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The Real CLERK'S TALE; *or, Patient Griselda Exposed*

THE TALE THAT CHAUCER PUTS INTO THE MOUTH OF THE CLERK IN *The Canterbury Tales* has been the source of some embarrassment to twentieth-century teachers of literature. Fond of the studious Oxonian, to whom books were the highest form of wealth and who would gladly both learn and teach, the modern academic is predisposed to approve of the tale the Clerk tells; but current fashions in taste have brought against this particular story charges that are leveled at very few parts of *The Canterbury Tales.* James Sledd, attempting to defend the story, was driven to admit:

> It is far from a perfect tale, as I would be the last to deny. If sentimentality is one likely charge against it, plain dulness is another, for interesting complications . . . cannot be expected from a story how the marvelous patience of a pious wife converts a husband from cruel suspicion to the ultimate conviction that she is really what she seems.[1]

Although it may be presumptuous of me to disagree with those whose knowledge of Chaucer and his times is deeper than mine, I became convinced while teaching the *Clerk's Tale* in conjunction with other tales in Chaucer's so-called "Marriage Group" that one who, like Mr. Sledd, wishes to admire the story need not apologize for it on any grounds; from its dramatic setting the tale emerges as one of the most subtle and skillful of all *The Canterbury Tales,* a worthy testimony to the rhetorical skill both of the Clerk of Oxenford and of his creator.

Because *The Canterbury Tales* embodies dramatic developments, the characteristics of the pilgrims that are mentioned in the *General Prologue* by no means exhaust the qualities that become apparent as the tales and links unfold. For example, the *General Prologue* introduces the reader to the Wife of Bath's lusty nature but does not anticipate the pseudo-erudition with which she calls upon all manner of sacred and secular authorities to justify her actions and opinions. Nor does the description of the Franklin in the *General Prologue,* the definitive clause of which says that "he was Epicurus owene sone," prepare us for the nobility of his tale and its idealistic sentiment, "Trouthe

[1] "The *Clerk's Tale:* The Monsters and the Critics," *MP,* LI (November, 1953), 81.

is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe."[2] And certainly the Merchant, whose very name remained a mystery to the narrator in the *General Prologue,* surprises the reader when, suddenly baring his heart to the company, he reveals the unhappiness of his marriage and, through his tale, presumably his own cuckolding. Comparing the first accounts of the pilgrims with later dramatic developments should convince one that, though the universe of *The Canterbury Tales* may be a closed one, it unfolds itself to the reader through progressive revelation. On the other hand, later manifestations of character never directly contradict the information in the *General Prologue*: the delight with which the Wife of Bath cites authorities is not, for example, inconsistent with her portrait in the *General Prologue,* and the Merchant's palpable, self-deceiving attempt to objectify his own unhappy situation in the story of January and May almost convinces us that he thinks himself to be as secretive as the naive narrator believed him to be. The *persona* of Chaucer who describes his fellow pilgrims is naive—or ironic—[3] enough to set the reader on the right track without himself apparently understanding the full significance of the details he has given: "My wit is short, ye may wel understonde." (I.746) Thus, although the picture of the sober Clerk drawn by the narrator is at least partially true, other aspects of his personality and character come to light when the Clerk has an opportunity to speak for himself in the dramatic context of *The Canterbury Tales.*

Harry Bailly's impression of the Oxonian (IV.1–14) is at first much the same as the *persona* "Chaucer's" view of him. But the Clerk promises to obey the Host's injunction to tell a "myrie tale" and not to preach, and at the conclusion of his long performance, the Host, mightily pleased, would "levere than a barel ale / My wyf at hoom had herd this legende ones!" (IV.1212^{c}–1212^{d}) Are we to assume that the Clerk has reconciled the Host to long-faced didacticism? Or is there something more "myrie" and less homiletic in the story of Walter and Griselda than modern readers recognize? First, let us consider the dramatic context in which the Clerk is called upon to tell his story. As George Lyman Kittredge pointed out half a century ago, the *Clerk's Tale* is provoked by and is in rebuttal to the Wife of Bath. Besides the Clerk's specific allusions to the Wife at the end of his tale, his entire method is as much

[2] V. 1479, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), p. 143. All quotations (and citations) of Chaucer's works are from this edition.

