panfilo, the narrator, recognizes this and thanks God that:

Faccendo noi nostro mezzano un suo `enemico, amico credendolo, ci esaudisce, com se ad uno veramente santo per mezzano della sua grazia ricorressimo.<sup>19</sup> (24)

The narrator recognizes the ironic possibility that a wicked person might easily be mistaken for being virtuous and, like Ciappelletto, become a corrupted example of virtue. In this way, the *Decameron* opens with a corrupted exemplum, the story of a wicked man falsely held up as a virtuous example, and its position within the structure of the *Decameron*, directly opposite the Griselda story, should prepare readers for another exemplum.

In addition to the story's place within the narrative framework and opposite the story of Ciappelletto, it also exists within the structure of the tenth day. The king of the final day, Panfilo, sets the day's structure as he says, "I would have each of you bethink

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<sup>19</sup> "when we take an enemy of His as our advocate in the belief he is His friend, His kindness grants our prayers, just as if we were resorting to a truly saintly man as the agent of His grace."

herself to discourse tomorrow of this, to wit, of whoso has in any way wrought generously...or magnificently in matters of love..." (Boccaccio: *John Payne Translation* 697). According to the wishes of their king, the narrators of the day's tales discuss serious moral issues especially with regards to love. Marga Cottino-Jones notes that in addition to being grounded in moral issues, "many stories which belong to the Tenth Day are centered around idealized women and love," and analysis of the Tenth Day reveals this to be the case (295). In it, the narrators tell such stories as Saladin's reunion with his wife and King Pedro's and Lisa's love-sickness for each other. Readers find the themes of love and unselfishness appearing over and over again in the last day of the *Decameron*. These themes are the unifying aspect of the day, and they culminate in the exemplum of Griselda and the power of her unselfish love for her husband.

The basic plot of the Griselda story is well known. However, because Boccaccio's, Petrarch's, and Chaucer's versions of the tale are so similar, the subtle changes that each writer makes in plot, tone, and mood are of extreme importance. Furthermore, because the *Decameron* establishes the basic plot that all future writers will follow, careful consideration of its narrative is necessary. The story begins with a description of Gualtieri, a marquis of the region of Saluzzo. Boccaccio never explains what sort of ruler the marquis is, choosing to focus instead on his personal habits. The narrator notes that he spent his time doing nothing but hawking and hunting. Indeed, Gualtieri's existence is the epitome of the life of leisure that one would expect from a member of the nobility. However, the narrator, who is also a carefree nobleman, sees nothing wrong with this, noting, "di che egli era da reputar molto savia"<sup>20</sup> (238). Unfortunately for Gualtieri, the responsibilities of his position intrude upon his idyllic

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<sup>20</sup> "he should have been considered very wise"

life, and his vassals beg him to take a wife, promising to help him choose the perfect bride.

Gualtieri's willingness to allow his subjects to force a lifestyle change upon him marks a theme that is of great importance to understanding Boccaccio's version of this tale, for the responsibilities of his office are more important than his personal pleasure. The idea that the common citizens are the responsibility of the ruling lord was an important part of the feudal social order, of which Gualtieri is a part. Giuseppe Petronio describes this social order as one of "relationships" because in feudal society, the lord restrained "man with the bonds of subjection and vassalage" and created a "small self-contained world...built around their leader" (48). The leader controlled his subjects' lives and profited from their work, but he was in turn beholden to their will (49). This is all part of the "Aristotelian chain of command on which the politics of the Decameronian microcosm are posited...when individual and society come into conflict, the former must yield to the latter" (Kirkham 214). In this instance, Gualtieri submits to their requests, demanding only that he pick his own wife. This answer pleases his subjects greatly, and they reply that they would be content if he would only take a wife. Because Gualtieri agrees to fulfill his social responsibility by entering into marriage in order to perpetuate his line, order is restored, and the people return to their homes without the fear that "piu volte il pregaron che moglie prendesse, accio` che egli senza erede ne essi senza signor rimanessero"<sup>21</sup> (238). In taking a bride, Gualtieri chooses to honor his social duties rather than his personal desires; however, problems arise when he fails to recognize the social responsibilities that marriage entails, choosing instead to test his wife selfishly. This, of course, fits in with the social theme of the *Decameron* and echoes Pampinea's warning

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<sup>21</sup> "He might not abide without an heir nor they without a lord."

that “Ma per ciò che le cose che sono senza modo non possono lungamente durare”<sup>22</sup>  
(23).

It must be noted that the feudal order of Griselda’s story was not contemporary to Boccaccio. His was the age of the Commune, not marquises and nobles. The Commune, as defined by Robert S. Dombroski, was a congregation of “bankers, merchants, and artisans who made their living from small industries and trade rather than the exploitation of the land” (49). Because this mercantile power had supplanted the nobility in Florentine politics, it would seem more logical for Boccaccio to set a story of social responsibilities in a more contemporary locale. However, Dombroski explains that although Boccaccio was a part of this new mercantile culture, he did not whole-heartedly approve of it, and he notes that “the novellas of courtesy and tragedy” as well as the “rhetorical” are “never set in Florence” (53). It seems that “Boccaccio’s cultural ideal was therefore chivalric and courtly,” and although “the feudal courts were no longer in existence,” Boccaccio “yearned for the courtly times of Saladin and past generations” (50). Biographers often cite his youthful apprenticeships as creating in him an apprehension of the mercantile lifestyle. During his adolescence, he had several opportunities to visit various noble courts, and these made quite an impact on him. Vitorre Branca notes that upon his return to Florence, “it must have seemed as though he were plunging back into the meaningless and pettiness of the most bourgeois and mercantile life which he had dared to hope that he had escaped” (57). With this attitude towards the noble lifestyle in mind, Boccaccio’s choice of a courtly setting for the story of Griselda’s redeeming love fits with his style.

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<sup>22</sup> “Things that are without order may not long endure.”

Because of this feudal setting, it is notable that Gualtieri chooses a wife so far below his social standing. Perhaps this demonstrates his need to control things and foreshadows the trials to which he will submit his wife. Whatever the case, he chooses Griselda about whom the narrator says little save “e parendogli bella assai”<sup>23</sup> (238). In the opening scene, the narrator refrains from describing any elements of Griselda’s background. He fails to provide an explanation of her daily routines or her thoughts on the marriage that some future writers provide. For the tale’s purpose, it is only important that her father is poor and that her station is below her husband’s. However, from Griselda’s first appearance, her deeds mark her as the epitome of humility and meekness. She speaks only when spoken to and even then replies “vergognosamente”<sup>24</sup> (783). Her every action demonstrates her understanding of her social position and the respect that she has for authority.

Before Gualtieri consents to marry Griselda, he forces a promise of her:

E domandola se ella sempre, togliendola egli per moglie s’ingegnerebbe di compiacergli e di niuna cose che egli dicesse o facesse non turbarsi, e se ella sarebbe obediante e simili alter cose assai. (240)<sup>25</sup>

Of course, she promises to do all of these things without question, and at this point, he takes her out in front of his subjects and strips her of her lowly garb. The stripping of Griselda is the source of a good deal of critical debate and is often used to prove that Gualtieri is “monstrous” (McNamara 184). However, with the *Decameron*’s social framework in mind, this scene makes sense, for Griselda’s social position is being

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<sup>23</sup> “She was fair enough”

<sup>24</sup> “bashfully”

<sup>25</sup> “He asked her whether, if he married her, she would always strive to oblige him, never becoming vexed at anything he said or did, and many other things of the sort.”

changed. As the wife of the marquis, she has a new role to play, and the replacement of her peasant's cloths with a more appropriate dress and crown demonstrates this. Once again, with the social aspects of the situation organized, the narrative again moves forward, and Gualtieri and Griselda are married. However, her response of "signor mio si"<sup>26</sup> during the vows illustrates that she recognizes social position is still inferior to Gualtieri, who is her social superior both ruler of the land, and just as importantly, her husband (242).

The narrator notes that Griselda seems changed after the wedding. He explains:

La giovane sposa parve che co' vestimenti insieme l'animo ed i costumi mutasse. Ella era, come gia dicemmo, di persona e di viso bella, e cosi come bella era, divenne tanto avvenevole, tanto piacevole e tanto costumata, che non figliuola di Giannucolo e guardiana di pecore pareva stata, ma d'alcun nobile signore. (242)<sup>27</sup>

In this way, Griselda actually transforms to fit her new role in society. She has so completely left behind the trappings of her previous life that she would not be recognized as her father's daughter. Her social transformation is a success. Indeed, the subjects are so happy with the new marquessa that "tutti per los suo bene e per lo suo stato e per lo suo esaltamento pregando"<sup>28</sup> (242). Gualtieri's bride and the now "organized" social system bring happiness to the people of Saluzzo and honor to their ruler.

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<sup>26</sup> "yes, my lord"

<sup>27</sup> "The young bride seemed to have changed her spirit and her ways along with her clothes. As we said before, she was beautiful in face and body. Now, to match her beauty, she became so attractive, charmin, and well-bred that she seemed not to be Giannucolo's shepherdess daughter, but the child of some noble lord."

<sup>28</sup> "Everyone prayed for her welfare, health, and prosperity."

Unfortunately, the marquis fails to recognize the nobility of Griselda's character, and he decides to put her virtue to the test. In Boccaccio's version of the story, the narrator does not dwell on the reasons for these trials. Again, for the purposes of the tale, it is only important that he decides to test her. Using the birth of his daughter as an opportunity for his first experiment, Gualtieri lies and tells her that the people are unhappy with this birth. He sends a servant to collect their daughter with the implied purpose of her murder. Griselda's reply to this outrageous request once again reveals her humility and her understanding of her social position. She replies:

Signor mio, fa' di' me quello che tu credi che piu tuo onore o consolazion  
sia, che io saro di tutto contenta, si come colei che conosco che io sono da  
men di loro e che io non era degna di questo onore al quale tu per tua  
cortesua mi recasti. (244)<sup>29</sup>

She humbly accepts the decision he, as her lord both in the social and familial sense, makes. The servant who comes to take the child echoes the power of the social hierarchy as he woefully says, "Madonna, se io non voglio morire, a me convien far quello che il mio signor mi comanda"<sup>30</sup> (244).

