Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: an assessment of recent criticism

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Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: An assessment of recent criticism

by

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INTRODUCTION

I doubt if any stories in Chaucer have generated more debate and controversy than the Clerk's Tale. It is, first of all, a story of a marriage so unlike the relationships between men and women which we know that it requires some effort on the part of a modern reader to believe that the Clerk is seriously proposing it to his fellow pilgrims as a model of virtue. Patience in adversity is a moral point worth making, though a modern reader might react more sympathetically to the point were it made less hyperbolically.

The purpose of this study is to find out how a number of critics have responded to the story and the problems it raised. I begin with James Sledd's 1953 article which is the starting point for any contemporary criticism of the Clerk's Tale. The critics surveyed in this study represent a diversity of approaches to the Clerk's Tale. Some are concerned with themes in the Tale; one stresses its kinship to the Epistle of St. James while another reminds us that the story is fantasy. Still others explore such topics as the relationship between the Clerk and the Wife of Bath or the relationship between Walter and his people or the character of Griselda. Each in its own way makes a contribution to the modern reader's understanding of this complex and often controversial tale.
THE CLERK'S TALE: THE MONSTERS AND THE CRITICS

James Sledd

Sledd feels that various effects have been produced on readers of the Clerk's Tale, and that the contemptuous have outnumbered the compassionate admirers. He says that the Tale has suffered because "outstanding scholars have too hastily condemned it" (p. 161).

He refers to Kittredge's article entitled "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage" in which Kittredge gives the impression that Walter and Griselda are monsters. He stresses that the story is a dramatic speech rather than a tale, so that his ardent student followers are inclined to treat the story as such. Professor Malone warns that the predicament is a dangerous one because that might mean that Chaucer deliberately told a bad story in order to make a good drama. Sledd concludes that for the solution of the problems of morality and probability in the Tale, Kittredge would not be the best to consult.

He also considers Professor Griffith's book, The Origin of the Griselda Story, and the article by Mr. W. A. Cate, "The Problem of the Origin of the Griselda Story." Sledd notes that both writers assert that the story is "peculiar, contradictory, and irrational" (p. 163). Both authors' Griselda is "no longer the saintly heroine of a piteous, marvelous and gracious tale" (p. 163). Both Griffith and Cate are convinced that something is radically wrong with the story.
Sledd does not quite agree that the story is so thoroughly improbable as Griffith and Cate seem to believe. He believes that knowledge of literary origins should only be a means to interpretation and not a substitute for it, and so we cannot accurately compare the literary versions of the Griselda story with the folk tale from which they sprang.

Sledd examines a fourth book in which the author, Professor Severs, tells us more about the Clerk's Tale itself than any of the other three. It also differs in scope and purpose. Sledd says that the author set himself to "determine precisely the poet's sources for his tale of Griselda; to establish satisfactory texts of the sources; and to examine the poet's treatment of them" (p. 165). Sledd concerns himself only with the first and fourth chapters.

The main difficulty that arises in Severs' account is that Chaucer did nothing to make the story less absurd. He merely heightened and intensified the contrasts which the story offered. Sledd disagrees with Severs by saying that it is hard to see how an already absurd plot could be made more effective by heightening its absurdity. Severs compares the Clerk's Tale with its sources, not structurally, but word for word.

Sledd emerges from this brief survey with the conclusion that the problems of morality and probability are insoluble within the Tale. He questions why the cruelty and diabolical behavior of Walter are represented without proper abhorrence,
or even with the praise that should be reserved for virtue. He does not understand why anybody should admire the story. He says that he does not know whether the story is meant to be a sermon or a story or both together.

Sledd proceeds to talk about the moral question. Thomas Lounsbury in *Studies in Chaucer*, raises that point. Sledd notes that according to Lounsbury, the events of the Griselda story, "while susceptible of poetic treatment, are in no way consonant with the truth of life, and its central idea . . . is too revolting . . . for any skill in description to make it palatable. Her patience outrages every instinct of maternity" (p. 167).

Sledd wonders what would become of Griselda's children after such an extraordinary childhood, and also the Pope whose counterfeit letters are made the excuse for taking another wife. He reminds us that Chaucer ultimately forbids us to apply the rules of his fictional world outside his fiction. Inasmuch as he admits that a number of effects are inherent in the material, he warns that to destroy the extremes in the Griselda story would be to destroy its effect, but a wrong treatment could make those same extremes sickening.