[3] E. Talbot Donaldson's conception of Chaucer's *persona* as a naive bourgeois ("Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA,* LXIX [September, 1954], 928–936) has been challenged by John M. Major in "The Personality of Chaucer the Pilgrim." (*PMLA,* LXXV [June, 1960], 160–162)

a counterpiece to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* as the *Miller's Tale* is a parody of the *Knight's Tale*. The drunken Miller echoed the situations and structure of the *Knight's Tale* fortuitously, inspired by an acute attack of "now I'll tell one" in a mind of limited creativity, but the Clerk intentionally counters deftly every aspect of the Wife of Bath's performance. Whereas the Wife ostentatiously displayed her limited learning by citing authorities like Solomon, Jesus, Moses, Paul, Seneca, Juvenal, Ovid, Boethius, and Dante, the Clerk gives as his only source the relatively unknown Italian humanist "Fraunceys Petrak," who—far from contributing the prestige of established reputation—must himself be identified and praised by the Clerk. Whereas the Wife of Bath loquaciously digressed (in couplets), the Clerk, after a few words about the origin and setting of the story, moves directly into the tale and, in sophisticated stanzas, pursues his narrative directly and economically.

That the Clerk cites no authorities is, I believe, noteworthy. The Friar had in his prologue twitted the Wife of Bath about her pretentions to learning, suggesting that a tale for entertainment was no place to lecture: "dame, heere as we ryde by the weye, / Us nedeth nat to speken but of game." (III.1274–1275) The Friar's comment limits the method of the Clerk's rebuttal; he cannot attack the Wife's arguments directly, using his professional competence to crush her chop-logic under the weight of classical, Biblical, and patristic authorities (as Jankin, the Wife's fifth husband, had once done), because he must avoid the pedantry for which the Wife has already been criticized. By the time the Host calls upon him, the Clerk has made his decision to reply by indirection. He readily consents, therefore, to do the Host's bidding "as fer as resoun axeth," since his reason agrees with Harry Bailly's judgment that preaching is not the way to the minds of his fellow pilgrims.

If one accepts (as I do) the "Bradshaw shift" and orders the tales according to the plan advocated by Robert A. Pratt (*PMLA*, LXVI [December, 1951], 1141–1167), the Clerk's reasons for resorting to irony are strengthened. According to this arrangement, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* is immediately preceded by the *Monk's Tale* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. After the Knight interrupts the Monk's lugubrious recitation, the Host criticizes the Monk for boring his listeners, and cites the authority of learned rhetoricians for his injunction. (VIII.2800–2802) He then commands the Nun's Priest much as he later does the Clerk: "Telle us swich thyng as may oure hertes glade. / Be blithe, though thou ryde upon a jade." (VII.2811–2812) This advice, which the Nun's Priest obeys very well, is ignored by the Wife of Bath, who seems a "little deaf" in more than the physiological sense. But the Friar's critical re-

marks on her preaching and the Host's warning to the Clerk set the stage for another performance in the spirit of the *Nun's Priest's Tale.*

