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Author(s): Linda Georgianna
Reviewed work(s):
Source: *Speculum*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Oct., 1995), pp. 793-821
Published by: Medieval Academy of America
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2865344
Accessed: 07/11/2011 16:21

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The Clerk's Tale and the Grammar of Assent

By Linda Georgianna

The Clerk's Tale is the most elusive and least reassuring of Chaucer's religious tales. Though bad things happen to good people in the other religious narratives in the Canterbury collection, repeated assurances in those tales confirm that the world is governed by a powerful God intent on rewarding his faithful followers. By comparison, the Clerk and his tale are disturbingly silent on the subject of God's plan until the very end, leading many readers to categorize the tale as secular, developing in what seems "a moral void" (Cooper, 137), or worse, a perverse story of a bullying tyrant and his spineless wife.[1] In spite of Griselda's virtue, which is attributed to God's grace, she suffers alone, and the reasons for her suffering are made to seem arbitrary and weak. A domestic story of husband and wife set neither in the remote past nor far off in a heathen-filled land, the tale proceeds without the special effects of divine intervention that help guide our response to the stories of Constance, St. Cecilia, and the child-martyr of the Prioress's Tale. Miracles, mass conversions, and mysterious sea journeys seem out of the question in the closed and predictable world of Saluzzo. Even when Walter's people urge him to consider the problem of death, as arbitrary as it is inevitable, the solution they put forward is not transcendent or spiritual but prudential: Walter should settle down, take a wife, and produce an heir. Walter answers the people's mundane "preyere" to "delivere us out of al this bisy drede" in the pragmatic spirit in which it was delivered: he agrees to marry and promptly produces a child (albeit a girl child), removing what seems the only obstacle to complete "felicitee" in the realm.[2]

Even when religious motifs enter the poem, in the biblical allusions attending the description of Griselda's virtue, they enter quietly, with no apparent intention of upsetting the values of prudent accommodation and good government that guide the poem's opening scenes. On the contrary, Griselda's virtue is almost immediately "translated" into the "commune profit" (385, 431). Having observed her transformation from poor subject to wise co-ruler, the people surmise that she was sent by God to preserve the realm and promote the common good:

[1] Readers since the end of the nineteenth century have often been repelled by the story, both because of Walter's brutal behavior and because of Griselda's failure to protect the lives of her children. See Morse, "Critical Approaches," for a useful review of criticism. Some recent critics, especially Engle and Hansen, attempt to rescue Griselda's reputation by crediting her with subversive political power. See below, pp. 807–8, for a critique of this position. On attempts to categorize the tale as secular, see Morse, "Exemplary Griselda," 51–53. Judith Bronfman's *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, and Illustrated* arrived as this essay was going to press.

[2] IV.141, 134, 109. All quotations are from Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, and will hereafter be cited in the text.

> So wise and rype wordes hadde she,
> And juggementz of so greet equitee,
> That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,
> Peple to save and every wronge t'amende.
>
> (438–41)

But, as it turns out, that is not why she was sent. With the sudden turn in part III from the public to the private arena, the very values the poem has seemed to promote—prudent insight, discerning judgment, and the common profit—come under closer investigation as they collide with Griselda's unconditional assent to Walter's will. Although Chaucer frequently fosters in other tales the notion that spiritual values naturally coincide with the common good,[3] here he probes that connection in a troubling study of the limits of prudence and reason when measured against the mystery of faith.

The Clerk's Tale does not begin as a religious tale; rather, it gradually and painfully becomes one. Unlike some religious narratives, Griselda's story is not meant to comfort believers or to justify their suffering or their faith. Instead, as A. C. Spearing has suggested, the tale belongs to a special category of religious story. Like certain biblical stories—of Job's trials, with which Griselda's tests are specifically compared, or Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, or the workers in the vineyard—the Clerk's Tale is designed not to reassure but to challenge Christian complacency with a disturbing reminder of the radical demands of Christian faith, figured in Griselda's assent.[4]

The narrative shift of part III, though it seems abrupt, is prepared for in a crucial passage in part II, when in his marriage proposal, Walter asks Griselda: "[S]ith it shal be doon in hastif wyse, / Wol ye assente, or elles yow avyse?" (349–50). The question implies an opposition between prudent deliberation and assent that appears nowhere else in Chaucer. Critics since the Reformation have found in Chaucer a precocious rationalist, even a skeptic, or at least, in Dryden's more moderate words, "a perpetual Fountain of good Sense."[5] And not without

[3] This is particularly true of the religious tales in prose, the Parson's Tale and the Tale of Melibee, in which vices and corresponding virtues are typically related to the welfare of the community.

[4] Spearing's convincing reassessment of Salter's seminal essay on the Clerk's Tale has influenced my thinking throughout. On the general tendency of Chaucer's religious women to counter prudential values with radical faith, see C. David Benson, 116.

[5] Dryden's remarks are excerpted in Brewer, *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, 1:164. Concerning Chaucer's reputation as a rationalist, Brewer aptly remarks: "For the sixteenth century, and even for Wordsworth, . . . partly on the basis of texts wrongly attributed to him, Chaucer was something of a rationalist, and consequently, a religious reformer, but the general opinion in the nineteenth century tends to see him as something of a rationalist and therefore somewhat lukewarm in religion and not a reformer" (2:7–8). Lounsbury, in *Studies in Chaucer*, established what are still the essential arguments for Chaucer's skepticism; see below, pp. 809–10. Thomas (esp. 101–31) rehearses and expands upon Lounsbury's arguments, and Brewer, "The Rationalism of Chaucer," touches on similar issues. Delany, in her study of *The House of Fame*, makes a case for Chaucer as a "skeptical fideist" and compares him with Matthew Arnold (5–6, 119–21), as does Lounsbury (3:362–63). Muscatine recently called for a return to Lounsbury's view. Bloomfield categorizes Chaucer with Wyclif as a "rationalist" only by inventing an extremely broad definition of "rationalism": "In a less specialized sense, it stands for fairness and decency and the abjuration of unfair methods of argumentation, an agreement to accept the rules of the reason game." But Bloomfield also notes

reason. The need for careful preconsideration or *avysement* is fundamental to the architecture of Chaucer's language, as David Burnley has shown (44–63). In the first fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* Theseus's practical wisdom or "discrecioun" (I.1779) marks him as almost "a god in trone" (2529) for his efforts to impose some reasonable order on his chaotic world, while the carpenter "sely" John's smug lack of foresight in his choice of a young wife as well as in his ridiculous preparations for "Nowelis" flood marks him as almost a fool. The process of arriving at a decision after careful *avysement* is most closely examined in Chaucer's Tale of Melibee, where practical wisdom is the trademark of the aptly named Dame Prudence, who uses the term *avyse* more than any other character in Chaucer.[6] This same process is parodied in the Nun's Priest's Tale when Chauntecleer's lengthy consideration of his dream's warning ends with the illogical "conclusioun" (VII.3151) to follow his wife's flattering advice and defy the warning. In all of these tales prudent discretion or its lack is the distinguishing feature of the tales' major characters.[7]

Closer to our subject is the Merchant's Tale, the opening of which glosses the preceding Clerk's Tale particularly in terms of *avysement* and *assent*, represented as two parts of an essential, logical process which "hastif" January typically bypasses. When January decides suddenly to marry late in life, Justinus urges him to consider carefully before choosing a wife:

> Now, brother myn, be pacient, I preye,
> Syn ye han seyd, and herkneth what I seye.
> Senek, amonges othere wordes wyse,
> Seith that a man oghte hym right wel *ayse*
> To whom he yeveth his lond or his catel.
> And syn I oghte *avyse* me right wel
> To whom I yeve my good awey fro me,
> Wel muchel moore I oghte *avysed* be
> To whom I yeve my body for alwey.
> I warne yow wel, it is no childes pley
> To take a wyf withouten *avysement*.
> Men moste enquere—this is myn *assent*—
> Wher she be wys, or sobre, or dronkelewe.
>
> (IV.1521–33, emphasis mine)

A few lines later, Justinus repeats his advice in identical terms: "*Avyseth* yow—

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the limits of reason in Chaucer's thought, in which it figures as "a strong, though not necessarily the strongest, aid in enabling man to endure this life" (66). On the remarkable tenacity of the construction of Chaucer as a rationalist, Protestant poet, whether in the mold of a sixteenth-century reformer or a nineteenth-century liberal skeptic, see Georgianna, "The Protestant Chaucer."

[6] VII.1134, 1181, 1252, 1298, 1324, 1348, 1726, 1751, 1786. Dame Prudence is herself a more down-to-earth version of Lady Philosophy, who leads Boece through a rational inquiry into the meaning and place of human suffering. Chaucer does not quote *Boece* in the Clerk's Tale, suggesting that the latter work, unlike the former, is less interested in rational inquiry than in suprarational faith.