Finally, Sledd while defending a few charges against the *Clerk's Tale*, mentions that gross sentimentality would indeed be a more likely charge against it than improbability, and he, like most critics, does not wish that the Tale were any longer.
Michael D. Cherniss

Cherniss is of the opinion that of the variety of themes in the Clerk's Tale, the marital theme is the most prominent. The Clerk seems to favor the spiritual theme of constancy. But interestingly enough, many commentators have shown convincing evidence of the relationship between the marital and the spiritual themes. If the Clerk's Tale were indeed an allegory, then upholding the spiritual meaning of the story would seem perfectly justified. Chaucer portrays Griselda's obedience and devotion and the curiosity of Walter who tests her to prove to himself that she will always remain faithful to her vow of obedience. She never thinks of Walter as God to whom only her spiritual devotion is due.

Every man, like Griselda, ought to be constant. The story of her marriage is connected to its moral because her marriage became a source of adversity which she fully endured. Her constancy toward a mortal man ought to convince us that we should remain constant in our faith in God, no matter what adversity He sends us.

Although Boccaccio treats Griselda as a unique and admirable woman, he nevertheless feels that his story is unbelievable, and offers no moral whatsoever. The spiritual moral
first appears in Petrarch who warns his readers that Griselda should not be taken as a model to be imitated by wives. Despite the fact that Chaucer tried to make his story credible, many of his readers find it difficult to believe in Griselda as a real person or even to sympathize with her. The Wife of Bath would certainly not be on Griselda's side. Chaucer's device in allaying his readers' objections to his tale is the moral supplied by Petrarch. The Tale seems to exist only for the sake of its spiritual moral. But this unexpected moral only serves to divert readers' attention from a sad story.

Most of Chaucer's critics read the envoy as irony that means the opposite of what it says. This would mean that Griselda would be a model for wives to imitate, just as the Wife of Bath's ideal of female dominance is to be ignored. This ironic view does not completely explain the envoy. The other level of irony in the envoy is that it means what it says, but not for selfish reasons that would make it appeal to the Wife of Bath and her group. Women can follow Walter's example and test their husbands by providing the adversity. Their spouses could improve spiritually if they take their adversity in the proper spirit.

The double irony in the envoy apart from making the marital theme more prominent, also unites it with the spiritual. Wives have the option of aspiring toward Griselda and benefiting spiritually through their constancy, or turning away
from Griselda to the Wife of Bath and providing their husbands the opportunity of attaining spiritual heights exemplified by Job and Griselda. The real moral of the Clerk's Tale and his envoy is "that both partners should assume their proper roles in marriage, aspire to constancy in the face of adversity, and avoid being themselves the occasion for adversity" (p. 243).

Most of the elements that Chaucer combines to produce the complex irony of the Clerk's epilogue and envoy appear prominently in the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale. She jokingly describes herself as the metaphorical "purgatory" on earth of her fourth husband. This metaphor of marriage as purgatory underlies the second level of irony in the Clerk's envoy; wives who through their shrewishness cause their husbands tribulation may perform a valuable, spiritual service. The Clerk suggests that beneath the Wife's joke lie spiritual truths of which she is apparently unaware.

The first lines of the Merchant's Prologue are similar to the final line of the Clerk's envoy. The Merchant's wife is the direct opposite of Griselda. The Merchant feels that marriage is a purgatory on earth. This conception of marriage makes it impossible for him to think that a marriage can even be near enough to the Clerk's ideal.
THE EVOLUTION OF THE "CLERK'S TALE": A STUDY IN CONNOTATION

Alfred L. Kellogg

Kellogg notes that the three greatest literary and clerical minds of the fourteenth century - Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Petrarch - were all powerfully attracted to the story of the patient Griselda. This story by its very nature poses problems for any writer of the Christian era. The story seems to originate as a variant of the Cupid and Psyche myth, in which, to merit the love of the god, the mere mortal must expect to be put to superhuman temptations to break the taboo which is the binding link between immortal and mortal. Griselda scorns nature in excelling all that can be expected in woman, and yields up her children to what she firmly believes to be brutal murder.