I

There has been some confusion, I believe, about the crux of the differences between the Clerk and the Wife of Bath. The points of contention usually cited are the Wife's uncomplimentary remarks on clerks in general (III.688–710) together with her attacks on Jankin, her fifth husband, who "som tyme was a clerk of Oxenford," (III.527) and her assertion of the supremacy of wives over their husbands. Kittredge, it is true, does record as the Clerk's first provocation the Wife's heretical glorification of "fleshly delights," but because his article is primarily concerned with "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," he soon loses sight of the larger issue of orientation, writing that the Clerk "opens with tantalizing deliberation, and it is not until he has spoken more than sixty lines that he mentions marriage."[4] As a matter of fact, the Clerk begins to attack the Wife's attitudes very early in his prologue, for his basic quarrel is not with the Wife of Bath herself or with her small heresy that wives ought to rule their husbands; his tale explores a far more fundamental issue—one that divided the loyalties of all the Canterbury Pilgrims: what is the proper object of man's primary allegiance, the glories and pleasures of this world, or God and the life hereafter? The Clerk, in his courteous reply to the Host's injunction, alludes very simply to the limitations of earthly authorities: "Ye han of us as now the governance, / And therfore wol I do yow obeisance, / As fer as resoun axeth," (IV.23–25) for, as the Host had well remarked a few lines earlier, "Salomon seith 'every thyng hath tyme'." (IV.6) In his remarks on Petrarch the Clerk makes more explicit the limitations of *gloria mundi*: "He is now deed and nayled in his cheste, / I prey to God so yeve his soule reste!" (IV.29–30) Petrarch and Giovanni di Lignano have "illumined all Italy," but

> Deeth, that wol nat suffre us dwellen heer,
> But as it were a twynklyng of an ye,
> Hem bothe hath slayn, and alle shul we dye.
> (IV.36–38)

[4] "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *MP,* IX (April, 1912), 11. Actually the first mention of marriage comes in the second and third lines of the *Clerk's Prologue,* where the Host compares the Clerk to "a mayde . . . newe spoused." In the religious sense the Clerk is espoused, his soul being dedicated as the bride of Christ.

Although Petrarch, according to the Clerk, indited in a "heigh stile" a proem in which he described northern Italy from west to east, the Clerk, ostensibly obeying the Host's command to keep his narrative simple, says that he discards this as "a thyng impertinent."[5] In setting the scene the Clerk emphasizes the practical matters that the country was "habundant of vitaille" (IV.59) and that there had been a long and traditional social order: "many a tour and toun thou mayst biholde, / That founded were in tyme of fadres olde." (IV.60–61) And, while describing Walter, the Clerk mentions the concept of "gentillesse" that had loomed large in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and that will provide the theme for the Franklin's narrative. The marquis was "as of lynage, The gentilleste yborn of Lumbardye," (IV.71–72) succeeding "his worthy eldres" in the rule of faithful, "obeisant . . . liges, bothe lasse and moore." (IV.65–67) As S. K. Heninger has pointed out, the duties of ruler and people are equally important:

> Prosperity is maintained by proper observance of degree, "bothe lasse and moore." All members of the social body—the Marquis, "his lordes," and "his commune"—work coordinately toward the proper goal of sustaining God's hierarchial pattern in the social system of the land.[6]

Though the people ought not disobey their lord, they are permitted—even obligated—to call to his attention his duties and responsibilities. With every right in the feudal relationship came a concomitant duty, and though Walter enjoyed all the earthly advantages of God's bounty, though he possessed the four "moral" virtues and the goods of this world, he was "to blame" in that "he considered noght / In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde, / But on his lust present was al his thoght." (IV.78–80) Not observing the proper hierarchy of values, he put trivial earthly pleasures before his duty as the representative of God. Walter's distortion of values, his elevation of his "lust present" above all thought for his own salvation or his duty toward his people, signals the root of all cardinal sins, rebellion against God's will; when the Clerk then adds, "And eek he nolde—and that was worst of alle— / Wedde no wyf," (IV.83–84) the irony of the tale has begun. To the Wife of Bath, Walter's failure to marry might seem worse than his following the devices and desires of

[5] Actually the *Clerk's Prologue* (IV.43–55) and the first stanza of the *Tale* itself embody the substance of Petrarch's opening description, (*Epistolae Seniles,* Book XVII, Letter 3) the Clerk using nineteen lines of poetry to explain why he is not repeating fifteen lines of prose.