[7] This is not to say that *avysement* is always positively represented in Chaucer's works. Pandarus's deliberating in *Troilus and Criseyde* is a mixed virtue at best, while the sour narrator of the Merchant's Tale has May do her "narwe avys[ing]" in the privy (IV.1987–88).

ye been a man of age— / How that ye entren into mariage," to which January retorts, immediately and without *avysement*: "Wyser men than thow, / As thou hast herd, *assenteden* right now / To my purpos." The other so-called advisers then "rysen sodeynly, / And been *assented* fully that he sholde / Be wedded whanne him liste and where he wolde" (1555–76, emphasis mine), led by the aptly named Placebo, who begins by praising January ironically for his "heighe prudence" in seeking advice even though he has no need of it (1482).[8]

This parody of prudent consideration, in which the terms *avyse* and *assent* appear repeatedly, seems specifically to allude to the more exemplary process of advice and consent depicted in part I of the preceding Clerk's Tale (Burnley, 113–14). There Walter, apparent countertype to the incorrigibly rash January, with much deliberation chooses a bride at the urging of his advisers:

> Upon Grisilde, this povre creature,
> Ful ofte sithe this markys sette his ye
> As he on huntyng rood paraventure;
> And whan it fil that he myghte hire espye,
> He noght with wantown lookyng of folye
> His eyen caste on hire, but in sad wyse
> Upon hir chiere he wolde hym ofte *avyse*.
>
> (232–38, emphasis mine)

The word *avyse*, emphasized by its position at the end of the emphatically closed rhyme royal stanza, forcefully distinguishes between superficial forms of looking and what Burnley calls "the rational . . . perception of virtue" (114), described in more detail in the following stanza:

> Commendynge in his herte hir wommanhede,
> And eek hir vertu, passynge any wight
> Of so yong age, as wel in chiere as dede.
> For thogh the peple have no greet insight
> In vertu, he considered ful right
> Hir bountee, and disposed that he wolde
> Wedde hir oonly, if evere he wedde sholde.
>
> (239–45)

Walter's "insight" into Griselda's virtue, obscured in the people's eyes by her poor station, is presented here as the result of his "commendynge in his herte," "consider[ing] ful right," and "dispos[ing] that he wolde," thought processes central to *avysement*.

At the poem's opening, both the narrator and the nobles fault Walter for his imprudence in living *un*advisedly, for "he considered noght / In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde" (78–79). Instead of preparing for his inevitable death by marrying and providing an heir for his people, Walter has preferred "to hauke and hunte on every syde" (81). But unlike January, Walter responds with formal and heartfelt "assente" to the people's advice, seemingly aware, as Jan-

[8] See also Placebo's recurrent emphasis on "conseil," a close synonym for *avysement*: 1480, 1485, 1490, 1504, 1512.

uary is not, that marriage as a "blisful yok" (113) will bring responsibilities and constraints on his freedom:

> Hir meeke preyere and hir pitous cheere
> Made the maryks herte han pitee.
> "Ye wol," quod he, "myn owene peple deere,
> To that I nevere erst thoughte streyne me.
> I me rejoysed of my liberte,
> That seelde tyme is founde in mariage;
> Ther I was free, I moot been in servage.
>
> "But nathelees I se youre trewe entente,
> And truste upon youre wit, and have doon ay;
> Wherfore of my free wyl I wole *assente*
> To wedde me, as soone as evere I may.
>
> (141–51, emphasis mine)

Walter formulates his "assente" to the taking of a wife in a kind of contract limited by a set of reasonable conditions: he will forgo a portion of his freedom by marrying, but he will choose his own wife, and the people in return must "assente" (150, 174, 176) to his choice, which he makes after carefully "avys[ing]" Griselda's hidden virtue. At the end of part II the people praise him as a "prudent man," both because of his practical foresight in having now prepared for the future of the realm and because of his moral insight—a higher definition of prudence—into how "under low degree / Was ofte vertu hid" (425–26).[9]

It is no wonder the people praise Walter's insight, since Griselda's virtues at first seem tailor-made for the now careful Walter and the tactful, shrewd courtiers of Saluzzo. Nothing in her elaborate introduction would suggest any conflict between Griselda's "bountee" (409), a gift of God, and the secular, prudently arranged world depicted in part I. On the contrary, clear narrative parallels between Griselda's submissive behavior and that of Walter's people prompt us to judge Griselda's manner as differing from theirs only in degree, not in kind. Griselda kneels to Walter in the same gesture of fealty offered earlier by the nobles (compare 186–87 and 292–93), and she addresses her "lord" with a similar "reverence" but with a more "humble cheere" (298–99), as befits her station. Hierarchical values similarly govern her familial relations as well: "[I]n greet reverence and charitee / Hir olde povre fader fostred shee . . . , And ay she kepte hir fadres lyf on-lofte / With everich obeisaunce and diligence / That child may doon to fadres reverence" (221–31)

The reverence, obedience, and humility that characterize Griselda's virtue seem to coincide neatly with the feudal values of Saluzzo, although we should note that the source of Griselda's virtue is ambiguously described. It is at first attributed to God's grace—"But hye God somtyme senden kan / His grace into a litel oxes stalle" (206–7). But immediately a less idealized explanation is offered, one emphasizing not God's mystery but the quite transparent poverty of Griselda's station, which renders her powerless in this hierarchical society:

[9] On the development of the virtue of prudence in the Middle Ages, see Burnley, 51–63, and the more Thomistic analysis of Pieper.

> But for to speke of vertuous beautee,
> Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne;
> For povreliche yfostred up was she,
> No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.
> Wel ofter of the welle than of the tonne
> She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese,
> She knew wel labour but noon ydel ese.
>
> (211–17)

The passage quietly conflates two different explanations for Griselda's goodness: "for poveriche yfostred up was she," and "for she wolde vertu plese," which is not quite the same thing.[10] What is suggested is that her virtue may well be conditioned by her circumstances, a virtue made of necessity, what St. Thomas Aquinas calls the political prudence of the docile (Müller, 97–98). But the narrative neither probes nor clarifies the origins of Griselda's virtue. Instead, social and spiritual values simply mesh, as though poverty and goodness go naturally hand in hand. When "translated" (385) to a higher station, Griselda's virtue correspondingly expands to include the noble public virtues of a marchioness. Her dignity, eloquence, and discretion mirror the practical wisdom of her lord so that

> . . . whan that the cas required it,
> The commune profit koude she redresse.
> Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse
> In al that land that she ne koude apese,
> And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ese.
>
> (430–34)

With the birth of an heir, the narrative would seem complete: the people's earlier anxieties have been brought to "reste and ese," and the common profit served.

The emphasis in part II on Griselda's "obeisaunce," "reverence," and "humble cheere" has provided for many readers the rationale they seek to explain her ready acceptance of Walter's extraordinary proposal. The ideology of feudal loyalty or its corollaries, such as the powerlessness of those at the bottom of the hierarchy, they claim, would explain Griselda's submission to Walter as predetermined, or at least as prudently advised under the circumstances. In light of the considerable attention focused in the first two parts of the poem on political negotiation, such explanations would seem reasonable, especially in a poem that so far represents reason as its highest good.[11]

[10] See Ferster, 100–101, for other examples in which the narrative teases the reader with alternative views of Griselda's motives.

[11] Interpretations of Griselda's behavior based on a feudal model gained prominence in the eighteenth century, as Morse points out ("Critical Approaches," 73). Since then, the ideology of feudalism has often been given as a rationale for Griselda's obedience, as in Heninger's defense of Griselda as "a dutiful supporter of natural order" (388) and of the tale as "a lengthy illustration of the beneficial effects of maintaining God's order through obedience" (384). See also McCall, 262–63; Johnson, 19–28; Utley, 209–10; Levy, 394–96; and Kellogg, 296–98. More recently the feudal analogy has been resurrected by cultural materialists, not to defend Griselda's behavior, but

But this is only the beginning of Chaucer's poem, not the end, suggesting perhaps that the "reste and ese" sought by Walter and his people and seemingly insured by Griselda's political skills are somehow illusory, merely the backdrop against which the real action of the poem is set. For all of the emphasis earlier on prudently advised consent, Walter's abrupt question to Griselda poses a troublesome rupture in the smooth process of advice and consent, one that widens dramatically with Griselda's extravagant response and the ensuing narrative action.

The form of Walter's question—"Wol ye assente or elles yow avyse?"—suggests an either/or proposition. To wish to consider, deliberate, "avyse" in Walter's parlance, amounts to a refusal. Phrased in this way, as a choice between terms usually seen in Chaucer as two parts of a single, reasonable process, the question seems perverse, at least at this point in the narrative, when Walter has supposedly just learned the political and moral value of legitimate assent arrived at after carefully negotiated *avysement*. Up until now, Walter's political and moral authority, while initially somewhat flawed, has been nevertheless demonstrated by his pity for his people, his willingness to compromise, and especially by his acuity in "avys[ing]" Griselda's inner virtue, all of which remind us of Theseus's discretion and compassion in the Knight's Tale (Kellogg, 297; Burnley, 25–28, 114; Robertson, 260–63). But here, in his proposal to Griselda, Walter suddenly seems as much like January as Theseus. The terms he sets out in his "tretys," which dismiss all negotiation or preconsideration, recall January's fantasy of freedom in marriage:

> I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
> To al my lust, and that I frely may,
> As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
> And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
> And eek whan I sey "ye," ne sey nat "nay,"
> Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?
> Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance.
>
> (351–57)

The terms of Walter's offer echo the bargain he earlier struck with his nobles ("this shal ye swere: that ye / Agayn my choys shul neither grucche ne stryve" [169–70]), but they are much more sweeping and are arrived at not by negotiation, but by fiat. In its emphasis on Walter's every "lust," the demand marks his attempt to reclaim in his private life the "liberte" (145, 171) he had agreed to forgo earlier in his public consent to marry.[12] Earlier, Walter's idea of freedom was figured in his desire to "hauke and hunte on every syde" (81) with no apparent goal other than the satisfaction of his "lust present" (80). Similarly, here too Walter imagines his freedom as an ability to do ("that I frely may")

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to castigate the feudal system upon which they suppose it is based. See Knight, 108–9, and Aers, 34. Engle and Hansen give Griselda much more credit for manipulating her feudal position. See also Grudin and Wallace for carefully historicized readings that emphasize political realism as the driving force of the tale.