Having faithfully obeyed her husband's command, Griselda should have passed her husband's test. In an attempt to fulfill her marriage vows, she gave up her child obediently and without anger so that he might be pleased, but the passivity with which Griselda endures this trial causes many critics to question the seriousness of the story.

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<sup>29</sup> "My lord, do with me whatever you think your honor and your pleasure demands, for I will be satisfied with everything since I know I am beneath their rank and that I was unworthy of the honor to which you raised me through your courtesy."

<sup>30</sup> "Madam, if I would not die, needs must I do that which my lord commands me."

However, extreme conditions are a key element of the exemplum genre.<sup>31</sup> By definition, the genre focuses on the most outstanding representative of a given trait. For Griselda to be an exemplary figure, her virtue must be great enough to render it nearly unbelievable. Although this idea is foreign to modern psychology, this is an element of the exemplum that would be accepted and even expected by a medieval audience. Indeed, the purpose of the exemplum is to “show what lengths a quality might conceivably go” (Kittredge 131).

However, Gualtieri remains unsatisfied and decides to repeat his test after Griselda gives birth to a son. Once again the child is taken, and once again, Griselda endures it without question. However, at this point, “I sudditi suoi, credendo che egli uccidere avesse fatti i figliuoli, il biasimavan forte e reputavanlo crudele uomo”<sup>32</sup>(246). Gualtieri’s mistreatment of his wife, which is an abuse of the power that the social institution of marriage gives him, begins to damage his standing with his people. Indeed, they no longer see him as a noble. Because of his failure to uphold his social responsibility, he has become a barbarian. Despite his people’s changing attitudes, he decides to submit his wife to one more test, and he tells her that because of her low birth, he is abandoning her as a wife. Her reaction to this news once again stresses her knowledge of the social order, for she replies:

Signor mio, io conobbi sempre la mia bassa condizione alla vostra nobiltà  
in alcun modo non convenirsi e quello che io stata son con voi, da Dio e

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Albert Mosher discusses the key elements of the exemplum. In order to separate the genre from fables and parables, he argues that an exemplum contains a story of extreme human characteristic that has a strong narrative element (2-19).

<sup>32</sup> “His subjects, believing that he had killed his children, blamed him greatly accounting him a barbarous man.”



da voi il riconoscea, ne mai come donatolmi, mio il ed a me dee piacere e  
piace di renderlovi (248).<sup>33</sup>

Readers have long been at odds over Griselda's motivations for accepting this abuse. It is one of the most contentious elements of a controversial story, and critics have described the tale as being everything from "a perfect case of masochistic perversion" to "idiotic" (Bergin 324). Indeed, Griselda's passivity is so extraordinary that many suggest that it is not to be taken seriously (324). However, when the final test begins, the narrator chooses to provide some important insights into her motivations. Boccaccio's narrator notes that "dove come savia lei farlo conobbe,"<sup>34</sup> deflecting the criticism that Griselda is merely too ignorant to react (246). He also explains that, "e vedere ad un'altra donna tener colui al quale ella voleva tutto sill suo bene, forte in se medesima si dolea"<sup>35</sup> (246). Indeed, during the final trial, unlike the others, the narrator adds emotion to Griselda explaining, "Come che queste parole fossero tutte coltella al cuor di Griselda, come a colei che non aveva cosi` potuto giu` l'amore che ella gli portava, come fatto aveva la buona fortuna"<sup>36</sup> (250). Thus, the motivation of her suffering is her love for her husband. Because of her love for him and their marriage, she is willing to endure his mistreatment. Nonetheless, the test continues, and Griselda is cast out of the castle. However, before she leaves, she is stripped once more. In a symbolic gesture, her noble clothes are stripped away, and Griselda is sent back to her farm wearing nothing but a lowly shift, reducing her once again to the status of peasant.

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<sup>33</sup> "My lord, I have always known that my low status in no way matched your nobility, and I recognized that the rank I held with you came from God and from you; I never made or considered it my own as an outright gift, but always judged it to be a loan."

<sup>34</sup> "She was acting that way out of a philosophic frame of mind"

<sup>35</sup> "She sorrowed sorely in herself at the thought of another woman in possession of the man who she willed her weal."

<sup>36</sup> "These words were all daggers to Griselda's heart, who had been unable to lay down the love she bore for him as she had laid down her fortune."

Griselda makes this change in social position just as seamlessly as she did after her marriage, and she quickly goes back to her menial chores. Of course, Gualtieri's test is not over, and he commands her to act as a servant at his wedding. As she obediently fulfills this command, he at last realizes the strength of his wife's love, and he reveals that his supposed bride was actually their daughter and restores Griselda to her rightful place. For a third time, Griselda is stripped of her clothes as the noblewomen dress her in one of her royal gowns. Perhaps the most notable change at the end of the story is that of the people. With Griselda's marriage restoring her to her proper social position, the people's attitude towards Gualtieri changes once again. No longer do his people criticize him. Instead, having finally recognized his wife's virtue and promised to give her the honor she deserves as his wife, he is seen "e savissimo reputaron"<sup>37</sup> (254). In this way, Griselda's willingness to withstand suffering out of respect for love and marriage has restored order to the kingdom.

At this point, Gualtieri reveals the motivation behind the tests, explaining, "volendoti insegnar d'essere moglie ed a loro di saperla tenere"<sup>38</sup> (252). This is quite ironic, considering that he did not teach Griselda anything. It is only through her example that any lesson is learned at all. In fact, it is Gualtieri who learns from Griselda as he begins to fill his role as a husband properly by "lungamente e consolata visse"<sup>39</sup> (254).

Thus, the age-old idea that Boccaccio's story of Griselda is an exemplum proves correct, but one question remains. Of what is it an exemplum? There is a great deal of critical debate about this, and many readers attempt to focus upon Gualtieri. Such

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<sup>37</sup> "a very wise man"

<sup>38</sup> "I wanted to teach you how to be a wife and teach them how to keep a wife."

<sup>39</sup> "honoring her as much as he could"

theories are usually allegorical in nature and attempt to portray the story as an example of man withstanding divine temptation. However, Dioneo's opening and closing comments eliminate an exemplary role for Gualtieri. During the stories opening, he explains that he will tell a story that:

Vo' ragionar d'un marchese non una cosa magnifica ma una matta  
bestialita, come che ben ne glisequisse alla fine; la quale io non consiglio  
alcun che segua, per cio che gran peccato fu che a costui ben n'avvenisse.  
(238)<sup>40</sup>

The narrator explicitly commands that the readers not look to imitate Gualtieri. Indeed, any argument of his divinity falls apart as Dioneo wishes that Gualtieri could have received no benefit by the tests. The narrator reinforces this idea in his closing speech. Once again maintaining that Gualtieri has done wrong, he says:

Al quale non sarebbe forse stato male investito d'essersi abattuto ad una  
che quando fuor di casa l'avesse in camicia cacciata, s'avesse si ad uno  
altro fatto scuotere il pillicione, che riuscito ne fosse una bella roba.  
(254)<sup>41</sup>

Not only were Gualtieri's actions not appropriate for a husband, any revenge that Griselda might have taken would be justified. This is hardly the tone one would expect from a narrator who intended Gualtieri to be an example of divinity. Therefore, the focus of the story's example must clearly be Griselda.

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<sup>40</sup> "I shall speak about a marquess – not however, recounting a generous deed of his, but an act of mad brutality, even though it came out well for him in the end. I don't advise anyone to emulate his cruelty, because it was a great shame that he derived any good from it."

<sup>41</sup> "Perhaps it wouldn't have been a bad thing if Gualtieri had stumbled upon a woman who, when driven from home in a shift, had showed some other man such a good time in bed that she would have gotten a nice dress out of it."

The nature of Griselda's example lies in the structural framework that Boccaccio has created for the *Decameron*. It is appropriate that he begins his work with the words "Umana cosa e,"<sup>42</sup> for the work contains above all else "different views of the human condition" (Musa and Bondenella 326). In the final story, Griselda stands as an example of unselfishness and honesty. She is the opposite of Ciappelletto in every way. He achieved fame through his deceitful trickery while hers stems from her willingness to endure suffering. The reason for her unwavering faithfulness is her love for her husband and the social order of marriage. Griselda has been described as a "martyr for love," an appropriate title indeed; however, there is more to the tale than love (Cottino-Jones 295). By remaining true to the social contract of her marriage vows, Griselda is able to redeem her husband and restore the kingdom to order. In this way, Griselda stands as an exemplum of more than patience, humility, or magnanimity. Instead, she is the perfect example of unselfish, even divine, love, and her story demonstrates love's power over humanity's social existence.

That love is a force capable of restoring order is a persistent theme of Boccaccio's work. Marvin Becker notes "the theme of the civilizing force of love is reiterated by Boccaccio in all his youthful works through the *Decameron*" and explains "the whole of the *Filostrato* celebrates the softening, humanizing effect of love upon the high-born and scornful Troilus" (*The Decline* 41). Likewise, Robin Kirkpatrick explains that "disruptions of the social order are common themes in both Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and *Decameron*"

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<sup>42</sup> "Human it is"

(232). Griselda's unselfish love creates the same effect in Gualtieri. In this way, Boccaccio chooses to end the *Decameron* with an example of that love in action.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, the story that Chaucer would later transform into "The Clerk's Tale" begins as an example of the power of unselfish love; however, the narrative found in the *Decameron* is not the same story that Chaucer tells. Although trappings of this analogue remain, Chaucer's story differs greatly in terms of tone and theme. One reason for these differences lies in the changes made by Boccaccio's translator, Petrarch. As Emilie Kadish explains, "The model of Petrarch's translation differs in so many ways from his Latin text that most commentators are careful to call the Petrarchan version a free translation if not an adaptation" (190).<sup>44</sup> However, as different as Boccaccio's and Petrarch's Griselda are, the final novella of the *Decameron* establishes the basic plot that all future writers will follow, and as such, it serves as an important tool in understanding the many incarnations of the story that follow it.