[6] "The Concept of Order in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale,*" *JEGP,* LVI (July, 1957), 385. See also Donald C. Baker, "Chaucer's Clerk and the Wife of Bath on the Subject of *Gentilesse,*" *SP,* LIX (October, 1962), 631–640.

his own heart, but to the Clerk such reluctance seemed merely symptomatic of the deeper sin.

Walter's subjects, though obedient and faithful, cannot and do not passively permit their lord to neglect his responsibilities. They remonstrate humbly but earnestly with him for his lack of perspective, urging him, "Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok / Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse." (IV.113–114) Kittredge (p. 11) rightly calls attention to the word "soveraynetee," which the Wife of Bath had used to designate her supremacy over her husbands; even more significant is the concept that the marquis himself must bow his neck to a yoke even in his marital sovereignty. The Clerk, who fills his tale with Biblical echoes, alludes in the "blisful yok" not only to the marriage bond, but also to the yoke of service to Christ (Matthew 11:29). Moreover, the spokesman of the people unambiguously focuses the marquis' attention on the limitations of earthly values, echoing the Clerk's earlier comment on the death of Petrarch: "deeth manaceth every age, and smyt / In ech estaat, for ther escapeth noon." (IV.122–123) He urges the young ruler "for hye Goddes sake" (IV.135) to choose a wife who will seem an "honour to God and yow," (IV.133) so that his heritage will not pass into the hands of "a straunge successour" (IV.138) "as God forbede." (IV.136) The pious interjections of God's name might, in the mouth of the Friar, Harry Bailly, or the Wife of Bath, be meaninglessly conventional, but in the mouth of the Clerk, who "noght o word spak he moore than was neede, / And that was seyd in forme and reverence," (I.304–305) each reference to God is significant. Walter immediately recognizes the validity of his subjects' request and assents to it, though he rejects their wish that his wife be "born of the gentilleste and of the meeste / Of al this land," saying that since true gentility is not always inherited but comes as God's bounty, he will choose his own wife: "Ther as myn herte is set, ther wol I wyve." (IV.173) The people accept this reply ("ther seyde no wight nay," [IV.177]) but the "bisy drede" from which they asked deliverance (IV.134) still lingers. (IV.181–182)

The First Part of the *Clerk's Tale* establishes the concept, accepted in principle by all parties, that God's will and the welfare of the society eclipse every private desire. The marquis, though apparently bowing to the voice of the people when they speak the righteous law of God, retains one remnant of his self-will, refusing to marry within the circle of the nobility; but he does so on grounds that had the sanction of the theologians: God's spirit blows where it lists and can bring nobility of nature into bloom amid the humblest circumstances. In this matter the *Clerk's Tale* seems, for the moment, to accord with the tale told by the Wife of Bath, but whereas the Wife had private, selfish reasons for favoring the

old, ugly, and low-born, the Clerk's expression would be a disinterested one—unless the Clerk is satirizing the Wife of Bath's rationalizations through those of Walter.

The Second Part of the Clerk's story reveals both Griselda's character and, apparently, the nature of Walter's love for her. God, who can sometimes send "His grace into a litel oxes stalle," (IV.206–207, cf. IV.291, 395–399) has seemingly endowed Griselda with all the virtues. Though she was merely "fair ynogh to sighte," (IV.209) in the beauty of virtue "was she oon the faireste under sonne." Unlike the Wife of Bath, for example, she was not filled with "likerous lust," but drank "ofter of the welle than of the tonne." (IV.215) Walter, it seems, loves her for the right reasons. (IV.236–240) Moreover, he does not woo Griselda clandestinely, as would an immoral courtly lover. Though he is rather imperious and arbitrary in waiting until the day of the wedding to reveal his will, he asks Janicula for Griselda's hand in marriage, promising to say nothing to the maiden that he does not say in her father's presence. (IV.328–329) Walter then tells Griselda that, since he and her father desire the wedding, he supposes that she also wills it, (IV.347) but that before it takes place he has some demands: she must swear that, no matter what happens, she will never object to any of his desires or whims ("be ye redy with good herte / To al my lust, and that I frely may, / As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte." [IV.351–353]) Griselda, overwhelmed by her lord's request, agrees to Walter's proviso, which seems reasonable enough in the light of the marquis' double claims to authority as liege lord and husband.