Boccaccio is the first to attempt to contradict certain elements of the Griselda story. In his account, Griselda, constant in both prosperity and adversity, mirrors the human soul striving to be worthy of the love of her Lord.

Petrarch's chief contribution to the Griselda story lies in his conservation of the vocabulary he inherited from Boccaccio. He also adds to it allusions with a strong appeal to the visual sense, the most striking of which occurs when immediately before the wedding she is stripped in front of the populace. This is done to prevent her from bringing in any of
her old rags to her new home. Petrarch associates Griselda on the one hand with the love of Mary Magdalene for Christ and on the other with the patience of Job. To the patience of Job is added the humility of Mary. Walter presents a far more difficult problem for him. Petrarch's Walter is introduced as a model youth, noble in blood and spirit. He suffers progressively over the sufferings he inflicts on his wife. Nobody knows why he inflicts these sufferings. If Walter tempts, he cannot be a God-figure. He can, however, be diabolic, which would accord perfectly with the Job allusion. It is difficult to make of Walter a consistent figure on any level. He is sometimes satanic, sometimes he is the power behind fortune, and sometimes a kind of sentimental sadist. The introduction of the James 1, 13, text concerning temptation rules out Walter as a God-figure, but he is also never quite Satanic.

Griselda is in the second temptation very much like what she was in the first. She is as usual associated with humility and patience, but the ratio is reversed. Her patience surpasses her humility. Only an incredible patience proceeding from an incredible love keeps her from breaking her bond. One sees here how perfectly Chaucer has carried out what was implied in Petrarch's identical Job allusion. The temptation is the same, the means of temptation are the same - the giving and taking away of children, possessions, worldly position. The reaction to temptation is the same - refusal to become
related with what has been given, refusal to question the justice behind the suffering inflicted by deprivation.

The most readily determinable element in Walter is temptation. If Job is a figure for Griselda, it would make no sense if Satan were not an opposite figure for Walter. Griselda leaves Walter's house stripped of all that she most highly valued. The Job image is here as moving and as appropriate as anyone could imagine.

In Kellogg's view, Walter is a composite of all the supernatural forces to which medieval man felt himself exposed. He is Fortune, raising man up and casting him down, stripping and clothing him. He is Satan. He is God, the master of both, proving his creature, but always with her, urging against the act which would sever the bond between them, revealing ultimately that the world possesses no reality. If Griselda's perfection be viewed as a figure of the human spirit struggling through prosperity and adversity to attain union with the heavenly bridegroom, it is her love which drives her on. As divine or human, she is perfection. Petrarch therefore does not tell this story with the intent of urging present-day women to imitate Griselda's humility, because it is impossible. His story is told simply that every person should be constant in adversity.
HUMILITY AND OBEEDIENCE IN THE CLERK'S TALE, WITH
THE ENVOY CONSIDERED AS AN IRONIC AFFIRMATION

Irving N. Rothman

Rothman's study demonstrates that "the envoy is a stanza­by-stanza contradiction of the virtues taught in the six separate parts of the Clerk's Tale" (p. 115). Parts 2 and 6 of the Tale stress humility and parts 3, 4, and 5 stress obedience. Each stanza of the envoy is an ironic contrast to the motif stressed in the corresponding part of the Tale. The second stanza of the envoy, for example, speaks of pride in contrast to the theme of humility in part 2 of the Tale and part 3 of the Tale which teaches obedience is contradicted by the theme of free will in the third stanza of the envoy.

The need for obedience is a theme at the heart of Kittredge's "Marriage Group," for the Clerk stresses man's responsibility to God's order, an order that requires an obedience which is paralleled by the submission of a subject to a ruler, of a wife to husband, of a child to parents. The obedience and humility shown by Griselda become examples for all mankind.

Of the two themes in the Tale humility is the major one and obedience a secondary and related theme. The Tale can be seen as a virtue story and the Clerk as the narrator of an exemplum. The theme of humility contrasts with pride, the major theme of the Wife of Bath's Tale and obedience contrasts
with disobedience, the minor theme of the Wife's tale. Thus the Clerk is set in "direct moral opposition to the Wife of Bath" (p. 117).