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<sup>43</sup> Marc M. Pelen notes that the most common reading of the last story of the *Decameron* is in reference to Gualtieri's misguided attempts to grant "munificence" to one he ironically believes to be beneath him (12). The above reading does not in any way deny this reading. Indeed, Griselda's extreme example of selfless love and social obedience amplifies the irony of Gualtieri's "munificence."

<sup>44</sup> Petrarch himself admits to taking liberties with the translation as he explains, "I have told your tale in my own language, in some places changing or adding a few words...and it is for you to judge whether I have, by this change of dress, injured or embellished the original" (186).

## CHAPTER 3

### “BY HIS WORDES AND HIS WERK:” PETRARCH AS CHAUCER’S SOURCE FOR THE “CLERK’S TALE”

By the time Chaucer penned his tale in the 1390s, there were already translations of the story in French and Latin (Kadish 202, Severs 6).<sup>45</sup> However, the version that was of greatest importance to Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale” comes from Petrarch. As a mentor to Boccaccio, Petrarch had ample opportunities to review his work, and the story of Griselda’s patience in the face of her husband’s unreasonable tests was one that intrigued him. Petrarch took Boccaccio’s story and translated it into Latin; however, he was not content merely to copy what Boccaccio had written. Indeed, it has been stated that Petrarch’s version is so different that it “can hardly be deemed a translation of the tale in the *Decameron*” (Lee 349). Instead, he created a new version of the tale, one that reflects his own personal vision of the world. Petrarch’s literary works have been described as having the “watchful eye of the moralist concerning his every word and action” (Mann 67). Chaucer himself echoes this sentiment as he describes “this clerk, whos rethorike sweete / enluyned al Ytaille” (32-33). With this in mind, it seems likely that this was Chaucer’s primary source, and if this is so, the clerk’s acknowledgment of Petrarch’s moral authority is important in understanding Chaucer’s purpose for the tale.

Petrarch and Boccaccio were long-time friends and maintained an exchange of letters that lasted over fifty years. Thus, when a copy of the *Decameron* crossed Petrarch’s desk in the 1370s, he took the time to skim through it. In light of their long relationship, it seems odd that Petrarch chose to wait nearly twenty years to read his friend’s work, but Petrarch

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<sup>45</sup> Examples of the many versions of the Griselda story that followed Boccaccio’s tale include Ser Giovanni Sercambi’s Italian version and Philippe de Mezieres’s French work as well as several anonymous reworkings of the story.

had little use for stories written in the vernacular and targeted at the masses. Instead, he was interested in stories with high moral purposes. Nonetheless, despite his many concerns, he took the time to examine his good friend's work. Petrarch was in the twilight of his life when the Griselda story came into his possession. Just a handful of years before, he had been embroiled in the papal conflict at Avignon and was bitterly upset when the Pope returned there in 1368 (Hollway-Calthrop 284). His health was also in decline, and he increasingly began to depend upon outside help to produce his writing. Because of his sustained illness, Petrarch believed that his death was imminent, and much of his correspondence during these years deals with this subject (289). His two major works of this period, the *Epistolae seniles* and *De remediis*, are largely autobiographical and moral, reflecting "his sense of then and now, of what he had been and what he had become, or at least what he wanted to become in the eyes of those who would come after" (Mann 102).<sup>46</sup> Indeed, *De remediis* is described as "a manual for moral life" which "tells you what to do, or what to think, if you are tempted to rejoice in your possessions, your friends, your wife, or your reputation" (82). Thus, Petrarch's reputation as a moralist is well deserved, and much of his later work "aims at moral perfection" (Morse, "The Exemplary" 57).

Not surprisingly, Petrarch finds little of interest in the occasionally bawdy *Decameron*. In a letter to Boccaccio, he is generally kind in his comments and attempts to make apologies for some of the rougher content:

Siquidem ipse magnus valde, et ad vulgus et soluta scriptus oratione, et occupacio mea maior et tempus angustum erat...Delectatus sum ipso in transitu. Et siquid lascivie liberioris occurreret, etas tunc tua dum id scribers,

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<sup>46</sup> *De remediis* was written in approximately 1366, and *Seniles* was completed in between 1370-1372 (Mann 107). They are both representative of the style of Petrarch's later writings.

stilus, ydioma, ipso quoque rerum scribas, morumque varietate stilil varietas  
excusatur.<sup>47</sup> (109)

The content and style of the *Decameron* are at odds with the moral purpose to which Petrarch devoted his later writings. However, one part of Boccaccio's work did interest him. In the course of his reading, he became struck by the story of Griselda's selfless love and obedience and decided to translate the tale. In regards to this tale he said, "In altero autem historiam ultimam et multis [precedencium] longe dissimilem posuisti, que ita michi placuit meque detinuit ut, inter tot curas pene mei ipsius que immemorem me [fecere]..."<sup>48</sup> (110-11). In *Griselda*, he found a moral example of the type that preoccupies his later writings. This story so affected him that he shared it with his friends and eventually created his own version of the story. This is this version of the story that eventually made its way to Chaucer.

Charlotte C. Morse provides insight into why Petrarch was so impressed by the *Griselda* story. She explains that "Petrarch is immensely fond of the exempla" and that he commonly employed this style of writing in his work ("The Exemplary" 57-59). She cites letter by Petrarch to support her argument:

There is nothing more moving to me as much as the examples of outstanding men. They help one to rise on high and to test the mind to see whether it possesses anything solid...next to experience itself...I would wager there is no better way to learn than by having the mind to emulate these greats. (qtd. 60)

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<sup>47</sup> "I would be lying if I were to say that I read it, since it is very lengthy and written in vernacular prose for the masses. There was also much work to do and time was limited...I was delighted with my browsing, and as for the rather frankly uninhibited events that cropped up, your age when you wrote it is enough excuse as are the style and idiom, for levity is suitable in the stories and in those who would read them."

<sup>48</sup> "But at the other end you have placed last – and in much contrast to much of what precedes it – a story that so pleased and engaged me that, amid enough duties to make me almost forget myself, I wanted to memorize it..."



In this way, Petrarch saw the exemplum as an important tool for teaching moral lessons, and as noted earlier, the writings of his later period revolve around such teachings. For Petrarch, the exemplum offered opportunities for instruction that could not be found in other genres. In the same epistle, he describes a “way of reading in which the reader imagines himself as the character tested by fortune in order to examine whether he could do what the character did” (qtd. 60). From a moral standpoint, the story of Griselda’s selflessness and obedience had much to offer a medieval audience. The ideas of obedience despite suffering had a spiritual connotation that is in many ways foreign to the modern mind (Morse “What to Call” 280). Therefore, Petrarch’s purpose in translating the Griselda story is to inspire his readers toward some moral purpose and that his readers should be able to imitate the example of virtue found therein. Indeed, the numerous changes that he makes to Boccaccio’s story seem to further this goal.

Petrarch’s tale differs from the last story in the *Decameron* in several meaningful ways. Understanding these differences, and Petrarch’s purpose in making them, provides important insights into his intentions for the tale. On the surface, the story is the same. A ruler, Gualtieri in Boccaccio and Walterus in Petrarch, is called upon by his subjects to take a wife. Although the idea of marriage is personally distasteful to him, he agrees, but only if they allow him to choose the girl for himself. His choice is the beautiful Griselda, a young woman of humble roots. Walterus’s offer of marriage rests upon one condition; the girl must obey his every command without question. In each story, the lord decides to test his bride’s faithfulness, and in each story, she suffers through several trials and tribulations. The ruler subjects his wife to four tests, two that test her maternal instincts and two that test her as a wife. Eventually, both tales seem to end happily as Griselda,

her husband, and her children are reunited. However, there are subtle differences in the way that the narrative advances that illuminate Petrarch's intentions, and in no area is this more apparent than the characterization of Griselda.

Petrarch's *Griselda* is much more central to his narrative than is Boccaccio's. When she is first introduced, Petrarch presents a detailed portrait of the girl's character. She is a woman of beautiful body and character, who has grown up in the worst poverty. This has not made her unhappy or bitter, and unlike some in her situation, "nil molle nil tenerum cogitare didicerat"<sup>49</sup> (115). Her life is simple and her virtue pure. The narrator continues by providing a picture of her life before her marriage with Walterus, explaining how she:

Patris senium inestimabili refovens caritate, et oauculas eius oves pascebat, et colo interim digitos atterebat; vicissimque domum rediens, oluscula et dapes fortune congruas preparabat, durumque cubiculum sternebat, et ad summam angusto in spacio totum filialis obediencie ac pietatos officium explicabat.<sup>50</sup>

(115)

Petrarch details the pleasures and pains of her daily life. The increased emphasis on *Griselda* herself performs two functions in the narrative. First, it displays her as a figure of great virtue before any of the narrative's events take place. Her extraordinary perseverance should not surprise readers, for she displays the virtues of "obediencie" and "pietatos" while still in her humble cottage. This increased emphasis also serves to cement *Griselda*'s importance to the narrative. As discussed previously, Boccaccio glosses over *Griselda*'s early life, choosing instead to focus attention, at least early in the story, on Gualtieri. Instead of

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<sup>49</sup> "She had learned not to dream of soft and tender things."

<sup>50</sup> "Comforting the age of her father with immeasurable love, she used to graze his few sheep, wearing away her fingers meanwhile by spinning thread. Returning home again to the house, she would prepare home-grown meals according to their lot before lying down on her hard bed. In sum, she performed in their narrow cottage the whole duty of filial obedience and piety."

detailing Griselda's background, the narrator simply explains that "Gualtieri buona pezza piaciuti I costumi d'una povera giovanetta che d'una villa vicina a cas su era, e parendogli bella assai, estimo che con costei dovese potere aver vita assai consolata"<sup>51</sup> (238). The increased focus on Griselda's background affects her husband's reason for choosing her. In contrast to Boccaccio's Gualtieri, who sees in Griselda merely someone he can live comfortably with, Petrarch's Walterus finds her appealing, "Walterus, sepe illuc transiens, quandoque oculos non iuvenili lascivia sed senili gravitate defixerat, et virtutem eximiam supra sexum supraque etatem"<sup>52</sup> (115). Petrarch makes it clear that Griselda is not an ordinary peasant girl. While Boccaccio avoids discussing her virtues until the tests begin, Petrarch introduces her as a figure of virtue. This serves to pull the focus away from Gualtieri, who dominates Boccaccio's narrative, and place the focus of the story on Griselda and her amazing virtue. In this way, Petrarch affixes Griselda's virtue much more centrally into his narrative, increasing her importance to the tale.