At the end of Part Two Walter's choice of a wife has been vindicated by Griselda's virtues: Not only is she beloved by all her subjects for her virtuous deeds, but she has fulfilled the purpose of her marriage by bearing the marquis a child, who, though a girl, presages the birth of a male heir in the future. The plot seems, on the surface, to have arrived at a stasis, but if the story is unified—if the first two parts of the *Clerk's Tale* are not to be regarded as "a thyng impertinent, / Save that he wole conveyen his mateere"[7]—then there must be some instability in the plot situation at the end of Part Two that will reveal itself and connect the first two parts with what follows. In the later parts, the flaw in the otherwise perfect marriage proves to be Griselda's oath of perfect obedience to her earthly lord and master, and the single theme that unites the

[7] IV.54–55. Significantly, in recent defenses of the *Clerk's Tale* as religious allegory Charles Muscatine (*Chaucer and the French Tradition* [Berkeley, 1957], pp. 190–197) and E. Talbot Donaldson (*Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* [New York, 1958], pp. 917–920) omit all mention of the events of the First Part, apparently finding them less than thematically integral to the tale.

first two parts with the last four is not "patience" (which is not mentioned in Part One) but rather the question of sovereignty and order.

II

The same recalcitrant self-will that had first caused the young marquis to take too little heed of the future, that then had inspired him to tell his subjects, "Ther as myn herte is set, ther wol I wyve," (IV.173) and that had finally driven him to demand of his wife perfect obedience in all his whims, next prompts him to "tempte" his virtuous wife. The Clerk's unambiguous censure of Walter's decision (IV.455–459) rebukes not only tyrannical husbands, but also the whole courtly love tradition, with its ideal of humility during capricious tests of love.[8] From the orthodox theological perspective, no man had a right arbitrarily to test the faithfulness of any of God's creatures.

Walter's first two tests take the ostensible form of the greatest crime one could commit against God and man, the murder of one's own children. In this instance, Walter, a ruler who needs an heir lest "a straunge successour sholde take" his heritage, (IV.136–139) compounds the crime. Although he has taken a wife, his apparent murder of their children deprives his people of the security from "bisy drede" that was to have been the result of that union and frustrates the desired, worthy end of his marriage. The crime becomes still more odious because Walter has enslaved Griselda's conscience until she acquiesces to the unnatural murders without a murmur of protest. Far from determining to obey her temporal lord only "as fer as resoun axeth," as the Clerk obeyed the Host, (IV.25) Griselda completely surrenders her moral freedom and disobeys God's law to follow the whims of a fellow-creature. The Clerk had in the Second Part warned against accepting birth and rank as the criteria of "gentillesse," recalling that "hye God somtyme senden kan / His grace into a litel oxes stalle." (IV.206–207) But Griselda, who possesses more of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity than does the high-born marquis, misdirects them by submitting patiently and obediently, not to God's law, but to the arbitrary and evil desires of a "mortal man"; (IV.1150) she is, therefore, guilty of idolatry according to either medieval or modern theological standards.

Griselda is, in short, pathetic rather than virtuous in the eyes of both the reader and the Clerk; one sympathizes with her predicament without respecting either her intelligence or moral sensitivity. To argue, as Donaldson does, that Griselda's "constancy is rather to her own promise

[8] See C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 2–3, 26–29.

than to her husband," (*Chaucer's Poetry,* p. 919) does not exonerate her, for under the terms of value established in the First Part of the tale, self-will or persistence in one's own course of action becomes sinful as soon as the action conflicts with God's law. Because such conflicts could occur between the wills of ruling authorities and the Divine law, Reason remained God's gift to all men to measure the acceptability of authoritarian injunctions, and for the studious Clerk of Oxenford, who quotes no *authorities,* reasoned study of Griselda's behavior could lead only to the conclusion that Griselda's great "patience" was as much a source of evil as was Walter's arbitrary wilfulness.