Humility and obedience are not mutually exclusive themes rather they are related in such a way that they cannot always be separated to show distinct development. But the structural decisions made by Chaucer in his version of the Tale show the dominance of humility as a theme. The Chart Rothman attaches to his paper shows that Chaucer's deviations from his sources play an important role in a study of the relationship of structure and theme. There are a few differences between the Petrarchan and the French tales. In Petrarch, moral passages that deal with the theme of humility occur but not in the French version. Chaucer obviously got his thematic pattern from the Latin tale.

The difference in structure is responsible for the difference in emphasis. The main plot and moral of the Tale appears in parts 3, 4, and 5 of the French version. Part 6 deals essentially with the portrayal of Griselda's constancy, a virtue that the author repeatedly tells us is almost impossible in real life. In the French version the test ends with Walter's revelation of the identity of the children. In Chaucer the test is concluded when Griselda is sent back to her father's home, "having proven her obedience to her husband's will but more to her steadfastness in adversity" (p. 121).
Concluding each test, Chaucer devotes a stanza to the theme of humility. Some passages in Chaucer's parts 2 and 6 in addition to emphasizing the humility motif show the parallelism of his structure. In each part significant stanzas which bear climactic emphasis parallel each other. In part 2, Walter makes his intention to marry Griselda known. In related stanzas in part 6, Walter says that he wishes to keep her as his wife.

There is an additional evidence in the Clerk's Tale that supports the idea behind this paper that Chaucer's main theme was that of humility, and obedience his secondary one. This evidence lies in the envoy which has the same structure as the Tale itself. The envoy contradicts the Tale, and the sudden reversal of the tone of the Clerk's narration makes for its irony. The envoy has six stanzas. Each stanza serves the purpose of each part in the Tale. Stanzas 2 and 6 deal with lack of humility and stanzas 3, 4, and 5 deal with disobedience. Griselda's humility serves as a contrast to the pompous attitude of the women in the Clerk's contemporary society. The envoy in addition to serving as an ironic statement that reverses the motif of the Clerk's Tale, also parodies it by initiating the structural balance that Chaucer had achieved in the Tale.

The envoy closely resembles the stand taken by the Wife of Bath, whom the Clerk is refuting, and obviously ridicules
contemporary woman who is constantly accused of pride. The Clerk by contradicting the Wife of Bath's principle proves that Griselda's humility is preferred to the Wife's sin of pride.
The Clerk's Tale presents a serious problem to Chaucer critics. Although many readers recognize real merit in the Tale, some of Chaucer's ardent admirers feel that Walter's monstrous behavior makes Griselda's subservience and their eventual reunion implausible, if not downright offensive. McNamara says that some of the most serious objections to the Tale can be resolved by following Chaucer's own suggestion to use the Epistle of St. James as a key to its meaning. He, therefore, proposes to set forth the teaching of St. James in some detail and to show how the Clerk's Tale is in large part a dramatization of that teaching. Chaucer considered the Tale precious enough to assign it to the only "philosophre" (p. 185) among the Canterbury pilgrims.

A brief look at earlier versions shows that Chaucer's reference to the epistle of St. James had not always been part of the story. Boccaccio, who composed the first literary rendition of the Tale, did not attempt to present the action in Christian terms. Through his narrator he concludes that Griselda should have answered her husband's cruelty with adultery. Petrarch, basing his account on Boccaccio, sees Griselda as a model of the good wife and Christian, a model for which he invoked the authority of the epistle of St. James. He
did not, however, fully develop the implications of St. James's teaching on patience, temptation, grace and works throughout the narrative. He referred to St. James simply to support his own conclusion that man should, like Griselda, submit patiently to adversity in order to prove his worth to God.

The theme of the Clerk's Tale is essentially the same as that of St. James's epistle. Griselda undergoes trials at the hands of Walter, but this is what all men must expect in life. According to St. James, God permits evil and suffering as tests for man to prove his faith. For the Christian, as St. James points out, patience is a creative cooperation with the divine will. It is man's proper response to trials of his faith, the manner in which he manifests his faith in works.

McNamara notes that some critics contend that Griselda's virtue is not patience but constancy. This is partly true because she does remain constant in her fidelity to Walter. Constancy is static whereas patience is a positive, dynamic alliance with the divine will.