Another example of Griselda's amplified role in Petrarch's version can be found in her increased number of long speeches. In the *Decameron*, Griselda reacts to events with almost total passivity. She speaks only when spoken to, and even then her speeches are extremely short, something that is quite surprising remembering that "Boccaccio's heroines are never at a loss of words in their own defense" (Kirkpatrick 233).<sup>53</sup> Her only outward show of emotion is that she "wept with joy" upon reunification with her children (Payne 790). Even upon being informed that her husband was to take a new wife, Griselda responds,

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<sup>51</sup> "...Gualtieri had admired the character of a penniless young woman living in a village near his home. Finding her quite beautiful, he thought he could lead quite a contented life with her."

<sup>52</sup> "Walter, periodically riding past, fixed his eyes, not youthfully lascivious but maturely considerate, on the virtue of this maid, excellent beyond her age and gender."

<sup>53</sup> For examples of vocal females in the *Decameron*, readers should examine the stories of Madonna Filippa (VI.vii) and Ghismonda (IV.ii) among others.

“Signor mio, pensa di contentar te e di sodisfare al piacer tuo, e di me non avere pensiero alcuno, per ci che niuna cosa m’è cara se non quanto io la veggio a te piacere”<sup>54</sup> (244).

Petrarch’s Griselda is much more vocal when expressing her feelings. She does not hand over her children quietly but instead explains her reason for doing so: “...Tu, inquite, noste es dominus. Et ego et hec parva filia tue sumus. De rebus tuis igitur fac et libet”<sup>55</sup>(119).

Furthermore when Walterus tells her of his intentions to remarry, she begins a long discourse on how she “semper scivi inter magnitudinem tuam et humilitatem meam nullam esse proporcionem”<sup>56</sup> and lengthens her warning about mistreating his new and possibly fragile bride (125). Though she never speaks out against her husband or his actions, her speeches provide readers with insights into Griselda’s thought process, making her a much more realistic character and magnifying the power of her example.

J. Burke Severs describes Petrarch’s Griselda as being more emotional than Boccaccio’s (14). Certainly, she demonstrates more genuine feelings for her children than her counterpart in Boccaccio. As an example, Severs cites the scene in which Griselda is finally reunited with her children. In Boccaccio’s version, Griselda is lead away by the ladies of the court in order to be restored to her noble clothing before reacting to her children in any way. This is hardly the reaction one would expect of a mother who has suddenly been reunited with her long-lost children. However, in Petrarch’s version, “as soon as Griselda learns the identity of her children, she rushes into their arms” (14). This is indeed a very telling scene, for in addition to providing an example of Griselda’s increased emotional

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<sup>54</sup> “My lord, just satisfy yourself and see to your own pleasure. Don’t worry at all about me, because I care about nothing but pleasing you in every way.”

<sup>55</sup> “You,” she replied, “are our lord. Both I and this little daughter are yours: do as you like about our affairs.”

<sup>56</sup> “always knew that there was no parallel between your greatness and my lowness.”

capacity, it also makes her a far more realistic mother. Indeed, Petrarch's changes make the characters and narrative more realistic.

The reason that Petrarch must create a more realistic narrative is found in his purpose for the tale. As discussed earlier, Boccaccio's tale is a social exemplum. Griselda demonstrates the power of unselfish love and its potential impact on society. By remaining obedient to the social contract of her marriage vows, Griselda is able to restore her husband and reinstate order to the kingdom. Boccaccio makes the same point in the *Obedientir commendatio*, a work of from the same period as the *Decameron*:

Quam non immerito suaserim amplexandam et maioribus totis  
exhibendam viribus: quippe domatur ferocitas animorum, ostenditur  
mentis humilitas, comprimuntur vitia, exhilarantur virtus, ordo servatur in  
cunctis et redditur ociosus iustitie gladius: hace regna florent, ampliantur  
urbes, et mentium tranquillitas servatur.<sup>57</sup> (qtd. Kirkham 220)

In Boccaccio's story, this is exactly what happens. Gualtieri's actions have destabilized his kingdom.<sup>58</sup> Because of the tests, "I sudditi suoi, credendo che egli uccidere avesse fatti i figliuoli, il biasimavan forte e reputavanlo crudele uomo"<sup>59</sup> (246). However, when the truth is revealed, the example of Griselda's selflessness in fulfilling her role as wife and subject reunifies the people. They are now "lietissimo di questa cosa" and celebrate greatly holding Griselda as "sopra tutti savissima"<sup>60</sup> (254) Furthermore, at the conclusion

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<sup>57</sup> "It is not without reason that I should like to urge people to embrace and exhibit obedience with all their strength; by obedience ferocity of spirit is tamed; humility of mind is revealed; vices are restrained; virtues are exalted; order is maintained in all things; the sword of justice lies idle; by obedience kingdoms flourish, cities grow, and peace of mind is preserved."

<sup>58</sup> As noted before, disruptions of the social order are common themes in both Boccaccio's *Filocolo* and *Decameron* (Kirkpatrick 232).

<sup>59</sup> "His subjects, believing he had killed his children reproached him greatly and considered him a cruel man."

<sup>60</sup> "overjoyed at this happy issue" and "wisest of all."

of his story, there is no evidence that Griselda has done anything unusual. True, she has passed her husband's test, but the narrator neither condemns her husband nor celebrates her actions in any extraordinary way. Instead, Griselda and her husband merely live out their lives in great peace and happiness. Griselda's unselfishness and obedience to her social responsibilities is a unifying force that everyone should "exhibit with all their strength," as Boccaccio recommended in the *Obedientir commendatio*.

Petrarch has different intentions for his version of the tale. He takes Boccaccio's story of social obedience and applies it to religious issues (Kirkpatrick 232). In this way, Petrarch transforms Boccaccio's story into a moral exemplum. If his Griselda is more realistic than Boccaccio's, it is because Petrarch intends her to be. Petrarch expects that people will submit to God with the same passivity that Griselda displays in the narrative. In order to drive home the lesson that spiritual obedience is expected of all humankind, he attempts to craft a story that is grounded in reality. Petrarch explains this idea in the letter to Boccaccio accompanying his Latin translation:

Non tam ideo, ut matronas nostri temporis ad imitandam huius uxoris  
pacienciam, que michi vix imitabilis videtur, quam ut legentes ad imitandam  
saltem femine constanciam excitarem, ut quod hec viro suo prestitit, hoc  
prestare Deo nostro audeant.<sup>61</sup> (138)

For Petrarch, Griselda's obedience exemplifies the expected relationship between humanity and God. At the end of Boccaccio's tale, his narrator asks who can be expected to endure such trials, and to this, Petrarch answers, "There are some who think that whatever is difficult for them must be impossible to others...yet there have been many, and there still

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<sup>61</sup> "Not so much that I might arouse the women of our time into imitating the patience of this wife, which seems to me scarcely imitable, as that I might arouse readers into imitating at least the woman's constancy, that what she offered to her husband, they would be eager to offer to our God."

may be many, to whom such acts are easy” (qtd. Miller 140). The example of Griselda proves that such acts of obedience are possible in the hopes of inspiring others to overcome the “difficulty” of such actions.<sup>62</sup> Her willingness to suffer humiliation and abuse for her husband echoes the sacrifice of Christian martyrs for the Church.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Petrarch believes that “Habunde ego constantibus viris asscripserim, quisquis is fuerit, qui pro deo suo sine murmure paciatur quod pro suo mortali coniuge rusticana hec muliercula passa est”<sup>64</sup> (129).

In this way, Petrarch changes Boccaccio’s social exemplum into a spiritual one. Severs describes this change as moving from a “worldly” perspective to an “elevated, moral, almost pious” one (12). In Petrarch’s work, Griselda represents humankind’s expected obedience to God during trials of temptation. This message would have been well received by the religious-minded readers of medieval Europe, and Petrarch’s story influences many future writers to attempt their own versions of the tale. However, even though it shares many features with the “Clerk’s Tale,” in order to support the claim that Petrarch is Chaucer’s primary source, it is necessary to prove that he had access to Petrarch’s version of the story. Evidence indicates that Petrarch wrote his version of the tale around the year 1373 and placed it in his final work, the *Epistolae seniles*. Indeed, tradition holds that the Griselda story was the last thing that Petrarch actually wrote before his death in 1374, and it became one of his most popular and widely-read works. However, Chaucer began work on the

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<sup>62</sup> One common reading of the story is that of Walterus as a representation of God and the tests he places on mortals. However, Petrarch appears to recognize this possibility and speaks out against such a reading. He quotes Saint James, saying “God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempteth no man” (Miller 138). Petrarch acknowledged that God might allow us to be tested but is adamant that it is not God who does the testing.

<sup>63</sup> Charlotte C. Morse’s translation of Petrarch’s rubric to the story, “De obedientia ac fide uxorial mythology” notes that as opposed to “patientia” or “constantia” which typically have personal applications, “obedientia” and “fide” are used religiously and have strong connections with “spiritual martyrdom” (“What to Call” 279).

<sup>64</sup> “I would have rated among the most steadfast of men one of whatever station who endured without complaint and for God what this little country wife endured for her mortal husband.”

*Canterbury Tales* around 1380 and most likely penned the “Marriage Group” between the years of 1392 and 1395 (Benson xxix). Therefore, if Petrarch is in fact a source of Chaucer’s tale, the English poet had to come in contact with Petrarch’s work sometime before 1395.