[12] See Engle's reading of Walter's motives, 439–46.

whatever he wants ("al my lust") whenever he wants ("nyght ne day"). Griselda must be "redy" for "al" Walter's "lust" because no one can tell, not even Walter, where or when his desire may strike. The unpredictability of Walter's desire is more pointedly emphasized later in part III, when he is seized by a "merveillous desir" (454) to test his wife, and later yet, when he "caughte yet another lest" (619) to tempt her again.[13] In his initial proposal Walter does not ask Griselda to fulfill or satisfy his desire; it seems that desire, for Walter, is an end in itself. All that he asks of Griselda is that she not offer any apparent obstacle to the unlimited freedom of desire he calls "liberte."

The emphasis here is on *apparent*. Although Walter does not exclude a "good herte," his demands emphasize external behavior, his own and Griselda's. Walter presumes that his thoughts will be hidden from Griselda and hers from him. Both may do one thing but think another. Internally, Griselda may "laughe or smerte"; all that matters to Walter is that her "contenance" or "cheere," her expression or demeanor, not reveal her thoughts or feelings.[14] The assent he seeks is also external, a verbal swearing to the terms of a formal, almost ceremonial contract or "tretys," and Walter presumes Griselda's compliance can be verified externally by deeds, looks, and words. Thus what Walter wants is the freedom to be wanton, and his contract with Griselda is meant to insure that he need not read in her appearance or speech any signs of his will as erratic.

This rather harsh assessment of Walter's motives is not unlike those of previous readers who arrive at their conclusions by critically assessing Walter's actions leading up to the proposal.[15] Yet this critical assessment could not be further from the tone and content of Griselda's response which follows. While the reader *avyses* concerning how to judge Walter's offer, and perhaps looks to Griselda to reestablish some "natural" ideal of informed consent, Griselda, for her part, assents immediately with a force that comes as a shock, especially for readers who have up to now tried to accommodate Griselda's behavior to some reasonable pattern:

> Wondrynge upon this word, quakynge for drede,
> She seyde, "Lord, undigne and unworthy
> Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede,
> But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.
> And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,

[13] See Mann's discussion of "the motif of 'the enthralled lord' " in Chaucer ("Parents and Children," 171–73), and particularly her remarks on Walter, 178.

[14] Brewer shows that this absence of any show of feeling is what Chaucer means by *sad*, forms of which recur often in the tale. Rather than carrying its modern connotations of "sorrowful," the term *sad* in this tale is primarily "an anti-expressive word, or rather, perhaps an expressive word used to signify the absence of the expression of feeling" ("Some Metonymic Relationships," 42). Thus Middle English *sad* means showing a face that in Modern English is *not* sad. See also Mann, "Satisfaction and Payment," who revises and extends Brewer's argument in important ways. Schleusner, in a recent paper that anticipated several of the arguments presented here, analyzed Walter's reliance on pretense and appearance in his demands and the theatricality and pretense of everyone in Saluzzo except Griselda.

[15] Engle, Wallace, and Grudin, to name a few of the most recent critics to do so, offer similarly harsh assessments of Walter's behavior. Mann, on the other hand, evaluates Walter's offer more generously in *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 147–48.

In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,
For to be deed, though me were looth to deye."

(358–64)

As with Walter's proposal, so too Griselda's speech bears some resemblance to what has come before. Griselda's "drede" should not surprise Walter, who is used to being "biloved and drad" by his subjects (69); his "delit" in being a lord lies largely in the "obeisant" behavior of his people, who are "ay redy to his hond" (66–68), as Griselda is when he arrives in her village. The nobles, when they do negotiate with their lord, do so with great deference, addressing Walter in terms similar to Griselda's as a "lord so deere" (101), able "to doon right as [he] leste" (105). Janicula, like Griselda, responds to Walter's proposal "abayst and al quakynge" (317); he pledges to will whatever Walter wills in words reminiscent of Griselda's (319–22).

Critics who demand of the narrative a plausible (by which these days they usually mean political) explanation of Griselda's unhesitating assent point to these parallels as evidence that Griselda's behavior is ideologically determined by feudal obeisance.[16] Yet, though the text teases us with some similarities between Griselda's response and feudal submission, it also quickly distinguishes between them. The feudal relations established earlier are negotiated and mutually defined by two parties, the product of a bilateral agreement with informed consent on both sides. The negotiating parties may be unequal in power, but each side consents in carefully limited phrases to the terms agreed on. However, none of the previously established meanings of *assent*—agree, acquiesce, or submit—seem appropriate to Griselda's response, for she agrees so extravagantly in terms so unlimited that they transcend the political and moral context previously established, further disturbing (as did Walter's proposal itself) our frame of reference and the terms of our judgment, our *avysement*.

First of all, although both Janicula and the spokesman of the people had elaborately deferred to Walter's will, Griselda displays none of the anxiety or constraint evident in Janicula's red-faced, nearly speechless "astonyed" embarrassment (316–19) or in the noble spokesman's almost painfully circumspect, calculated (and quintessentially *avysed*) rhetoric. In fact, it will turn out that neither meant what he said: behind his back, the people "grucche" at Walter's will throughout the poem, and Janicula later confesses that in spite of his deferential rhetoric he never did trust his lord's desires. Both the people and Janicula, like the "privee" (519) sergeant introduced later, are "suspect" (540–42, four times; 905) because their actions and words are at odds with their will or "entente." Each represents himself as constrained to say or do one thing while thinking another.[17]

[16] Both Aers (33–34) and McCall (261–62) point to the similarity between Janicula's and Griselda's responses to Walter's proposal as evidence that feudal relations guide both characters, though they draw very different conclusions from that evidence.

[17] Schleusner aptly describes the moral and political life of Walter and his countrymen: "phoniness is the rule here. . . . Neither side ever knows the other's will or knows whether it even matters. From this point it's a short step to general mistrust and indifference, and that seems to be the state of Walter's Saluzzo, where everyday life is shot through with anxiety, callousness, resentment and

Griselda, on the other hand, though "quakynge for drede," speaks with uncanny self-assurance and certitude. Though she begins by professing her unworthiness, what is most remarkable about Griselda's speech is its performative quality. This along with the extravagant terms of her assent contrasts distinctly with the constrained speeches of the nobles, Janicula, and even Walter. In the first place, she assents immediately, eliminating the time for *avysement* even before she vows to eliminate the will for it. Furthermore, the line introducing her assent emphasizes "wondrynge" and "drede," reactions at the opposite end of the mental spectrum from rational consideration. In addition, she gives her assent in a self-enclosed stanza, which unlike her initial brief, midstanza response to Walter's earlier question (299), and Janicula's similarly situated response as well (319–22), establishes the independence of her reply from Walter's request, and something of its magnitude. Finally, what Griselda swears is much more than Walter bargained for, and her assent is qualitatively different from that which Walter seeks.

Walter defines assent in external and negative terms: there will be no "grucch[yng]," no grimacing, no saying no—in short, no *dis*sent. What Griselda promises and simultaneously performs is a mysteriously self-authorized and *positive* assent, an act of the will in which forms of "I" and "will" appear ten times in six lines. Not only does her speech show no signs of the constraint that Walter's demand assumes, but the terms of her assent eliminate the very possibility of *avysement* when she promises to obey not only in "werk," which can be observed and verified, but in "thoght," which cannot.[18] By internalizing the demands of the contract, Griselda moves her assent beyond the bonds of the law, beyond Walter's power (and ours) to scrutinize or *avyse*.[19] Finally, in the climax or *cauda* of the stanza, she unexpectedly shifts the terms of her assent. With its surprising *disobeye/deye* rhyme, the concluding couplet extends Griselda's contract beyond "grucchyng" to the ultimate limit of dying, not the death that inevitably creeps up on those unprepared for it, the death envisioned by the nobles earlier (121) and toward which Janicula "crepeth" at the end (1134), but a death anticipated and freely chosen by an undivided will.[20] Walter had asked Griselda to conceal the gap between her will and his; she responds with mysterious confidence and power (later called her "hool entente," [861; see also 973]) that there will be no gap to reveal.

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shame." See also Wallace, who similarly characterizes the duplicity or "rhetoricity" (198) of Walter and the nobles. But Schleusner sees, as Wallace does not, that Griselda is defined by the absence of duplicity. She displays no gap between her will and thoughts and those of her lord because there is none. Wallace wishes to retain some "private" self for Griselda that Walter cannot penetrate, while Schleusner makes clear that Walter cannot see into Griselda because she is always wholly there, "body and soul."

[18] On the voluntary character of Griselda's promise, see Steinmetz, 48–51; Frese, 144; Kirk, "Nominalism," 117–19; Ferster, 101–2; McCall, 268–69; and McNamara, 187–88.

[19] Wallace, 195, and Engle, 446, both point to the tyrant's need to encounter resistance; without resistance the despot has no clear role or identity.