When Walter comes to marry Griselda, he asks for her assent to the marriage and its conditions. Her free choice obligates her to accept both good and bad eventualities in their marriage. By entering the marriage on this condition, Griselda accepts whatever trials God may send her in that marriage with a patient response to her husband, which ultimately means a patient cooperation with the divine will.
In this way, she clearly intends to justify her faith, in Jamesian terms, through works as a patient wife.

The meaning of the term "tempte" (p. 188) raises an important question. Chaucer clearly shows that God has sent external temptations to Griselda in order to test her faith. But at the same time, Walter has himself succumbed to the sinful desire to "tempte" his wife when he decides to pretend the murder of their children. Since Walter already has proof of his wife's fidelity, his continued tests exceed his rights as husband and lord. The tests that Walter uses to try his wife are external temptations through which God tests her faith in divine justice.

At the beginning, Walter's good qualities are described, and the narrator goes on to point out his central moral flaw. As a young man Walter had forgotten that he would provide his people with an heir. Under pressure, he eventually gives in to their demand to take a wife. His willful testing of his wife's patience usurps authority belonging only to God. Walter is not satisfied when Griselda passes his inhuman tests. At the end, the Clerk likens Griselda's patience to Job's. Job also was God's faithful servant, and his fidelity was rewarded with happiness and prosperity. Walter stands in the same relation to Griselda as the devil does to Job. The only difference is that Walter is not trying to destroy Griselda's faith in God. Griselda has succeeded in making him recognize
her virtues and the power they have in overcoming adversity. The Clerk does not agree that wives should actually respond to cruel husbands with the patience of Griselda but sees Walter as serving God's purpose by providing her with the means to prove her faith.
THE WIFE OF BATH AND THE CLERK

Stephen Axelrod

Over the past half century there has been many critical studies of the relationship between the Wife of Bath and the Clerk in The Canterbury Tales. So far no explanation of it has been entirely satisfactory. Since Kittredge's article, most critics have joined him in saying that there is an intense antagonism between Alisoun and the Clerk. This assertion is not very pleasant. Kittredge and other critics are probably unaware that the Wife of Bath has a crush on the Clerk which might even make him her sixth husband.

Since Chaucer did not finish The Canterbury Tales, nobody knows neither how the poem would have turned out had it been completed, nor what adjustments and improvements Chaucer would have made in the portions that we have. Chaucer is a subtle and competent poet and this is what people of all ages have come to respect most of all. Still, this artistry which makes final evaluation so difficult makes the effort worthwhile.

Kittredge's article, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage" provides a good starting point for an inquiry into the relationship between the Wife of Bath and the Clerk. Although Axelrod disagrees with one of his points, he nevertheless points out that it is the most influential and, perhaps, the most durable piece of Chaucer criticism in this century. Kittredge's point is that some of The Canterbury Tales are
"determined to some extent by the circumstances, by the situa-
tion at the moment, by something that another Pilgrim has said
or done, by the turn of discussion already under way" (cited on
p. 110). He cites the Miller and the Reeve, the Friar and the
Summoner as examples of this generalization. Axelrod disagrees
with Kittredge in applying this generalization to the case of
Alisoun and the Clerk.

According to Axelrod, Kittredge fails to judge tone
accurately. Although he is aware that Chaucer's purpose in
The Canterbury Tales is essentially comic, he insists that the
Wife and the Clerk are engaged in a serious duel. In order to
show the hostility between the two, Kittredge is forced to mis-
read the Clerk's character, the Wife's attacks on clerks in
general and the Clerk's reaction to the Wife's speech.
Kittredge has concluded that the description of the Clerk in
the General Prologue is true. All the descriptions in the
Prologue are ironical. Chaucer the pilgrim gives minute and
accurate physical descriptions, but he does not wish us to
make even the simplest kinds of assumptions or judgments about
the men and events he observes.

Chaucer lays emphasis on the point that the Clerk is
silent. It is also stressed by the Host in his address to the
Clerk. According to Axelrod's calculations, the Clerk ranks
fourth in total number of words spoken in the poem. The Clerk
only speaks at the Host's request in the Clerk's Prologue and
Tale. It is perhaps more sensible to conclude that the Clerk is capable of voicing his opinion when given the opportunity. Axelrod disagrees with Kittredge's assertion that the Clerk was celibate because of lack of evidence in the text. Although Chaucer does not indicate that he was offended by the Wife of Bath's Prologue, Kittredge insists that the Clerk was scandalized and that the Wife of Bath "had done her best to make the Clerk ridiculous" and he justifies his argument by saying that it is "nothing but straightforward interpretation of the text in the light of circumstances and the situation" (cited on p. 114). Axelrod feels that his own interpretation of that relationship is more in keeping with Chaucer's text as we have it.