Because of his position within the English government and the London Customhouse, Chaucer had the chance to travel abroad, and this afforded him several opportunities to meet with continental scholars and acquire works of literature. He took no less than four such journeys, the first of which departed in 1368. Of these, the most notable is the 1373 journey to “treat the affairs of the king in Genoa and Florence” (Benson xix). During this trip, a literary-minded person such as Chaucer could not have escaped the sensation that the works of Dante and Petrarch were causing and would have had ample opportunities to acquire manuscripts of their work (Crow and Leland xix). Indeed, Chaucer’s writing style changes distinctly after this journey. Before his Italian visit, Chaucer often worked in French poetic styles, but after visiting Italy, his work “shows a clear Italian influence” (Childs 66). The general consensus is that *The Romaunt of the Rose*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and some short poems are certain to have been written before 1373 (Benson xxix). *The Romaunt of the Rose* uses as its source a French poem by Guillaume de Lorris, and Chaucer remains faithful for the most part to the original. This poem, and Chaucer’s translation of it maintain the “conventions of French courtly style” (Muscatine 30). *The Book of the Duchess* also makes use of French styles, and its form owes much to Machaut’s *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne* (Benson 966). Furthermore, *The Book of the Duchess* is a dream-poem, a style that was popular in France in the second quarter of the thirteenth century (Winny 13). However, a sampling of Chaucer’s work after 1373 seems to reveal a change in his literary tastes. Although he continues to make some use of dream poetry, his work begins to show a definite



Italian influence. *The House of Fame* (1379?) owes much to Dante, Virgil, and Ovid; *Troilus and Criseyde* (1387?) and “The Knight’s Tale” come from Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*; and *The Legend of Good Women* models the style of Boccaccio’s saint tale, *De claris mulieribus* (Benson 966-1059). With this in mind, Chaucer’s use of Petrarch as a source is within his usual writing habits.

The timing and destination of this visit also fuels the debate over whether Chaucer actually met either Petrarch or Boccaccio, as both of the Italian authors would have been in the area during these years (Hollway-Calthrop 301). Chaucer’s clerk hints at such a meeting when he says, “I wol yow telle a tale which that I / Lerneþ at Padowe of a worthy clerk, / As preved by his wordes and his werk” (26-28). This obviously refers to Petrarch and supports the claims that Petrarch and Chaucer met. Regardless of the reality of a meeting between the great authors, these trips coupled with the overwhelming similarities between Petrarch’s and Chaucer’s version of the story provide ample evidence that Petrarch was indeed the primary source of the “Clerk’s Tale.”

Thus, the evidence that Chaucer had access to a manuscript of Petrarch’s version of the tale is overwhelming.<sup>65</sup> However, in discussing Chaucer’s use of his source material and his intentions for his tale, it is important to note how much of Petrarch’s narrative that Chaucer chose to preserve and how much he changed to suit his own purpose. The ramifications of these differences are noteworthy because Chaucer’s clerk cites Petrarch as a moral authority for his tale. Therefore, any moral interpretation of Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale” should include Petrarch’s notion that Griselda’s actions can be imitated. Indeed, the slight changes that Chaucer made to Petrarch’s narrative seem calculated to amplify the idea that

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<sup>65</sup> Severs reports that Chaucer, at the very least, had access to the works of Petrarch, De Mezieres, and an anonymous French play. However, the Clerk’s preface and the amount of similar phraseology point to Petrarch being the most important source (27-34).

Griselda is an example of obedience. Furthermore, it is likely that Chaucer had a copy not only of the narrative but the explanatory letter as well. In an echo of Petrarch's letter, Chaucer's Clerk calls upon Saint James during his explication of the tale: "But he tempteth no man that he boghte / As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede / He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede" (1154-1156). With this in mind, it seems that Chaucer created his own moral exemplum after the model of his source material. Even his choice of narrator reinforces the exemplary nature of the tale, for the Clerk's teaching was "Sownynge in moral vertu" (307). In fact, Chaucer's narrator and the tale's place within the framework of the *Canterbury Tales* are as important as any of the minor changes that Chaucer makes to Petrarch's story.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, before examining the content of Chaucer's tale and his use of his source material, it is necessary to examine its narrator and its place within Chaucer's narrative framework.

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<sup>66</sup> Robin Kirkpatrick asserts that Chaucer's version of the tale deviates only slightly from Petrarch's in respect to the narrative and characterization (Kirkpatrick 233). J. Burke Severs agrees that Petrarch is the major source and that Chaucer changes little of his material but notes that the *Clerk's Tale* parallels several elements from the anonymous French versions of the story as well as possible material from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Severs 34 and 135).

## CHAPTER 4

### THE DUAL MEANING OF CHAUCER'S: "CLERK'S TALE"

In the Middle Ages, the prevailing literary theory was that all literature should maintain a unity of structure and theme that ties the work together. The *Decameron* is a perfect example of this premise as each day contains exactly ten stories, all of which share a connecting theme. This is the sort of perfect ratio "that medieval literary theorist lauded" and that Chaucer was trying to achieve with his *Canterbury Tales* (Baldwin 15). Therefore, any study of the individual tales will be incomplete unless it takes into account the tale's place within the structure as a whole. The tales do indeed work in connection to the prologue and the tales around it. Few stories in the *Canterbury Tales* have drawn as much critical attention for so long a time as "The Clerk's Tale" has. However, modern critics, in their pursuit of the feminist and social issues to which the tale's subject matter so naturally lends itself, often ignore the importance of this structure in ways that earlier critics did not. While I do not deny the appropriateness or usefulness of such a reading, it is necessary to examine modern readings of the tale in order to realign them with the historical, religious, and cultural mindset of medieval England in which the tale was produced. To do this requires careful attention to Chaucer's treatment of his source material and the way in which he places it into the structure of the overall work. In this way, the beautiful complexity of the tale and its narrator becomes clear.

Chaucer's choice of narrators is an important aspect of every tale. Whether it is the immoral Miller who tells a tale of lust and deceit or the domineering Wife of Bath who illustrates the necessity of submitting to a wife's will, the theme and subject matter of each tale is appropriate, although sometimes ironically, for its teller. In the "General Prologue,"

Chaucer notes that “A Clerk ther was of Oxenford also, / that unto logyk hadde longe ygo” (285-86). This line highlights the Clerk’s rather impressive educational pedigree. Chaucer stresses that this Clerk is one of great education and ability by emphasizing his university and depth of study. In medieval England, there was no better university than Oxford. The historian A.B. Cobban notes that “by the twelfth century, Oxford had attained a definite educational primacy and had emerged as the only *studium generale* of a permanent nature,” a status which it maintained until the rise of Cambridge in the early fifteenth century (97). Therefore, the Clerk’s attendance of this prestigious university marks him as an academic of the highest order. This point is emphasized by the fact that he studied “logyk longe ago,” for the medieval university had a rigid hierarchy of disciplines. This hierarchy was divided between the “trivium,” which included grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and “quadrivium,” which consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (10). The medieval university system focused its efforts within the area of trivium, and a young scholar would begin with the study of grammar while logic and rhetoric were “an option for those who had the aptitude for more advanced studies” (11). At Oxford only the Masters of Arts “read the books on logic” (Rait 142). Indeed, Oxford “was noted throughout Europe for the study of logic and its masters who did the teaching and the writing” (Dillon 109). Therefore, the fact that the Clerk had studied logic “longe ygo” at such a prominent institution illustrates the quality of his education and his academic standing. The narrator of the “Clerk’s Tale” is no simple student but is instead an exceptional scholar who has completed an advanced program of study. Because of this, readers should expect a tale with a complexity befitting its quick-witted narrator.

The medieval clerk was stereotyped as a long-winded preacher, capable of long discourses on moral behavior, and Chaucer's Clerk follows this stereotype. "The General Prologue" describes his love of moral teachings as it says:

Noght o word spak he moore than was neede,  
And that was seyde in forme and reverence  
And short and quyke and ful of hy sentence;  
Sownynge in moral vertu was his speche,  
And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly would he teche. (304-308)

The Clerk loves to hear moral stories, but he also loves to teach them. The ragged description of his dress and personal appearance that Chaucer creates in the "Prologue" accentuates this point. Most medieval students of Oxford would have, by this point in their academic career, left college to seek some office for themselves. Because the Clerk still has the trappings of a student, most notably his obvious lack of money, "it is clear that the Clerk was more interested in teaching" (Dillon 112). This Clerk is interested in education for education's sake. He is not in college to increase his earning power. Instead, he loves teaching and learning, and nothing pleases him more than "moral vertu." Thus, medieval readers would expect that when his turn to speak arises, he would take advantage of the opportunity. Indeed, this is what the Host fears, and when he offers the Clerk his chance to speak, he warns, "It is no tyme for to studien here. / Telle us som myrie tale, by youre fey" (8-9). The Host wants entertainment and has no desire to hear a sermon on morality. He begs the Clerk to hold his "termes, colours, and figures" until the end of the story and avoid the "heigh style" of speaking (16 and 17, respectively). The Clerk agrees to the Host's request out of "obeisance" to his authority, wording that foreshadows the theme of the "Clerk's Tale" (24).

However, the way in which the Clerk manages to both be obedient to his promise and teach a lesson reveals the Clerk's ingenuity, which he uses again at the end of the tale in order to present his moral at the expense of the Wife of Bath. Indeed, he proves that he has no intention of fully keeping his promise when he declares that he will tell a story he heard from Petrarch, "whos rethorike sweete / Enlumyned al Ytaille," and begins it in rhyme royal, the style reserved for the most didactic of Chaucer's tales (32-33).