[20] On the importance of the reference to death in 364, see Nolan, 28 and n. 18. Little attention has been paid to Chaucer's exploitation of the rhyme royal stanzaic form in the tale, but see Frese, 143–44, for a pioneering, if not convincing, attempt to analyze Chaucer's use of the form. Stevens provides a general discussion of rhyme royal in early English verse.

Measured against such active willing, feudal loyalty and the prudent restraint of the powerless begin to seem pale imitations of Griselda's assent, an assent so sweeping and so confident as to suggest that she promises only what has somehow already occurred, a joining of two wills at the source, as it were. (Viewed in this way, Chaucer's choice of marriage as the figure of such assent becomes clearer.) Griselda reinforces this same idea of two wills joining later, after hearing Walter's plan to remove her second child, when she says:

> And certes, if I hadde prescience
> Youre wyl to knowe, er ye youre lust me tolde,
> I wolde it doon withouten necligence;
> But now I woot youre lust, and what ye wolde,
> Al youre plesance ferme and stable I holde;
> For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,
> Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese.
>
> (659–65)

What Griselda claims here is that increased foresight or "prescience," rather than making her more cautious or well-*avysed*, would render her assent more immediate and less prudent in any practical sense. If she could anticipate Walter's will, she says, she could then assent to it before he spoke it, perhaps even before he thought it, as though somehow she wants to save him the trouble of willing or desiring what he already in fact possesses, if only he knew it.[21]

The extravagant terms of Griselda's assent suggest why virtuous obedience and even patience, although technically accurate, can be misleading terms for the eager activity of Griselda's willing. These terms as currently used often imply a weak passivity, an abnegation of reason and responsibility, or a psychological failure to assert one's autonomy and worth.[22] Thus, in Chaucer criticism, the adjective that frequently modifies obedience is "unquestioning" (e.g., Hawkins, 354; Knapp, 132), and it often carries with it the connotations of a rebuke for the *not* doing of what one presumably should do before obeying.[23] As John

[21] Schleusner remarks: "The vices of the present day are not after all the opposites of a primitive virtue. They are the privation of that virtue, the disintegration of its simplicity into bits and pieces, parts without a whole. . . . [Griselda] stands to Walter as the former age does to the present day, the object of a repressed nostalgia, the one thing that fickle willfulness would want if it could just remember."

[22] The term "passive" is cognate with "patience" (both from L. *patior, pati, passus*, "to endure or suffer"). Until very recently the terms denoted the quality of suffering action from without, ranging from the "passive" verb to Christ's "Passion" (see OED *passive*). Passivity as a psychological abnormality found especially in females is a modern, post-Freudian usage.

[23] See OED, *obedience* 2. Aston points out in *England's Iconoclasts* that in English Protestant thought, belief must *always* be questioned, whence the great value placed from the Reformation forward on the need for constant introspection and vigilance against false belief or idolatry. By contrast, as Weber points out in his classic study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Catholic spiritual systems seem remarkably unsystematic; the Catholic, in Weber's phrase, "lives, ethically speaking, from hand to mouth," with no apparent need for a coherent, rational system of belief. The negative connotations of "unquestioning obedience" are evident in Hudson's *Premature Reformation*, where she derides those late-medieval English clergymen who, as she puts it, urged the laity "to avoid theological speculation, to remain in humble ignorance and unquestioning obedience to any and every ecclesiast" (432). Hudson's coupling of "humble" with "ignorance" and "unquestioning" with "obedience" as well as the binary opposition between "theological speculation" and "ignorance" are typical of English Protestant polemics.

McCall and others have suggested, Catholic theories of obedience and patience, elaborately articulated in the Middle Ages, provide a context for understanding Griselda's assent that is more historically appropriate than modern notions of individual freedom and autonomy, especially because, as Elizabeth Kirk has shown, medieval theories often distinguish active from passive suffering and obedience.[24] In its highest form, active patience comes closest in meaning to its cognate *passion*, which, as used to characterize Christ's salvific acts of which Griselda herself speaks (555–60), emphasizes the redemptive and creative qualities of patience.

Nevertheless, although patience was distinguishable from weak passivity in medieval thought, both obedience and patience were typically analyzed as practical virtues. Thomas Aquinas treats patience, which, like many previous theorists of virtue, he equates with passive endurance, as at best a secondary virtue, more useful than holy and so not equal to either the theological or the cardinal virtues (Chino, 38). The patient endurance of a Stoic, much admired in the Middle Ages and especially in the Renaissance, is analyzed as a practical strategy for maintaining tranquillity or self-sufficiency, ends in themselves in Stoic thought.[25] Chaucer in the Parson's Tale, quoting the maxims of Cato, takes the Stoic position, describing patience as a practical weapon that vanquishes the enemy and brings victory (X.661).[26] Obedience, as the Parson describes it, is similarly a Stoic derivative of patience, which privileges duty, doctrine, the law (674–75). The Parson is typical in analyzing both patience and obedience as means to an end, special kinds of *avysement*, morally shrewd responses to circumstances.

Both in Griselda's first speech and throughout the Clerk's Tale, however, Chaucer goes out of his way to represent Griselda's assent as anything but shrewd or prudent, a point often missed by critics who emphasize her "stoic endurance" (Brewer, 42–43; Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 149, 154), her sense of "duty" or "obligation" (Heninger, 391; Carruthers, 225), her "integrity" (Donaldson, 917–20; Carruthers, 230), and her power to subvert Walter's assaults on her will.[27] Although the narrator at times attributes her assent to endurance or

[24] On obedience, see McNamara, 186–87; Johnson, 19–28; and Kellogg. In addition to Kirk's illuminating study (" 'Who Suffreth More than God' "), a number of more general discussions of patience are useful. See especially Crampton, 193–201; Hanna; and Chino. Hanna (77) and Burnley (75–81) discuss distinctions between Stoic endurance and the higher forms of Christian patience. Hanna's study demonstrates, however, that in most surviving discussions of patience, "the external act most strikingly associated with patience is simply unswerving and silent endurance, passive bearing up under all hardship, even to the point of death." Like Kirk, Baldwin treats notable exceptions to the tendency to treat patience as a passive or static virtue.

[25] See Crampton, 35–38; Burnley, 64–91; and Hanna, 67–70. Hawkins's aggressively liberal reading clearly prefers the stoic endurance of the Renaissance Duchess of Malfi, which allows her the internal "freedom" to "resist tyranny" (358–61) and contrasts the Duchess's "brave resistance" with "poor" Griselda's "passive endurance of unnecessary, senseless suffering" (358).

[26] On the topos of the victory of patience, see Crampton, 33–39.

[27] See Ferster, 104; Engle, 446–54; and Hansen, 189–95. Hansen's argument makes Griselda into something more like the Renaissance Duchess of Malfi, a victor/victim who resists male tyranny as best she can under the circumstances, while Hawkins sees crucial differences between them. The Renaissance produced its own version of a stoical Griselda in *Patient Grissil*, by Thomas Dekker et al.; see Morse, "The Exemplary Griselda," 52.

patience, Griselda herself does not. Both in her initial speech and throughout the tale, Griselda focuses not on *why* but on *what* and *how* she wills, on assent as an end in itself.[28] The only motive Griselda ever offers for her assent is love, which is less an explanation than a synonym for her assent. In Griselda's lexicon, both terms refer to the joining of her will with that of her lord. No practical purpose, strategy, or possible reward impinges on Griselda's assent (Steinmetz, 47–51), which is in every sense free. Her first speech frees her from any possible constraint imposed by Walter because in it she removes every condition that could limit or define her assent, not just feudal or familial obligation, but all time and change, even death itself. Griselda's active willing strips Walter's bargain of the political, economic, and even moral terms that had at first seemed to explain it. What is most mysterious about Griselda's assent is its certitude, which effectively counterbalances any sense that her promise is "naive" (Engle, 445) or self-destructive (Hawkins, 348–58). Rather than being destroyed, Griselda's self—her whole self, not the supposed exterior shadow of a self to which Walter had appealed—completely dominates the stanza, a self that she confidently equates with an undivided will fixed on its object.[29]

Having forcefully removed itself from the context of the politics of Walter and Saluzzo, Griselda's unconditional assent introduces another context altogether, the transcendent context of prayer (Nolan, 28; Pearsall, 269). Her response to Walter is chiefly characterized by "wondrynge" and "drede," by expressions of unworthiness and utter dependency provoked by the presence of a mysterious "lord" whose power she instantly recognizes but whom she never addresses by name (Edwards, 64). These characteristics define precisely what Rudolf Otto calls a numinous experience. Otto coined the term to describe an essential "overplus of meaning" in all expressions of the holy (5). Reacting against a nineteenth-century legacy of liberal Protestant theology, with its confidence in the rational foundations of faith, Otto focuses his attention on what he argues to be the irreducible *supra*rational elements in religious experience, systematically distinguishing the "moral" from the essentially "holy" experience of the divine. If the former stresses the believer's confidence in being able to know and follow the lord's will, Otto argues, the latter or "holy" experience recognizes the imponderable gap between divine and human, inspiring feelings of awe, dread, and absolute dependency. Numinous experience, because it lies beyond the rational, is unlike moral goodness; it "cannot be 'taught'; it must be 'awakened' from the spirit" (60). This awakening, Otto argues, is precisely the function of certain religious stories, such as the story of Job, that appeal to our imaginative sympathy and concentrate on the gestures, attitude, voice,

[28] In his 1870 monument to the Catholic tradition of religious assent, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Newman distinguishes between "real" and "notional" assent" (32–92). Though Newman's style of thought is far more rationalistic than Chaucer's, the distinction is helpful in considering Griselda's assent.