The relationship between the Clerk and the Wife of Bath may be interpreted as courtship rather than as anything else because this would continue the sexual motif introduced in the General Prologue, and would be more appropriate to Chaucer's characterization of the Wife. The first motif announced in The Canterbury Tales is sexual and regenerative. The time is Spring and the Pilgrims are reinvigorated in their spirit as well as in their bodies. And if Chaucer intended to include a love relationship among his pilgrims it would almost certainly have to involve the Wife of Bath, since the other two women on the pilgrimage are the Prioress and the Nun. On the basis of this alone, it seems probable that Chaucer intended the Wife
of Bath to be involved in a love situation of some kind.

It is almost certain that the Wife of Bath is looking for a new husband, for she says so on several occasions. Her defense of multiple marriages is partly to justify her past and present behavior. There are good reasons for believing the Wife of Bath is attracted to the Clerk. She tells us that the husband she loved best was a clerk. The Clerk's personality is likely to appeal to the Wife of Bath. His story challenges the Wife's theory of marriage but the Wife specifically indicates she likes troublesome men.

Finally, the Clerk closely resembles the Wife of Bath's fifth husband both in appearance and behavior. Like her previous husband, he is disdainful and gay and the Wife is attracted to these qualities. Their differences, not withstanding, the Clerk and the Wife of Bath are compatible in their persons, personalities and beliefs. The idea of a courtship satisfies the demands of Chaucer's material by supplying a new dimension to the Wife and the Clerk's characterizations, adding vigor and variety to the comic drama taking place, and contributing to the unity and balance of the poem as a whole.
The Clerk's Tale, though on the surface seems to present an answer to the Wife of Bath's inversion of the hierarchy of marriage, actually supplies a theme of obedience applicable to the soul's submission to God. The first covenant is the relationship between Walter and Griselda which is contrasted with that between him and his subjects. A continuation of Walter's line represents an extension of social harmony and well-being. Therefore, the people's request for Walter's marriage is a plea for future order within the state.

The role of the people, when extracted from the body of the narrative, is characterized by varying degrees of discontent. It becomes all too apparent that popular homage to Walter is all lip service and not from the heart. The second covenant is the nature of the relationship between Walter and Griselda which draws its significance from its relation to Christian love. Chaucer clarifies this in the terms Walter fixes to the covenant and in Griselda's agreement to them. The terms of the marriage are stronger than the usual marriage contract. A wife's obedience to her husband should not be beyond reason, and a real wife would find Walter's tests impossible. Griselda's relationship to Walter resembles the relationship of the Christian to God more than it does the relationship of
wife to husband in a real marriage. Thus the Clerk's assertion at the end that he is not really discussing wifely obedience is of great importance to the Tale.

Griselda's obedience is contrasted to the popular unrest. By using the interest of the state as the apparent reason for the disappearance of the children — and the rejection of Griselda, Chaucer re-emphasises this association and Griselda's loyalty to Walter as head of the state. Her response is a reiteration of the terms of their covenant. Walter represents the agent of testing within the Tale. He is not to be confused with God or divine Law. In order to understand his position in the narrative, it is necessary to consider the medieval conception of a good ruler within a state. Chaucer states that Walter is a figure of honor and courtesy who rules in a peaceful hereditary succession. Furthermore, Walter demonstrates his love of virtue and lack of false pride in his choice of Griselda. To call him a tyrant is probably to join the Wife of Bath and the people in their preference for the letter of the law.