In this way, Chaucer's choice and characterization of the narrator of the "Clerk's Tale" prepares readers for a story of morals. However, the Clerk, as George Lyman Kittredge explains, is also desperate to reply to the Wife of Bath's attack on his morals and his order.<sup>67</sup> In her tale, the Wife said that:

Wommen desiren to have sovereyntee  
As wel over hir housbond as hir love  
And for to been in maistrie him above  
.....  
And eek I preye Iesu shorte her lyves  
That wol nat be governed by her wyves. (1038-1040, 1261-62)

This, of course, "scandalizes" the moral minded Clerk, and being an intelligent man, he ultimately decides that he can both be true to his moral beliefs and respond to the Wife (Kittredge 135). Therefore, he chooses a story with the high moral value that he loves but which also contains situations that will allow him to argue his views of marriage. Thus, his

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<sup>67</sup> As discussed here and in my introduction, Kittredge's seminal essay agrees that the tale and its Envoy are used by the Clerk as an attack on the Wife of Bath. I hope to add to this by showing the appropriateness of the narrator to this task, examining how the "notabilia" that the Clerk calls on for support aids his argument, demonstrating how Chaucer's changes to the narrative support this reading, and explaining how the Clerk's irony in the Envoy drive his point home. I also hope to reconcile this reading with those who hold that the tale is religious in nature by proving the Clerk's dual intentions for the tale.

tale becomes a subtle cat-and-mouse game in which he secretly builds his case against the Wife of Bath while at the same time preaching Petrarch's exemplum of spiritual obedience. However, because this methodology develops slowly, it confuses the issue for many readers and has created a debate between scholars who argue that the tale must be either "secular" or "religious" in nature. Let us remember that such a division only occurs in the modern world. The monolith that is the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages pervades every aspect of people's lives being the keeper of baptismal, marriage, and death records and even providing the hours of the day from the bell tower. Dividing sacred and secular is nearly impossible in this time period. Thus, the Clerk's dual meaning is appropriate.<sup>68</sup> In leaving Petrarch's story intact for the most part, he insures that his audience will receive a proper moral message, but the subtle changes that he makes allows him to set up the Wife of Bath for his final attack in his closing song.

The idea that the Clerk is working with two intended meanings in mind is not new. Indeed, the critical dissention over the story most likely stems from the fact that it seemingly "could answer to a variety of themes" (Cherniss 294). Even Kittredge, who ultimately supports a marital theme for Chaucer's tale, agrees that the Clerk maintains the religious meanings of the tale, but he warns that in accepting this reading "we miss the pathos because we are aridly intent on discussing an ethical question that has no status in this particular court, however pertinent it may be in the general forum of morals" (132). However, if Chaucer intends the tale to be only secular in nature, he wastes a good deal of effort in emphasizing the religious aspects of the tale. Indeed, many of the changes that Chaucer makes to Petrarch's version of the tale enhance its application as a spiritual exemplum. In

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<sup>68</sup> The idea that the Clerk purposefully creates two meanings for his tale is the subject of Bernard S. Levy's "The Meanings of the Clerk's Tale," and I acknowledge my debt to his essay. However, our views on the Clerk's approach and ultimate outcome are far different, as I shall discuss.

answer to this problem, many critics have embraced the idea that “Chaucer purposely had the Clerk present his narrative from varied perspectives aimed at a diverse audience” (Levy 385). Bernard S. Levy believes that the Clerk maintains the exemplum of obedience while presenting a social discussion of “munificence” (396). For Levy, Griselda illustrates the idea that true nobility comes from “trouthe,” and lowly born Griselda has it while the supposed noble Walter falls short. This argument, while it recognizes that the Clerk is capable of advancing two themes in one tale, is unsatisfying because it ignores the obvious connections between the “Clerk’s Tale” and the rest of the “Marriage Group.” Instead, the changes that Chaucer makes to his source material and the notable examples that the Clerk employs to make his points indicate that the Clerk approaches the stories with two goals in mind. He wants both to preach Petrarch’s social exemplum and attack the wife for her views on marriage.

Chaucer prepares his readers for the Clerk’s dual purpose before the Clerk utters the first word of his story. Having been commanded by the Host to avoid the high style, the Clerk pauses to jab at the Host’s expense before beginning. This demonstrates that he is willing to strike back at those who insult him and his craft and prepares us for the Clerk’s attack on the Wife of Bath at the end. Although this seems to contradict his “shyness” as described in the “General Prologue,” it is certainly “indicative of the combative behavior we would expect of an Oxford schoolman” (Dillon 114). As a student, the Clerk would have frequently been called on to defend his beliefs, and this gives readers an opportunity to see his skill in this arena, foreshadowing his use of it against the Wife of Bath at the end of his tale. His thrust at the Host is quite subtle, and it goes unnoticed by the victim. The Clerk begins the tale just as Petrarch does, with the long description of the Italian setting of the



story. However, he quickly cuts this short saying, “The which a long thing were to devyse/  
And trewely, as to my judgement,/ Me thynketh it a thing impertinent” (52-54). Obviously  
the Clerk does not think the Petrarch’s rhetoric is unimportant after having praised him in  
two different speeches. Instead, the Clerk devises this little speech for the purpose of making  
the Host look foolish for his ignorance. Karl Wentersdorf sees this as “the Clerk trying to  
demonstrate the superiority of his own literary tastes” (315). Whatever the case, Chaucer  
uses these episodes both to illustrate the Clerk’s combative tendencies and prepare reader’s  
for his ironic way of teaching.

When discussing the Clerk’s intended message, it is also important to examine the  
sources and examples that the Clerk calls on for proof, for in a medieval lecture, the presenter  
must “remark on notabilia” in order to make a point (Rait 142). Indeed over the course of his  
tale the Clerk calls on many such notable figures, the first of which is Petrarch from whom  
the Clerk, and Chaucer, received the tale. Of Petrarch, the Clerk says, “I wol yow a telle a  
tale which that I / lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk, / As preved by his wordes and his  
werk” (26-29). Petrarch’s reputation as a moralist would be well known to both Chaucer’s  
readers and the Clerk’s fellow pilgrims. By evoking his name, the Clerk’s audience is  
prepared for an exemplum of the type that Petrarch was so fond. Furthermore, his invocation  
of Petrarch’s name adds support to whatever moral the Clerk decides to pursue. Of course,  
the Clerk does not simply recite Petrarch’s tale. Just as Petrarch had his own intentions for  
Boccaccio’s work, the Clerk has decided that he will use Petrarch’s story to attack the Wife.  
However, because he has devoted his life to “sowing moral virtue,” he still wants to present a  
moral message, so he leaves Petrarch’s work virtually untouched.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Severs also notes that “Chaucer’s source manuscript was a good one: it is close to what Petrarch actually wrote” (110).

The story that Chaucer tells follows Petrarch's original nearly exactly. Griselda is tested by her husband and ultimately passes all his tests. Just as in Petrarch's version, Griselda's obedience is a model that humans should follow in respect to God. To drive these points home, the Clerk cites two biblical examples. The first of these biblical analogues to Griselda is Job. The Clerk says:

Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse  
As clerkes, whan hem list, konne wel endite,  
Namely of men, but as in soothfastnesse  
Though clerkes preise women but a lite,  
Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite  
As woman kan, ne kan been half so trewe  
As women been. (932-38)

The Clerk acknowledges Griselda as being equal in obedience to Job, who suffered for God. However, by proclaiming that no man can be "half so trewe" as a woman, the Clerk maintains his dual intentions as he draws attention back to the Wife of Bath, who accused clerks of always speaking ill of women. However, he is still not ready to attack her outwardly, so he continues on with his story, which to this point still appears to be nothing more than a retelling of Petrarch's exemplum of spiritual obedience.

This proves the duality of the Clerk's purpose. He keeps the Wife of Bath in everyone's mind while at the same time continuing his moral message. However, the Clerk does not leave his discussion of Job here. Instead, he seeks to strengthen the comparison between Griselda and Job. The Bible describes Job, like Griselda, as being spiritually strong.

Depicted as “true, honest...and far from wrong-doing,” Job lives a righteous life (1:1).<sup>70</sup> However, Satan condemns this righteousness as being nothing more than an attempt to get God’s blessings saying, “Job fears his God...and loses nothing by it/ Sheltered his life by Thy protection...he loses nothing/ One little touch of Thy hand, assailing that wealth of his...then see how he will turn and blaspheme thee” (1:10-12). In order to prove that His servant is indeed righteous, God allows Satan power over Job that culminates in the destruction of everything that Job holds dear, including his children. However, despite his suffering, Job refuses to curse God instead exclaiming, “should we accept the good fortune God sends, and not the ill?” (2:10). The implications of this are clear. If only good things happened to the righteous, Satan would have little chance at tempting them; therefore, Satan pursues the God-fearing with an even greater zeal than he pursues the pagan. However, through all of these trials, God expects the righteous man to maintain his integrity. In doing so, mankind can expect to be rewarded for its faithfulness just as God rewards Job at the end of the Biblical narrative.

Griselda echoes the spiritual purity of Job’s example. The narrator marks her as a living example of God’s grace by saying, “But hye God somtyme sende kan / His grace into a litel oxes stalle” (206-7). The narrator also describes her tastes as more inclined to take “Wel offer of the welle than of the tonne” (215). Griselda’s tastes, like Job’s, are for things natural and pure, such as water over alcohol. Like Job, she undergoes a series of trials that test her ability to maintain her virtues. Satan accuses God of putting a hedge around Job, making it easy to maintain his faithfulness because of his easy living. Walter accuses Griselda of a similar motivation when he says:

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<sup>70</sup> All Biblical quotes that follow come from the *Knox Holy Bible*, a translation from the Vulgate authorized by the Hierarchy of England and Wales. Chaucer most likely would have used the Vulgate for his own Bible study.

Griselde quod he, that day  
That I yow took out of your povere array  
And putte yow in estaat of heigh noblesse  
Ye have nat that forgotten

.....

Maketh you not foryetful for to be

That I yow took in povre estaat ful lowe. (466-69,72-73)

The implications of this accusation are that Griselda will no longer be able to maintain her virtues now that she has been elevated into nobility. For Griselda, her humble background is like Job's hedge. Like Job, Griselda must prove that she can maintain her obedience even when life destroys her "hedge."

In addition to the obvious narrative parallels between the Job story and the "Clerk's Tale," the language of the tale echoes the biblical story. When Walter examines his wife's faithfulness, he refuses to accept its reality. Instead, he "in his herte longeth so / To tempte his wyf" (451). The parallels continue after Griselda's temptations begin. Faced with being turned out of her home, she says, "For as I lefte hoom al my clothing / Whan I first cam to yow, right so, quod she, / Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee" (654-56). Like Job, she refuses to curse her master, instead choosing to endure patiently all her trials, and her patience wins her a full return to glory. Just as Job casts off his sackcloth, Griselda's servants "stripen hire out of hire rude array" (1116). The story of Job states that "a richer man the Lord made Job now than he had been in old days," and Griselda receives the same (42.12). Just as Job's gift for following God is peace for the rest of his life, Griselda's virtue wins "pees and reste" for her entire kingdom (1136).