[29] See Kirk, "Nominalism," 117–18; Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 146–47; and Kirkpatrick, 231–48. Kirkpatrick shows that Chaucer emphasizes Griselda's individuality, wholeness, and presence far more than does Petrarch. See also Wallace (181–84, 192–94, 203–4) and Dinshaw (148–50), both of whom argue that for Petrarch, unlike Chaucer, Griselda remains throughout a text to be read or penetrated, not the autonomous individual that Chaucer represents her as being.

and tone of numinous experience rather than narrative causation or pictorial details.[30] For Otto, the difference between moral and holy experience is the difference between reason, knowledge, and calculation of value, on the one hand, and mystery, power, and will, on the other. In terms of the Clerk's Tale, it is the difference between Walter's calculated *avysement* and Griselda's free *assent*.

Chaucer reinforces the numinous qualities of Griselda's assent by inserting numerous biblical allusions in his treatment of her, additions that stand out in a text that usually follows its sources closely. The references themselves have been noted and identified (Speirs, 154; Salter, 42–50; Kean, 126–28; Wimsatt, 187–207; Kellogg, 298–306; Utley, 217–28; and Besserman, 103–11); however, it has not been emphasized that most of these allusions specifically recall the prototypical Christian numinous experiences of Job, Christ, and especially of the Virgin, whose contact with the divine is illustrated in the stories of the Annunciation, Incarnation, Assumption, and Coronation.[31] Griselda's opening words in the speech, "undigne and unworthy / Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede," recall the words of the centurion of Cepharnum to Jesus, "Domine non sum dignus . . ." (Matt. 8.8; Wimsatt, 189). In the Gospel story Christ marvels at the centurion's faith and rewards it with a miraculous cure. The early church adopted the address as a popular prayer; eventually it was incorporated into the Mass following the consecration as preparation for its most holy moment of sacramental communion with the divine (Fortescue, 381–85).

Chaucer seems quite aware that the numinous experiences represented in biblical stories and in the liturgy could, because of their familiarity, come to seem tame and almost ordinary.[32] Such details as the description of Griselda at the threshold beside a water pot, or on her knees asking her lord what he would have of her, seem at first to blend accommodatingly into the feudal political style of Saluzzo. Griselda's goodness is assumed at first to work for the "commune profit" (431) and is analyzed by the people largely in terms of its moral and political value to the community. But with Walter's extraordinary proposal and Griselda's powerful response, the tale suddenly begins to move in a different direction, reinvesting such repeated terms as "lord," "will," and "werk" with the radical spiritual force that biblical stories and the eucharistic liturgy sought, in Otto's term, to "awaken."[33] Chaucer makes the transition from the ordinary

[30] Salter's seminal discussion of the Clerk's Tale "as religious fable" (42–50) points to the privileging of a few gestures and formalized speech over pictorial or narrative detail.

[31] On the Book of Job as the quintessential expression of numinous experience, see Otto, 77–80. See Wimsatt's discussion of the Marian allusions, each of which, as he puts it, "marks a climactic union of heaven and earth" (195).

[32] The Wife of Bath, for example, comically translates the story of the Samaritan woman at the well into a question of simple arithmetic: "But that I axe, why that the fifthe man / Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan? / How manye myghte she have in mariage? / Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age / Upon this nombre diffinicioun" (III.21–25).

[33] On the necessary oddness of religious language, see, in addition to Otto, Ramsey, 147; Salter, 40–50; and especially Kirk, "Nominalism," 116, where she describes the difficulties experienced by religious artists in a culture "in which Church and society are co-extensive. . . . In most popular religions, didactic language functions to inculcate acceptance of religious belief by assimilating it

to the numinous both sudden and mysterious, leaving the reader for the moment to wonder at its significance. Griselda's grammar of submission, as it is first introduced, hovers somewhere between the prudent and the holy, between political *avysement* and religious *assent*. Its very indeterminacy makes us uneasy because the two discourses, though sharing some similar terms (including the term *assent* itself), imply very different frames of reference, different demands, and different limits. Such indeterminacy makes Walter uneasy, too, in spite of his initial formal pronouncement that "This is ynogh, Grisilde myn" (365). As he soon discovers, it may in fact be either too much or not enough at all (Mann, "Satisfaction and Payment," 31–45). Walter's testing beginning in part III is meant to investigate precisely the origins, limits, and ends of Griselda's assent. During the course of his investigation, the gap introduced in this passage, between prudently advised choice and radical, suprarational assent, begins to grow, and with it the discomfort of both Walter and the reader.

Throughout the rest of the poem Griselda herself provides no further insight into her assent. It is not that she grows silent, as critics sometimes imply.[34] On the contrary, Chaucer has amplified her speeches considerably beyond the treatment of his sources; in parts III and IV, she has almost as many lines as Walter, and in part V she does most of the talking. But as the narrator tells us over and over, Griselda's assent, *by definition*, does not vary or progress. An excruciating repetition haunts her speeches, rendering them more like prayers or lyrical refrains than parts of a dialogue.[35] The same limited vocabulary recurs again and again, not only individual words such as *wil, lust, herte, love*, and *lord*, but longer sequences expressing a given idea: "undigne and unworthy / am I" (359–60); "I ne heeld me nevere digne in no manere" (818); "I nevere held me lady ne mistresse" (822); "Where as I was noght worthy" (829); "though I unworthy weere" (882); "al lyth in youre plesaunce" (501); "Dooth youre plesaunce; I wol youre lust obeye" (658); "Al youre plesaunce ferme and stable I holde" (663); "Al youre plesaunce wol I folwen fayn" (873).

Such repetition stymies even the most sophisticated critical efforts to find in Griselda's speech acts signs of a developing character. Lars Engle's recent Bakhtinian analysis of the tale makes Griselda a heroic contestant in a lopsided battle between monologic and dialogic forms of authority. The strength of Engle's approach is that it treats Griselda as "active rather than passive" in the tale

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even more simplistically and uncritically with the idiom of the culture. But for that very reason both the language and the belief, by an irresistible undertow, keep losing their meaning, like dead metaphors. The imaginative thinker, the true religious artist, must keep pushing back against these forces of acculturation and restoring the strangeness, the radicalness, the vitality and mystery to religious language, must find ways to render the familiar unfamiliar and the shop-worn numinous."

[34] The most recent critic to emphasize Griselda's "silence" is Hansen, whose interest in fact lies not in what Griselda says—she rarely refers to Griselda's language—but in the offstage drama, as it were, of all the times when Griselda does not speak, particularly after the poem has ended. For Hansen as for many critics, the term "silence" refers to the fact that the character does not say what the critic wants to hear.

[35] See Nolan, 27–32, and Pearsall, 269–70. Josephine Tarvers in a paper given at the Twenty-Ninth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1994, aptly compared the effects of the speeches of Chaucer's religious women to those of Gregorian chant.

(448). But Bakhtin measures activity exclusively in terms of shifts in political or social control. Thus Engle defines Griselda's role in terms of "a process of character development" (446) in which, although she initially "naively promises" (445) more than she should, she gradually learns to "subvert" (451) and "contradict" (449) Walter's authority by means of "subtle effects" in her language (450). While Engle admits that Griselda will disappoint modern readers accustomed to characters as openly defiant as Jane Eyre (448), he nevertheless describes her as a similarly developing character whose speeches serve to transform a "monologic poem into the dialogic of the *novel*" (454, my emphasis). In Engle's analysis of the slight variations in her speech, Griselda becomes, if not Jane Eyre, then at least another, more subtly resisting novelistic heroine (an Esther Summerson, perhaps) who manages to keep "an implicit voice of sane moral protest alive" (453).

Engle's reading of the Clerk's Tale as a novel, and of Griselda's speeches as developing strategies for gaining social control, flies in the face of the text's repeated insistence that there is *no* ambiguity, hidden meaning, or substantial change in her assent. Over and over, Griselda and the narrator tell us that her speech, behavior, and features always reveal her "hool entente," which is repetitiously described as unchanging: "evere in oon ylike sad and kynde" (602), "evere in oon so pacient" (677), "ay oon in herte and in visage" (711), "ylike sad for everemo" (754).