The Tale is one of the most artificial of The Canterbury Tales. Literally Walter should not, as Chaucer points out, test his wife beyond reason. In order to come to terms with him as he appears in the Clerk's Tale, it is necessary to recognize his position as head of the state, as image of the law, and as protector of communal order. The people's response
to Walter is essentially an Old Testament response to Law, taking comfort in the letter of the Law rather than in the spirit that creates the Law. Their rejection of the social hierarchy basic to social order is emblematic of their rejection of faith. For this reason, their obedience is merely token, having no foundation in love. In order that the Clerk's Tale not be read too literally, the moral is stated clearly at the end. It is the key to the Tale.
E. Pearlman

Pearlman acknowledges the gracefulness and beauty of the Clerk's Tale but quickly adds that it is far removed from our everyday experience. We are aware that our emotion is playing on us even as we read the account of the reconciliation of Walter and Griselda. The actions of both of them are unnatural. Pearlman prefers to call the Clerk's Tale "high and serious comedy" (p. 248) designed only for the purposes of entertainment since it employs many comic devices. He is perplexed that such an antagonist as Walter escapes totally unpunished and unpurged. In spite of obvious problems, the Tale almost always succeeds in arousing admiration and sometimes even enthusiasm in its readers.

Most modern critics who seem to admire the story somehow imply that the story is an allegory. Griselda could either be seen as Patience herself, or, as human perfection. Pearlman denies the validity of any of these formulas. He warns that we should look on the Tale only as a theological allegory. The story is defective since it manipulates characters and emotions for symbolic purposes.

Pearlman asserts that Griselda's attachment to her father seems more than familial and that Walter is a father substitute. Walter in addition suffers from a conflict between his sexual desire and dread of incest. Sending his children to his sister
is an expression of his feelings about death and incest. By banishing his children, he probably wishes to produce children incestuously (by his sister). Pearlman says the argument is not entirely convincing because it is not as persuasive in its present form as it was in the original.

Griselda regards herself as Walter's tool. She surrenders her body and will to him and adopts the role of a child toward her husband. Pearlman adds that Griselda's condition is not without its rewards since abandonment of the self and responsibility for one's person produces the liberty of the child. Griselda's relation to Walter can best be understood in terms of this analogy. This particular kind of relationship is more often encountered in a child's relation to his parents or a man's to God. This state is usually characterized by loss of selfhood and the denial of the ego. But in some extreme cases one of the parties must be "dominant and fickle, and dispense the law," (p. 252) and the other party derive satisfaction only by obedience. In the case in question, Walter monopolizes authority, power and self. Griselda is childlike and looks upon Walter as God.

Griselda has clearly established a dependent relationship with her husband, and under stress, she reacts exactly as we might expect. She does not attempt to rectify the situation by self-assertion, but becomes even more indissolubly attached to her tormentor.
Pearlman concludes that psychological reality for Chaucer is not inhuman. Against our better judgments we are aware that the Tale represents a human reality, and under the pressure of Chaucer's art, we grudgingly yield to it.
Warren Ginsberg

Since Boccaccio ended the Decameron with the story of Griselda, it has been retold again and again. But neither Boccaccio's nor Petrarch's version has evoked as controversial a response as has Chaucer's version as told by the Clerk. The changes made by Chaucer bring together secular and religious details. Petrarch's version and Boccaccio's differ considerably. Petrarch clearly states that he intends his tale to have a religious overtone. Boccaccio's account relates to the everyday world, a polluted and empty world. Petrarch wishes us to see Griselda as the moral and spiritual center of the story. But he urges us to emulate only the constancy of her faith not the patience she exhibits under the pressure of Walter's temptation. Just as she was faithful to a mortal man, so should we be to God.

It is hard to reconcile Walter's testing of Griselda with conjugal love and even more spiritual love. But Petrarch hints throughout his story that Walter's actions are destined by God and that Griselda's actions are similar to Christ's. And all through the tale, Petrarch tries to divert our attention from Walter and onto some other character. Petrarch, then, found the Griselda story worthwhile but only slightly flawed and its "sentence" almost consonant with Christian ethics. Petrarch admits in his dedicatory letter to Boccaccio that he had
admired the story of Griselda all his life. Chaucer's version of the story poses a number of problems for us. Chaucer followed Petrarch's narrative nearly to the letter. Yet in the Clerk's Tale there are introduced realistic, sentimental and religious attitudes that sometimes direct our attention to the moral purpose of the story and sometimes distract us from it. And although Chaucer actually made these additions, he makes the Clerk responsible for them.

The Clerk's complaints against Walter make us sympathize with Griselda's plight and remind us of Walter's cruelty, of his tempting his wife, who had already proved her virtue. Griselda deserves our attention and praise, not our sympathy. In Petrarch's account, Griselda never despaired, because her faith and constancy precluded despair but the Clerk makes us feel that Griselda has suffered even to the point of despair, and that her final joy springs from the depth of her anguished soul.