In this way, the Clerk actually strengthens the religious message already present in Petrarch. While Petrarch mentions Job and makes the comparison between him and Griselda, the Clerk adds to this, making it an even more important part of the story. Thus, the Clerk continues to keep his audience off guard. Everything he says seems to be leading up to the expected moral conclusion while he continues to wait for his chance to strike at the Wife of Bath.

To enhance Petrarch's exemplum, the Clerk also adds a reference to Saint James into his version of the tale. As noted earlier, Petrarch was fully aware that his story echoed the teachings of James, and he wrote about it in one of his letters to Boccaccio.<sup>71</sup> However, in order to strengthen further the religious message of the tale (and hide his true purpose) the Clerk cites Saint James inside his narrative. In closing his tale, the Clerk says, "But he tempteth no man that he boghte / As seith Seint Jame, if ye his pistel rede / He preeveth folk al day, it is no drede" (1154-1156). James has always been a difficult book for theologians. Even today, many theologians grapple with the idea that James "seems to contradict the Biblical teaching that people are saved by faith and not by good deeds" when he declares that "faith without deeds is dead" (Barker 1882). However, this passage was considered "perfectly orthodox" during the Middle Ages, demonstrating that, like Job, a man proves his faithfulness by his actions, and one expected action is overcoming temptation (McNamara 187).

Bede, the Middle Age's foremost authority on James, explains that there are two types of temptation, external temptation that tests man's faith in "divine justice" and

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<sup>71</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, Chaucer most likely had access to the letter in which Petrarch mentions James; however, Chaucer adds this citation into the story itself and thus aids his audience's understanding of the tale's spiritual dimension.

internal temptation that tests men's "desire to turn away from God" (qtd. McNamara 189).<sup>72</sup>

The belief is that mankind undergoes constant temptation from outside forces, family, friends, the natural world, fortune, but through all these tests, humankind proves its faithfulness by maintaining its loyalty to God. A study of the book of James reveals this idea. Over and over again, the epistle of James proclaims that believers should "consider yourselves happy indeed...when you encounter trials of every sort/ as men who know well enough that the testing of their faith breeds endurance" (1:2-3). In this way, temptation is not a trap to fall into but is instead the instrument by which faith is measured. Without Walter's tests, it is impossible to judge the faithfulness of Griselda. Thus, the book of James is of key importance to understanding the nature of Griselda's passivity.

Each time the sergeant comes to take away her child, Griselda responds without complaint, earning the blessings promised in James to "the man who endures under trial" (1:12). In closing his epistle, James notes that everyone has heard of "Job's endurance and has seen how kind and merciful the lord is in rewarding us" (5:11-12). For James, Job personifies the idea that patience and obedience through great temptation is the proof of a person's faithfulness. In the "Clerk's Tale," Chaucer creates another such example. A common criticism of the "Clerk's Tale" is that Griselda's passivity is "unnatural" and is itself "sinful" (Pelen 10). However, this reading ignores the authorities that the clerk calls upon for support, for there is nothing "unnatural" about Griselda to Petrarch, Job, or James. In order to prove their faith, humans must overcome temptation from external forces. In conquering these temptations, people prove their faithfulness. As the clerk says, "every wight, in his degree / sholde be constant in adversitee" (1146). Griselda,

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<sup>72</sup> McNamara does not attempt to prove that Chaucer read Bede. However, he does note that this idea was widespread in the Middle Ages and appears in other *Tales*.

like Job, represents the example of obedience that people must strive for in their relationships with God, and like Job, her tale demonstrates the gift of “pees and reste” that those who persevere win as their reward.

Again, this is exactly the message that Petrarch argues in his tale. After his tale ends, the Clerk even explicates this as the moral of his story, saying:

This storie is seyde nat for that wyves sholde  
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,  
For it were inportable, though they wolde  
But that every wight, in his degree,  
Sholde be constant in adversitee  
As was Grisilde; therefore Petrark writeth

This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth. (1142-48)

Here the Clerk iterates that this is a tale about obedience to God. Like Petrarch, whom the Clerk has once again mentioned, the Clerk sees Griselda as an example of mankind’s expected obedience to God, for if Griselda could show such obedience to a mere mortal, how much more should all people be able to obey God? The Clerk has finished his story and gives every indication that it was the type of moral story that his audience expected him to tell. However, the Clerk is not finished. Having done justice to Petrarch, a fellow clerk and his source, he now turns the tale around on the unsuspecting Wife. However, before examining the “Lenvoy de Chaucer,” and the Clerk’s true intentions for the tale, it is necessary to examine how subtly and skillfully the Chaucer changed Petrarch’s religious exemplum for his own purpose. As discussed earlier, Severs notes that Chaucer only slightly changes Petrarch’s work, and in many cases, he maintains the exact

phrasing of his Latin original. Therefore, it is important to note each of these subtle differences, especially in light of the Clerk's dual intentions. The changes that Chaucer makes to Petrarch's narrative do not lessen the effect of Petrarch's spiritual exemplum in any way; instead, Chaucer uses them to prepare his audience for the Clerk's attack on the Wife at the end of the tale and in the "Lenvoy de Chaucer."<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most noteworthy difference between the "Clerk's Tale" and its source material is the amount of narratorial interjection that Chaucer allows the Clerk. Petrarch's narrator makes very few comments over the course of the story and never attempts to color the readers' attitude toward a particular character. Indeed, Petrarch's narrator is often apologetic on Walter's behalf. The Clerk, on the other hand, constantly interjects his own opinions into the story, and these interjections are a calculated attempt on his part to strengthen his upcoming attack on the Wife of Bath. Before the marquis ever begins his test, the Clerk condemns him, saying:

He hadde assayed hire ynogh before,  
And foond hire evere good; what neded it  
Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,  
Though som men preise it for a subtil wir?  
But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit  
To assaye a wyf whan it is no need. (456-61)

The Clerk makes sure that his audience understands that Walter is wrong for testing Griselda. The proper role of a husband is to honor and love his wife, and since Walter already knows the extent of Griselda's virtuousness, it is "evil" to test it any further. The Clerk repeats this

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<sup>73</sup> What follows are the most obvious changes between the works of Chaucer and Petrarch. For a more detailed description of the many changes between the two texts, readers should examine Piero Boitani's *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento* or J. Burke Severs *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale*.



censure several times during the tests, calling Walter's actions "nedelees" (621). Again, these comments are calculated by the Clerk to drive home his meaning. He has entered a battle with the Wife over marriage, and he is subtly attacking the idea that one spouse should have "mastery" over another. By attacking Walter for being unnatural and for failing in his marital role, the Clerk is showing his audience of the danger if either spouse abuses his or her power. However, by appearing to side with Griselda in attacking the husband, something the Wife of Bath would have surely approved of, the Clerk continues to obfuscate this intended meaning. Indeed, the Clerk carefully disguises his true intentions until he sings his song in his closing speech.

Another example of Chaucer's carefully planned changes is the characterization of Walter's sergeant. When Chaucer's sergeant is compared to Petrarch's, Chaucer's stands as a much more diabolical character. Petrarch's sergeant is "a faithful man" who asks Griselda to "spare him...and not lay blame for what I am forced to do" and who does his job "with many a plea of the necessity of obedience ... and many an entreaty for forgiveness" (Miller 145 and 147, respectively). Chaucer completely erases these signs of the sergeant's humanity. Instead, he seems like a wild man who takes the child "Despitously, and gan a cheere make / As though he wolde han slayne it ere he went" (535-36). Chaucer's sergeant is "an ugly" man whom the narrator condemns by saying "Suspectious was the diffame of this man / Suspect was his face, suspect his word also" (673 and 540-42, respectively). In removing the humanity of Walter's chief agent, Chaucer heightens the effect of Griselda's obedience. As the severity of her trials increases, the power of her example increases in kind. Chaucer's changes to the narrative serve to amplify the example of his source. In this way, Chaucer's Griselda is even more effective than Petrarch's.

The Clerk also makes Griselda a more sympathetic character through her own emotions. As discussed earlier, Petrarch took Boccaccio's demure Griselda and allowed her to play a larger part in the narrative. She has longer speeches, and her thoughts and emotions are more realistically portrayed. The ramification of this change is a more realistic Griselda, and a more satisfying story. The Clerk goes even farther in heightening the emotional impact of Griselda, although he has different reasons for doing so. During the tests, the Clerk displays a Griselda who suffers without complaint in accordance with her wedding vows. Even when cast out of her house, she displays little emotion, and despite the weeping of those whom she passes, she "fro wepyng kepte hire eyen dreye / Ne in this tyme word ne spak she noon" (899-900). At this, the high point of her suffering, she still refuses to break her vow and speak out against her husband. In short, she fulfills her marital role perfectly. However, note the vast difference in Griselda's emotion when the tests end and she is reconciled with her husband:

Whan she this herde, aswowne doun she falleth  
For pitous joye, and after hire swownyng  
She both hire yonge children to hire calleth  
And in hire armes, pitously wepyng  
Embraceth hem, and tenderly kissyng  
Ful lyk a mooder, with hir salte teeres. (1079-84)

The emotional outpouring here seems uncharacteristic of a character who has otherwise been so passive. Once again though, this is merely a part of the Clerk's plan to communicate his meaning. Note the repeated use of the word "pitous." This scene highlights all the suffering that Griselda has endured up to this point. Because of her quiet acceptance of her marital

vows, a reader might have missed the emotional trial that Griselda was suffering. However, in this scene the true depth of her agony is made clear. Furthermore, this deflects any claims that she is unnatural or “has failed” as a mother (Levy 404). She is, in fact, a loving mother. It is Walter who has failed in his role as husband and father by denying her the opportunity to be a mother. For this, Griselda has suffered grievously, and through her suffering, the power of her example multiplies.