Griselda's character does not develop; it is always "oon" and "ylike." What do change, however, are the demands made upon her assent, which make its absoluteness increasingly difficult to explain in terms of politics, morality, or any other rationalized social practice. When Walter asks for the second time "That ye to me assente as in this thyng" (494), the "thyng" being the death of her firstborn child, Griselda provides not a shred of rational support to buttress her assent, even though Walter is prepared for, even invites, dissent by voicing his own misgivings and his refusal to act without her assent. But Walter's attempt to determine the limits of Griselda's assent is frustratingly unsuccessful:

> Whan she had herd al this, she noght ameved
> Neither in word, or chiere, or contenaunce,
> For, as it semed, she was nat agreved.
> She seyde: "Lord, al lyth in youre plesaunce.
> My child and I, with hertely obeisaunce,
> Been youres al, and ye mowe save or spille
> Youre owene thyng; werketh after youre wille.
>
> "Ther may no thyng, God so my soule save,
> Liken to yow that may displese me;
> Ne I desire no thyng for to have,
> Ne drede for to leese, save oonly yee.
> This wyl is in myn herte, and ay shal be;
> No lengthe of tyme or deeth may this deface,
> Ne chaunge my corage to another place."
>
> (498–511)

If anything, her assent seems more sweeping than before because it is amplified and intensified not only by its repetition of the language of her earlier promise—

"lord," "wil" "werk," and "deeth"—but by its frequent repetition of terms within these two stanzas themselves. The most striking recurrence is of negatives, nine of them in fourteen lines, five of them in the prominent initial position in the line—"noght ameved," "Neither in word," "nat agreved," "no thyng," "Ne I desire," "no thyng," "Ne drede," "No lengthe," "Ne chaunge." The reiterated negatives insist on the inexpressibility of any limit whatsoever to Griselda's assent. Such language defies rational explanation, nor does it aim toward moral persuasion. In the rhythms of its excruciating and insistent repetition—as she later puts it, "I have seyd thus, and evere shall"—in its refusal to be qualified by or bound to any particular context, in its formality combined with intimacy, and in its intense emotional appeal, Griselda's grammar of assent is aimed not at persuasion but at the suprarational transport of the sublime.[36]

Critical arguments that attempt to defend Griselda's behavior on the basis of duty, obedience, or integrity ring hollow because they strain to supply what the text refuses to provide, namely, a rational explanation for Griselda's assent to Walter's monstrous demands.[37] If one assumes that reason represents Chaucer's highest value, then critical priority must be given to searching the tale for evidence of logic and reason in Griselda's assent. Finding no reasonable limits to Griselda's assent, many critics judge her actions as immoral, even though the text never offers the slightest hint of criticism of its heroine: on the contrary, it works throughout to elicit sympathy and admiration for her. Even those critics who see the tale as exemplary typically presume that Chaucer means to "justify" Griselda's behavior.[38] But if Griselda's assent to Walter's will is to be judged on purely moral grounds, on questions of justice or the natural law, then surely her choices as they affect her children must be judged reprehensible, since her "duty" to protect her innocent children should override her "integrity" regarding her promise, as her critics are quick to point out.

Thomas Lounsbury's reaction to Griselda's behavior is instructive because he is far more outspoken about his moral and religious presuppositions than most later critics. Lounsbury struggles self-consciously against his "modern" feeling

[36] The classic treatise on the sublime is that of Pseudo-Longinus, *On the Sublime*, of the first century A.D. McClellan, 503, refers to Griselda's speech as a form of the "negative sublime," which "points to a principle of inexpressibility." On the use of negatives, see Spearing, 94–96, and Kirkpatrick, who examines "a series of passages in which Griselda, so to speak, absents herself," beginning with the text's avoidance of any physical description of her. "It is true that Griselda, if not described, has a good deal to say for herself. Yet she does not have the moral vehemence of Petrarch's Griselda; her words tend to be characterized by negatives, or to retreat—like a form of authorial retraction—into the undramatic sphere of liturgical language" (243–44). Schleusner, in private correspondence, aptly refers to Chaucer's characterization of Griselda as an attempt at "remystification." See also Ferster, 95–109.

[37] See, for example, Kellogg's appendix, entitled "The Moral Responsibility of Griselda," 316–18, in which he reproduces several alarming medieval stories as proof that in Chaucer's time, "duty" to one's husband was a cherished belief. A similar confusion of the role of the "moral" and "spiritual" in the tale runs through Heninger's argument, in which Griselda's behavior is rationalized as the "spontaneous" response of a "dutiful supporter of the natural order" (388). Numerous critics judge the story as flawed because it fails to rationalize Griselda's suffering.

[38] Salter's essay is perhaps the most subtle example of the insistence that a religious purpose requires that Griselda's assent be justified. See below, pp. 817–18.

of "repulsion" (3:341) to view the tale from a medieval perspective as "a tale of faith." Yet, so strong is Lounsbury's belief in the primacy of moral duty and a faith that is, above all, rational that he cannot imagine Griselda's unconditional assent except as a misguided reaction to political absolutism peculiar to an earlier, more naive age: "In [the story] was represented a phase of sentiment and belief which, however temporary in its nature, was at the time widely prevalent. It was doubtless accepted by many as belonging to the normal order of things. Its details were consonant with the feelings of an age in which there was an ingrained belief in the absolute inferiority of the subject to the lord. . . . [Griselda] exemplifies in her unrepining obedience to the most unnatural commands the principles of conduct which she, as well as everyone else in her situation, had been brought up to regard as sacred."

Lounsbury automatically conflates political and religious obedience in a move typical of nineteenth-century muscular Christianity. But, seemingly aware that he has overly demystified medieval Christian belief in the "sacred," he concludes by trying once again to justify Griselda's assent in terms of older notions of "faith": "She acts in accordance with her faith. If Abraham is to be honored for his willingness to offer up his only son at the command of his Creator, she, in the view of that age, is to be honored for yielding, without complaint, to a sacrifice of herself and her children *which she had not the power to prevent, and against which she had not the disposition to protest*" (3:342, my emphasis).

As far as I know, Lounsbury is the first of many critics to compare Griselda's story with the sacrifice of Abraham; but as his concluding remark makes clear, Lounsbury finds Abraham's "faith," like Griselda's, in the end explicable only in terms of a socially constructed powerlessness combined with a personal weakness of "disposition." A strongly disposed modern character, unlike the "weak-spirited" medieval Griselda, would recognize "a woman's first duty [as] the defense of her young," a duty that comes naturally even to "the females of brute creation" (340–41).[39] Thus, what begins as a historical defense of Griselda's behavior turns into a critique of earlier forms of belief. Lounsbury's final judgment of Griselda's behavior as "revolting to the feelings of modern life" (344) is entirely consistent with his Victorian sense that above all one is required to behave decently and properly, rather than be "transported by the spirit of self-sacrifice" (344).[40]

Griselda's speeches create the greatest stumbling block to any argument like Lounsbury's (and there are many) that would translate her assent into the reasonable demands of moral or political duty. It is certainly the case that other characters in the tale represent themselves as constrained by duty. Walter says that he acts "Nat as I wolde, but as my peple leste" (490); likewise the sergeant asks Griselda's forgiveness on the grounds that he is "constreyned" by his lord's

[39] Modern readers often share Lounsbury's revulsion on similar grounds. See, for example, Brody's castigation of Griselda's "criminal behavior as a mother" (127), and Aers's objections to her "servile obedience," which "renounces responsibility for herself and her children" and actually "encourages vicious tyranny on Walter's part" (43).

[40] For further discussion of Lounsbury's evaluation of Chaucer's religious tales, see Georgianna, "The Protestant Chaucer," 59–60.

commands (526–39). But Griselda never alludes to duty or any other motive for her actions except love, which under the circumstances is as mysterious a term as *assent* itself. Griselda's assent remains throughout the tale, as it is in her first speech, a mysterious given, intensified by its constancy in the face of drastic consequences, but never explained or justified. Rather than demystifying Griselda's assent, as critics would have him do, Chaucer engages in the opposite process.[41]

Beginning in part III, the narrative reinforces the mystery of Griselda's assent in another way, by shifting our attention to a critical reassessment of the *avysement* that brought Griselda to Walter's attention in the first place. Earlier in the tale, rational observation and careful consideration seemed naturally to lead to wise, informed consent. That model is upset, not only by the alternative model of Griselda's unconditional assent, but also by the narrative's move to demystify the process of Walter's *avysement*, the *acer intuitus* that Petrarch had admired and even deified in his representation of Walter.[42]

Following Walter's first encounter with Griselda, the word *avyse* rarely appears again in the tale; it is replaced by either morally neutral terms for perceiving, thinking, and knowing (such as "aperceyveth," "wende," "saugh," and "deeme"), which are used repeatedly in the tale,[43] or by "subtil," a term that accrues increasingly negative connotations as the tale proceeds. Of Walter's sudden "merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye," the narrator indignantly asks:

> . . . [W]hat neded it
> Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,
> Though som men preise it for a *subtil* wit?
> But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit
> To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede,
> And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede.
>
> (457–62, my emphasis)

This abrupt critique of Walter's subtlety, which opens part III, is all the more striking when compared with Petrarch's version. At the same point in his narrative, Petrarch characteristically backs away from judging Walter's behavior harshly, leaving it to the subtle minds of those more learned to decide whether Walter's behavior is "more strange than laudable."[44] Chaucer's narrator, by contrast, leaves no doubt here that a "subtil wit" is merely an excuse for willfully cruel, gratuitous testing. In a later passage subtlety is made synonymous with duplicity, when Walter "in subtil wyse" (737) procures fake annulment papers to allow for his remarriage. Finally, after closely studying Griselda's response

[41] See above, n. 36.

[42] In Severs's text, 2.18, p. 260.

[43] See Lynch's analysis of modes of knowing in the tale. It should be noted that these terms are used of Walter, the people, and the narrator, but rarely of Griselda. The exception occurs at 281, when Griselda plans to stay at home in hopes of seeing the marquis's new bride.