In a human situation, Griselda does not speak as a parent, but as a personification of devotion. She keeps flashing back and forth as a saintly martyr to Walter's demands, and as an anguished mother for the Clerk's pity. She is caught between the conflicting demands of two incompatible worlds. In Chaucer's version, God's name is invoked more frequently than in Petrarch's, and the Clerk adds many descriptive details that have religious connotations. There is a passage which likens
Griselda's humbleness to Job's. By the time Griselda is likened to Job, the reader is likely to complete the comparison and identify Walter with Satan.

Chaucer's additions to the Tale made it more complex. In the Prologue, the Clerk is meek and compares Griselda to Job describing her with images of the Nativity. In the envoy, he is an exuberant young man who objects to Walter's cruelty. The Clerk, in sum, is a complex man whose high style we may gladly hope to teach and understand. Chaucer feels a person's character is related to the kind of story he tells and the way he tells it.
CONCLUSION

After examining four other works on the Clerk's Tale, Sledd comes up with the conclusion that morality and probability are problems that will ever remain insoluble within the Tale. Sledd is concerned mainly about the fate of Griselda's children after their extraordinary childhood, and also the Pope whose counterfeit letters are made the excuse for taking another wife. Sledd, while in defense of a few charges against the Tale, mentions that gross sentimentality would be a more likely charge against it than improbability.

A different reading of the Tale by Michael D. Cherniss shows the Clerk stressing the spiritual theme of constancy. Griselda's constancy toward a mortal man ought to convince us that we should remain constant in our faith in God, no matter what adversity He sends us. Walter tests her to prove to himself that she will ever remain faithful to her vow of obedience. She does not think of Walter as God who alone deserves her spiritual devotion.

Griselda's character is the major concern of Alfred L. Kellogg who notes that Griselda scorns nature because she excels in all that can be expected in woman, and gives up her children to be brutally murdered. Kellogg also notes that since Walter tempts, he cannot be a God-figure. If Job is a figure for Griselda, then Satan would be an opposite figure
for Walter. Kellogg's view is that despite Walter's inconsistent figure, it is Griselda's love which carries her through. He sees her as perfection.

In John McNamara's view the Clerk's Tale is essentially the same as the Epistle of St. James. The sufferings of Griselda at the hands of Walter is what all men must expect in life. All evil and suffering are permitted by God as tests for man to prove his faith in God. McNamara points out that since Walter already has proof of his wife's fidelity, his continued tests exceed his rights as husband and lord. By willfully testing his wife's patience, he is arrogating to himself the authority that belongs only to God. The Clerk at the end likens Griselda's patience to Job's. Walter stands in the same relation to Griselda as the devil does to Job. The only difference is that Walter is not trying to destroy Griselda's faith in God.

The relationship between obedience and humility is the focus of another study of the Tale in which Irving N. Rothman shows that humility and obedience are not exclusive themes but are related in such a way that they cannot always be separated to show distinct development. But Chaucer's version stresses the dominance of humility as a theme. In concluding each test Chaucer devotes a stanza to the humility theme.

Stephen Axelrod views the relationship between the Clerk and the Wife of Bath as courtship rather than as anything else.
He says that if ever Chaucer intended to include a love situation among his pilgrims it would almost certainly have to be the Wife of Bath.

In talking about the relationship between Walter and his people, Lynn Staley Johnson suggests that the people's loyalty to Walter is questionable. Walter made an unusual marriage contract with Griselda. Any normal wife would find Walter's demands impossible.

Pearlman, while acknowledging the beauty of the Clerk's Tale, reminds us that it is a fantasy. The actions of the Tale are unnatural but we allow our emotions to control us.

Warren Ginsberg notes that the Clerk's rendering of the Clerk's Tale has sparked off more controversy than both Boccaccio's and Petrarch's versions. The Clerk reminds us of Walter's cruelty and the sufferings of Griselda.

These essays represent a variety of approaches to the story of Griselda and Walter. The various interpretations of the Clerk's Tale cited in this study are evidence of the richness of Chaucer's story and serve to remind us that no single reading of this complex Tale can be the right one.
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