Once again, the Clerk is coyly setting up his audience for his final point. In the same way that he uses the cruel sergeant and his own interjections, here he uses Griselda’s emotions to condemn what Walter has done. What reader, after seeing her emotional outpouring at her reunification with her children, could have anything but pity for her? Even though Walter restores her to her previous condition and his subjects seem pleased with the outcome, the Clerk’s audience has not forgotten Griselda’s mistreatment at his hand. The Clerk has taken Walter, whom Petrarch was so careful not to criticize and upon whom Boccaccio centered his story, and made a villain of him. Furthermore, the point must be made that happiness does not return to the kingdom until “Walter hire dooth so faithfully plesaunce” (1111). Only by faithfully fulfilling his proper role in marriage by honoring his wife, does the story end happily. In order to create a truly happy marriage, Walter must quit abusing the power he holds over his wife and seek to honor her, as is his duty. Only then does it become “deyntee for to see the cheere / Bitwixe hem two, now they been met yfeere” (1112-13).

Finally, the Clerk’s true moral comes out. Although he disguised the fact that his tale was told to refute the Wife of Bath, the conclusion of the tale proves that the path to marital happiness, for both husband and wife, is to honor one’s spouse. However, the Clerk is not

finished with the Wife of Bath. In the “Lenvoy de Chaucer,” he makes sure that no one has missed his point about the Wife’s unnatural way of thinking.

The Clerk’s song also marks a change in his attitude, for he leaves the serious business of exemplum for a light-hearted song, which he sings in “troubadour-fashion” (Carruthers 231). He begins by explaining that Griselda is dead and that husbands would be wise not to think their own wives capable of this kind of obedience.<sup>74</sup> Once again, this is the sort of marital message that the Wife of Bath loves to hear. The Clerk is continuing his masterful performance in hiding his intentions for his tale. He begins by playfully reminding the Wife of her jab at clerks’ inability to say good things about women in his warning to “noble wyves” to avoid Griselda’s example. He says:

Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence  
To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille  
As of Grisildis pacient and kynde,  
Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hir entraille (1185-88)

Of course, the Clerk is being ironic in warning women away from the virtue that his exemplum illustrates, but the Wife would certainly once again be pleased by these words. His invocation of the name Chichevache emphasizes this irony in a way that, because of the reference’s obscurity, is undoubtedly missed by the Wife of Bath. Chichevache is most likely a corruption of “chich face,” which means lean face (Ginsberg 884). This refers to the story of a cow “which fed upon patient wives and consequently had little to eat” (884). She is often contrasted to Bicorné, a two-horned bull, who feasted on patient husbands and “was always fat and in good case” (884). Thus, the clerk’s irony in this passage works in two

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<sup>74</sup> “I crie in open audience/ No wedded mas so hardy be t’assaille/ His wyves pacience in trust to fynde/ Grisildis, for in certain he shal faille” (1179-82).

ways. First, Chichevache only consumes wives of noble character; therefore, those “noble wyves” that follow the Wife of Bath have nothing to fear. Secondly, by calling to mind Bicorné, readers are reminded that only a patient husband could endure a marriage to a woman such as the Wife of Bath.

However, the Clerk is not yet finished with the Wife. This is the moment for which he has been waiting, and he is determined to drive home his point. Continuing in his method of calling upon grand examples to make his points, he next begs all wives to “Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence,/ But evere answereth at the countretaille” (1189-90). Once again, this reference would sound good to the Wife of Bath, for as the Clerk explains, Echo was a woman who was not afraid to speak her mind. Indeed, to this point, a literal reading of the “Lenvoy de Chaucer” seems to show the Clerk playfully agreeing with the Wife. However, once again, the Clerk’s reference is obscured in irony. This reference is less subtle than that of Chichevache, for the story of Echo would be well known to most scholars.<sup>75</sup> Echo was a beautiful nymph and was a favorite of Diana’s. However, her one failing was that in any debate of argument, she had to have the last word. This ultimately caused her downfall during an argument with Juno, who placed a curse upon her. Obviously, Echo makes a fine comparison to the Wife of Bath, who prides herself on her ability to defeat her husbands at arguments. The fact that Echo’s combativeness caused her to be cursed is a warning to those who would follow the Wife of Bath’s way of thinking. Once again, the Clerk has subtly and ironically struck out at the Wife of Bath.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Let us not forget that the Wife of Bath’s last husband, Jankyn, was also a clerk. Therefore, it is conceivable that she begins to notice what the Clerk is truly saying at this point.

<sup>76</sup> It should be noted that men using irony to dupe women is a recurring motif in *The Canterbury Tales*. For example, the Nun’s Priest explains that “mulier est hominis confusio” (3164) means that woman is man’s joy and all his bliss. Of course, it actually means “woman is man’s ruin.”

With this point made, the Clerk moves to end his argument with one more set of ironic instructions to those who would be like the Wife of Bath:

Ye archewyves, stondest at defense,  
Syn ye be strong as is a greet camaille  
Ne suffreth nat that me yow doon offense  
.....  
Ne dred them nat; doth hem no reverence,  
For though thyn housbonde armed be in maille,  
The arwes of thy crabbed eloquence  
Shal perce his brest and eek his aventaille. (1195-97, 1201-4)

The Clerk advises these women not to back down like Griselda did; instead, he bids them to rise up and fight with great vigor. His references to armor, “maille” and “aventaille,” present marriage as a battlefield. In this way, he shows the destructiveness inherent in the Wife’s way of thinking, and with this image firmly in his audience’s mind, he prepares for his final point. He ends his song by saying that if you wives do all these things, you leave your husband to “wepe, wrynge, and waille” (1212). In this way, the Clerk describes the foolish and destructive nature of the Wife of Bath’s way of thinking. The Clerk believes that any woman who follows the Wife’s plan is doomed to an unhappy marriage. The Clerk’s ultimate message to wives seems to be, go ahead and follow the teachings of the Wife of Bath, but be assured, “you will make your husbands miserable, as she did” (Kittredge 143). Thus, although the Wife of Bath may be happy with her marriage, her husbands most certainly are not, and it can hardly be the example of marital bliss. Michael D. Cherniss offers an interesting reading on this that when coupled with the Clerk’s spiritual moral seems

especially appropriate. He says that the Clerk offers women the opportunity to “follow the example of Walter...and make their [husband’s] lives miserable;” in doing so, they will “offer valuable opportunities for spiritual improvement” by allowing their husbands to withstand their tests (243).

After the Clerk completes his tale, the Host, who warned him about telling a moral tale, praises him. His reaction to the tale shows the skill of the Clerk’s irony. Following into the same trap that many modern readers do, the Host says, “By Goddes bones, / Me were levere than a barel ale/ My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones!” (1213a-1215a).<sup>77</sup> In applying the tale’s meaning only to women, the Host understands only the “literal” meaning of the tale and misses the Clerk’s point. The example of Griselda’s obedience outshines the Wife of Bath’s model of mastery. Thus, the Clerk points the way, in his mind at least, towards marital bliss. In order to achieve happiness in marriage, both spouses must honor their proper roles. By setting Griselda up as an object of pity in the face of her husband’s cruelty, he proves that abuse of power by either of the sexes is a destructive force that ultimately leads to unhappiness. However, the Clerk, being a master teacher, has also strengthened the exemplum that he received from Petrarch in such away as to emphasize mankind’s proper role in relation to God. Tests may come, but with patience and obedience, people will overcome their trials. In this way, Chaucer creates a tale that is appropriate both to its narrator and its place within the narrative framework of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

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<sup>77</sup> This stanza does not appear in every edition of the tale, for some of the surviving manuscripts lack it.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that the pilgrims did not follow the plan of telling multiple tales, for if they had, readers might have the opportunity to see the Wife of Bath's rebuttal to the Clerk's Tale. Unfortunately, this did not occur, and therefore modern scholars will be left to wonder about Chaucer's intentions for one of his most debated tales. Warren Ginsberg explains, "Not many *Canterbury Tales* disturb Chaucer's readers as much as the Clerk's...and the Tale's central idea was too revolting for any skill in description to make it palatable" (*Chaucer's* 307). What is it about this tale that evokes such venom? I believe the answer to this is two-sided. First, modern readers, who are used to psychologically realistic characters, cannot accept the exemplum genre. It is simply too foreign to the modern mindset. John Burrow explains this well. He says:

The exemplary model is not very attractive to modern readers. We have been taught by so many good critics to respond so sympathetically...to allegorical stories that the allegorical mode has become more acceptable; but stories which represent themselves as "examples"...are something of an embarrassment. In a fiction which merely exemplifies an ethical concept...or an accepted truth, literature condemns itself to an ancillary role" (82).

The danger in dismissing the exemplum is that we risk losing a valuable tool in understanding medieval literature.

Martin Luther praised Aesop's Fables as being second only to the Bible because the morals of the stories were so good for people. Understanding the journey that the Griselda



story took from Boccaccio to Petrarch to Chaucer helps illuminate the beauty inherent in those “hyperbolic exempla beloved of the childishly single-minded Middle Ages” (Carruthers 221). The story of Griselda was always multi-faceted. Boccaccio’s story retained elements of the Cupid/Psyche folk-tales from which it originated, and Petrarch was well aware that his exemplum of spiritual obedience easily lent itself to a more secular lesson on marriage. Thus, it seems quite fitting that Chaucer’s Clerk chooses to tell a story that fuses two readings that seem so foreign to each other. This dual reading has been suggested many times before, and I hope that my examination of the story’s journey to Chaucer, the “notabilia” that the Clerk uses for support, and the changes that Chaucer chose to make to his source material helps prove the appropriateness of such a reading. The readers of the Middle Ages loved this story. This is evident by the many versions of the patient wife story that followed Boccaccio. Indeed, by 1600 there were at least four English, three Italian, two German, two French, and two Spanish, and one Dutch versions of the tale in existence (Lee 351-53). This, of course, is in addition to the fact that three of the period’s most notable writers saw fit to create their own versions of the tale. This in itself says something of the story’s value to medieval readers, and studying the story provides an interesting insight into the historical, cultural, and religious mindset of the medieval reader. Hopefully, understanding the historical background for the genre and story will allow modern readers to appreciate it without the venom it has provoked in modern times.

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