[44] "Cepit, ut fit, interim Valterium, cum iam ablactata esset infantula, mirabilis quedam quam laudabilis (doctiores iudicent) cupiditas . . ." (Severs, 3.1–3, p. 268). See Spearing's similar judgment of Petrarch's rather tepid remarks, 82, and Lynch's opposing view, 68. Kirkpatrick, 232–37, and Wallace emphasize the differences between Petrarch's and Chaucer's political and religious views.

to the loss of not one but two children, Walter wonders if maybe Griselda is the subtle one:

> This markys wondred, evere lenger the moore,
> Upon hir pacience, and if that he
> Ne hadde soothly knowen therbifoore
> That parfitly hir children loved she,
> He wolde have wend that of som *subtiltee*,
> And of malice, or for crueel corage,
> That she hadde suffred this with sad visage.
>
> (687–93, my emphasis)

Walter here associates "subtiltee" with malice and a cruel heart and assumes a discrepancy between Griselda's internal and external behavior, which the text explicitly denies. The subtlety that Walter momentarily sees in Griselda's actions is instead a reflection of his own, not only the obvious subtlety of pretending to do what he does not in fact do, but also his method of probing beneath the supposed surface of Griselda's reactions to discover in her some hidden reality. That probing was earlier described admiringly as the very prudent "insight" with which Walter, unlike his people, "avyse[d]" Griselda's behavior and as a result "saugh that under low degree / Was ofte vertu hid" (425–26). But beginning with part III, such probing calculation is increasingly viewed not as a virtue but as a compulsion to dominate or penetrate Griselda's mysteries, "hir sadnesse for to knowe" (452).[45]

A demystified, pathologically *avysing* Walter makes Griselda's assent all the more inexplicable since its object is made to seem increasingly unworthy. The tale complicates the audience's response to Griselda's assent even further by frequently aligning our point of view with that of Walter. In fact, the implied audience, like every other character in the poem, is closely tied to Walter's perspective by the thread of prudent *avysement*. The nobles of Saluzzo, Janicula, the people, the probing narrator, and the implied audience all serve as doubles for Walter's curiosity, calculation, and suspicion. The nobles at the beginning of the tale deliver their message of prudence very prudently, with tactfully calculated arguments for why their sovereign should marry. Janicula, Griselda's father, early on tells Walter, in a gesture that mimics Griselda's assent, "my willynge / Is as ye wole," but he later confides to his daughter that he was "evere in suspect of hir mariage" (319–20, 905). The "stormy peple" (995) excel at prudent calculation, constantly adjusting their judgments as circumstances change and making shrewd predictions of future events (Johnson, 17–19). For example, their joy at the birth of Griselda's first child, a daughter, results from their prudent calculation of the odds on her next child's being the desired boy:

> Glad was this markys and the folk therfore,
> For though a mayde child coome al bifore,
> She may unto a knave child atteyne
> By liklihede, syn she nys nat bareyne.
>
> (445–48)

[45] See Wallace, 181–84, and Dinshaw, 148–50.

Later, their response to Walter's sudden choice to remarry is to compile and examine comparative statistics on Walter's old wife and the new one and "deemen" (988) finally "that Walter was no fool, thogh that hym leste / To chaunge his wyf," since the new bride has "moore" to offer, being "fairer," "moore tendre of age," "moore plesant," and capable of bearing "fairer fruyt" (986–91; Mann, "Satisfaction and Payment," 41). If early on the people imagine Griselda as heaven-sent to reform community relations and serve the "commune profit," toward the end of the tale, in spite of all that has happened, their view remains similarly mundane and shortsighted when they are dazzled by the "prudence" of a poorly dressed woman who can so "konnyngly" arrange the seating and reception line at Walter's second wedding that every guest's social "degree" is noted and observed:

> With so glad chiere his gestes she receyveth,
> And so konnyngly, everich in his degree,
> That no defaute no man aperceyveth,
> But ay they wondren what she myghte bee
> That in so povre array was for to see,
> And koude swich honour and reverence,
> And worthily they preisen hire prudence.
>
> (1016–22)

The common people's understanding of the term "prudence" is not unusual since the virtue's meaning was frequently extended to include social accomplishments as well as household management skills (Burnley, 53–56). But its use serves here to mark the people's inability to see beyond the lowest practical terms of virtuous action. Their praise of Griselda's prudence indicates blindness rather than insight, and it points to a crucial change that has occurred in the terms of the tale. When in part II the people praised Walter for his "prudent" choice of a bride, we had no reason to question the value of this important practical virtue. But in light of both the increasing emphasis on Griselda's extravagantly *im*prudent assent, and the narrative's critique of the subtlety and *avysement* that infect Walter and his people, prudence is here reduced to an almost trivial pursuit.[46] This reductive process is completed in the Envoy, with its mocking praise of "noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence" who advance the "commune profit" by prolonging and taking steps to prevail in the battle of the sexes (1183–1212). In the light of Griselda's unconditional assent, such prudent calculation in the name of self-defense, here carried to extremes, becomes at least comical, if not grotesque.

The poem's narrator partakes fully in the zest for *avysing* that characterizes all of Saluzzo, continually interrupting his story to offer his own cultural critique of the politics and psychology of Walter, Griselda, and the people of Saluzzo, encouraging the audience to share his indignation and discerning judgment. In his commentary he urges the audience to watch Griselda closely just as Walter does, to read in her behavior signs of her feelings, and to guess at her motives

[46] See the opposing view of Ferster (98, 113), who has a higher opinion of the people's judgment than the text can support.

(Ferster, 98–99; Schleusner; Spearing, 80–90; Frese, 138–41). Just as Walter "gooth . . . ful faste ymaginyng / If by his wyves cheere he myghte se, / Or by hire word aperceyve, that she / Were chaunged" (598–601), so too the narrator studies Griselda's responses and imagines for her a rich interior life at odds with, and supposedly hidden behind, her unchanging exterior:

> I trowe that to a norice in this cas
> It had been hard this reuthe for to se;
> Wel myghte a mooder thanne had cryd "allas!"
> But nathelees so sad stidefast was she
> That she endured al adversitee.
>
> (561–65)

Later the narrator prides himself, by contrast with the "rude peple," on his ability to see through the facade of Walter's counterfeit annulment papers, and he similarly assumes with confidence that he can "deeme" Griselda's more benign duplicity of hiding her woeful "herte" behind a "sad" countenance:

> The rude peple, as it no wonder is,
> Wenden ful wel that it [the annulment] hadde be right so;
> But whan thise tidynges came to Grisildis,
> I deeme that hire herte was ful wo.
> But she, ylike sad for everemo,
> Disposed was, this humble creature,
> The adversitee of Fortune al t'endure.
>
> (750–56)

Encouraged as we are by the narrator to read Griselda as subtly as Walter does, it is no wonder that critics so often *avyse* rather than assent to Griselda's power, analyzing, measuring, and comparing her words early and late, hoping to discover some significant variation, guile, or subtlety, some hint of her saying "ye" when she means "nay," some break in what we suspect is only a facade of stoicism masking something else, whether spineless submission or subtle subversion. With Walter and the narrator, we wait for Griselda to slip and reveal signs of her hidden nature, count up what one critic calls her "lapses into naturalism" (Kean, 129; Jordan, 202). Griselda's most frequently quoted lines, which begin:

> O goode God! How gentil and how kynde
> Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage
> The day that maked was oure mariage!
>
> But sooth is seyd—algate I fynde it trewe,
> For in effect it preeved is on me—
> Love is noght oold as whan that it is newe
>
> (852–57)

while not at all characteristic, are the ones we turn to in relief, because here for once Griselda can be caught thinking more as we would, *avysing*, protesting, calculating her loss, thus revealing the signs we seek that she might share our

own critical subtlety.[47] Like Walter and the narrator, we read against the grain, especially these days when as critics we pride ourselves on not being taken in by the text. Given the ascendancy of what Paul Ricoeur calls "the hermeneutics of suspicion," we, like Walter, resist what is often labeled "facile sympathy" or "mindless identification" with texts, authors, or characters.

Chaucer, with his rationalist bent, builds our critical resistance into the poem, and even encourages it, but he also seeks to conquer it, at least temporarily. Even as the tale forces us and the narrator into Walter's corner, it begins to force Walter out of it. For all of his seeming power and authority, Walter becomes increasingly *re*active, following rather than directing Griselda's assent, until he finally finds in her "hool entente" (861) a worthy object of the hunt and the wavering desire with which he began the tale. Gradually, Walter's responses shift from active "avys[ing]" to reactive "wonder," a nonrational, affective recognition of mystery. Wonder or awe, although it is not identical with assent, is at least closer to it than the prying, violent experimentation that led Walter to feign the killing of Griselda's children to unlock the mystery of her assent. While his goal remains "hir sadnesse for to knowe," Walter after his second test momentarily withdraws his penetrating, destructive gaze in favor of simple "wonder" and a new form of "plesance":

> . . . And whan this markys say
> The constance of his wyf, he caste adoun
> His eyen two, and wondreth that she may
> In pacience suffre al this array;
> And forth he goth with drery contenance,
> But to his herte it was ful greet plesance.
>
> (667–72)

Walter's delight here results not from what his "eyen two" can see, test, or *avyse* but from suprarational wonder at the mystery of Griselda's love, a response that quickly increases as "This markys wondred, evere lenger the moore / Upon hir pacience" (687–88).[48]

Even closer to assent than benign but passive wonder is pity or "routhe,"

[47] While these lines cannot and should not be dismissed, neither should they be overread as I believe they are by those who interpret them as establishing Griselda's "disillusion[ment]" (Salter, 58) or her purpose in keeping "the voice of sane moral protest alive" (Engle, 453). As I read these lines, Griselda is lamenting her loss of her husband's love, not protesting his treatment of her, anymore than she protests the treatment of her child when she kisses it good-bye in part III (551–60). Nor does Griselda's recognition of the change in Walter's love alter or detract from the absoluteness of her assent; on the contrary, she reasserts her unchanging love repeatedly in this, her longest speech in the tale. On the other hand, her acknowledgment of loss at the moment of her final test contributes to the poem's pathos by reminding us, as does her swooning embrace of her children upon their return, that Griselda is human and vulnerable to loss. If we were not periodically reminded of her humanity, the repetition of her assent, needed to establish its unconditional quality, might make it come to seem ordinary or automatic, rather than mysterious and numinous.

[48] On the masculine gaze in Boccaccio's, Petrarch's, and Chaucer's versions of the tale, see Wallace, 180–95.

which competes with and finally conquers Walter's calculating *avysement.*[49] After hearing the sergeant's report of Griselda's reaction to the loss of her first child, Walter "[s]omewhat . . . hadde routhe in his manere" (579), but he continues to test his wife. Later, upon hearing Griselda's response to his plan to remarry, Walter can hardly speak "for routhe and for pitee" (893). Finally, after his goading of Griselda with the charms of his young new wife still fails to elicit a strong enough protest, Walter begins to "see," not with the eye of reason, which has discerned little for all of its watching, but with pity, which turns his gaze inward to his own "herte":

> And whan this Walter saugh hire pacience,
> Hir glade chiere, and no malice at al,
> And he so ofte had doon to hire offence,
> And she ay sad and constant as a wal,
> Continuynge evere hire innocence overal,
> This sturdy markys gan his herte dresse
> To rewen upon hire wyfly stedfastnesse.[50]
>
> (1044–50)

To "rewen" or pity another requires an act of sympathy (from Gr. *pathos*, "suffering or feeling"), a surrender of one's judgment in favor of joining with the feeling of the other. It is represented in the tale, not as a passive virtue, but as an active "conformyng" or bending to the will of another, and it is this motion for which the previously "sturdy" Walter now prepares or "dresse[s]" his heart.

Griselda's "[c]onformyng hire to that the markys lyked" (546) is the source of her strength, that which renders her in Walter's judgment "constant as a wal," presumably a reference to the protective strength of the defensive walls surrounding medieval towns and castles. As the narrator says at the tale's end, Griselda in her perfect sympathy is the unalloyed gold strong enough to "plie" rather than "brest atwo."[51] This image better than any other captures the paradoxical strength of Griselda's bending—she "stands fast" by means of bending. Such pliable strength contrasts sharply with the equally paradoxical weakness of Walter's rigidity, his "sturdinesse":

> What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse
> To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse,
> And he continuynge evere in sturdinesse?
>
> But ther been folk of swich condicion
> That whan they have a certein purpos take,
> They kan nat stynte of hire entencion,
> But, right as they were bounden to that stake,
> They wol nat of that firste purpos slake.

[49] See especially Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 152–54. On the function of *pitee* in the tale as the response Chaucer seeks as an alternative to "rational consideration," see the suggestive remarks of Kirkpatrick, 240–44.

[50] On the changes in Walter's way of seeing and knowing, see Lynch.

[51] It is surprising how many critics misread this line as providing evidence of Griselda's rigidity, exactly what the line denies. See, for example, Ganim, 85, and Ginsberg, 162.

> Right so that markys fulliche hath purposed
> To tempte his wyf as he was first disposed.
>
> (698–707)

The obstinacy of Walter's "purpos," emphasized by the triple repetition of the term, finally gives way to the power of pity. Sympathy thus replaces *avysement* as a route to knowledge for Walter, who can at last wed his wavering will to Griselda's whole will: " 'Now knowe I, dere wyf, thy stedfastnesse'— / And hire in armes took and gan hire kesse" (1056–57). As for Griselda, as Jill Mann has shown, in her bending she becomes a type of Christ himself, whose suffering and sympathy are not only exemplary but redemptive ("Parents and Children," 180–83; *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 158–64). Griselda's absolute sympathy is strong enough first to attract, then steady Walter's will so that it can join with hers. Defined and strengthened by Griselda's assent, Walter's pity, along with his new knowledge, quickly spreads to his people—the word "pitous" occurs five times in seven stanzas—and leads to the "reste and pees" (see 1129, 1132, 1136) that proved elusive in the beginning of the tale. Pity is not quite the same as assent, but it may be as close as we can come to Griselda's numinous assent.

Yet even sympathetic critics have objected to the strong element of pathos in the tale, claiming that it works against our acceptance of any clear moral lesson. Elizabeth Salter, in the best account we have of the reader's experience of the tale, objects precisely to what she terms Chaucer's unwitting confusion of rational, moral judgment on the one hand—akin to what I have called *avysement*—and pity on the other. Pathos for Griselda's unmerited suffering, according to Salter, must be supplemented by clear "instruction about its larger *meaning*" (52, author's emphasis) if the tale is to "teach clearly about the rewards of perfect patience and fortitude" (55).[52] Our rational judgment must be satisfied, Salter insists; some clear "lesson" is needed to justify the story (esp. 60–61). We must be assured that "these happenings make proper sense on a higher plane" (52). But Chaucer fails to relieve our doubts with the clear message that Salter demands of religious art. She complains that the tale requires too much of its readers: "We are asked to hate, to pity, to judge on [Griselda's] behalf when we should only have to admire and learn" (60). Like most good critics, Salter values judgment as much as Walter does. He, too, at first seeks to *avyse* Griselda's virtue from afar, where he can admire and judge its worthiness. But as the tale progresses, it becomes apparent that moral lessons and critical insight are not "ynogh," to use a word that appears more often in this tale than in any other (Mann, "Satisfaction and Payment," 31–45). Chaucer's religious art, most clearly figured in Griselda's sublime assent and Walter's final surrender to it, asks us for once to forgo critical judgment in favor of wonder and sympathy, themselves forms of assent.

But our surrender to the terms of the tale, unlike Griselda's, is at best temporary. Following Walter's act of pity and insight, the tale returns us to the

[52] Surely the story is not meant to teach "the rewards of perfect patience," if only because so little emphasis is placed on them. Griselda is not rewarded for her moral decisions any more than Job is. Chino, 30–33, shows that the rationalization of the Job story as exemplifying the "rewards" of patience is a late interpretation, especially popular in Reformation England.

public world of Saluzzo and its prudential values, with Walter's emphatic "This is ynogh, Grisilde myn" (1051). There follows a string of plausible-sounding explanations for the preceding events. Walter calmly explains his actions to Griselda and sternly warns his people against miscalculating his purpose. The people's tears of pity are quickly replaced by their busy redressing of Griselda, a gesture recalling the wedding scene as though to cancel out what has come between. The "pees and reste" which obtains at the tale's end also returns us to the beginning (434), but this time it is made to seem permanent; not only do Walter and Griselda "[l]yven . . . in concord and in reste" (1129), but Griselda's father, too, lives out his life "in pees and reste" (1133), and Walter and Griselda's son then in turn "succedeth in his heritage / In reste and pees" (1135–36). Further to seal up the tale, the narrator finally offers a bona fide moral, one of Christianity's most familiar: everyone should be constant in adversity, as Griselda was (1145–47).

Yet these morals and explanations fail to satisfy, as the critical history of the tale makes clear. Readers are right to question the appropriateness of the moral, which even the narrator has difficulty applying (1142–44), and which disintegrates completely in the dazzling poetry of the parodic Envoy. It is not the tacked-on moral, nor Walter's cool account of his motives, but the experience of the narrative itself that bears the tale's meaning. Our experience of Griselda's mysterious assent, which will not yield to Walter's or to our critical *avysement*, forces us to confront the radical demands of faith, and our need, as fallen people, to rationalize them. The pathos urged by the tale's telling does indeed, as Salter shows, bring a divided response, both encouraging a sympathetic, nonrational joining with Griselda's suffering and triggering a rational search for the causes of such "nedelees" suffering (see 452). But as Spearing suggests, that divided response carries the tale's meaning better than any moral can, repeatedly marking the difference between our "freletee" and Griselda's faith (1160).[53] As with other numinous religious narratives, our experience of the tale serves precisely as the Clerk says adversity does in God's scheme, "as for oure excercise" (1156), so that by our pity we may at least come to know our own frailty, our Walterity.

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[53] Chaucer's remarks on human frailty (1156–62) are a slightly abridged translation of Petrarch's statement that God tests us "non ut animum nostrum sciat, quem scivit ante quam crearemur, sed ut nobis nostra fragilitas notis ac domesticis indicijs innotescat" (Severs, 6.76–78, p. 288). The emphasis on human frailty accords better with Chaucer's version of the story than with Petrarch's. Although Petrarch expresses traditional sentiments about the limitations of human nature, he seems unsure of exactly what they are. His ambivalence is evident in his treatment of Walter as, on the one hand, too curious for his own good and, on the other, a humanist experimenter whose powers of observation place him above the common rabble. Chaucer's adaptation is more consistent (and perhaps more medieval) in its focus on spiritual faith and human frailty. See Wallace's argument that Chaucer offers a "cultural critique" of the whole "humanist enterprise" which Petrarch promotes. Middleton, 127–36, offers an opposing view.

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Linda Georgianna is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine (e-mail: lmgeorgi.@uci.edu).