The Clerk says near the beginning of the Fourth Part that the marquis "caughte yet another lest / To tempte his wyf yet ofter, if he may," if she would let him, because men "knowe no mesure" when they find a patient creature. (IV.619–623) When the marquis' subjects had not patiently borne his heedless irresponsibility, but had pointedly though reverently remonstrated with him, they had enabled him to recognize some of his shortcomings and temporarily to amend his ways. Even now these good people, unlike Griselda, do not bear without murmuring the mysterious disappearance of Walter's two children: whereas they had previously "loved hym wel," now "they hym hatede," because "to been a mordrere is an hateful name." (IV.729–732) When Walter perpetrates his third great cruelty, driving Griselda all but naked from the palace to make way for a new wife, and when the new bride-to-be is commended by some people for being fairer, younger, and of nobler birth, the wiser and more sober subjects cry out against this easy acquiescence to the whims of Fortune—and of Walter:

> "O stormy peple! unsad and evere untrewe!
> . . . . . .
> Youre doom is fals, youre constance yvele preeveth;
> A ful greet fool is he that on yow leeveth"
> (IV.995–1001)

To remain loyal and constant to an enemy of God is not virtuous but evil. Walter had given as his reason for mistreating Griselda his duty toward his people, but, of course, he owed nothing to his subjects except obedience to God's law, for if he governed according to the theological ideals, he would do his duty toward his subjects. The voice of the "unsad" multitude, whose judgment is false and whose very constancy is (like the misapplied patience of Griselda) an evil, cannot justify Walter's immoral actions that bring needless suffering to his wife and to his wiser and truer subjects.

When, at the wedding banquet honoring Walter and his wife-to-be, Griselda finally reminds Walter of the excesses he has committed and warns him against tormenting "this tendre mayden," (IV.1037–1043) indicating the limits of her patience (even while she keeps it), Walter relents and takes her as his loving wife once more. This result, which parallels that of the people's remonstrance in Part One, suggests that Griselda could have saved herself and Walter's subjects much woe had she not been as "constant as a wal." (IV.1047) The Clerk, a student of Aristotle, (I.293–296) doubtless would recognize virtue as a Golden Mean between two states of excess. Just as the Clerk's simile "constant as a wal" points with irony to the limitations of Griselda's submissive spirit, so the tone of the description of her reaction to Walter's revelation illuminates the Clerk's attitude, which is certainly pity, not admiration (italics mine):

> Whan she this herde, aswowne doun she falleth
> For *pitous* joye, and after hire swownynge
> She bothe hire yonge children to hire calleth,
> And in hire armes, *pitously* wepynge,
> Embraceth hem. . . .
> O which a *pitous* thyng it was to se
> Hir swownyng, and hir *humble* voys to heere!
> (IV.1079–1083, 1086–1087)

And the Clerk's repetition of "patience" likewise becomes increasingly ironic as the tale progresses: Griselda is "patient" much as Brutus is an "honourable man" in Antony's oration.

At least two details in the description of Griselda's actions make one suspect, momentarily at least, that the Clerk might be imputing to her unworthy motives for her immoral actions. When Griselda blesses her daughter before the sergeant carries off the child, she says,

> "sith I thee have marked with the croys
> Of thilke Fader—blessed moote he be!—
> That for us deyde upon a croys of tree,
> Thy soule, litel child, I hym bitake,
> For this nyght *shaltow dyen for my sake.*"[9]

The last two lines, which Chaucer has added to his source, seem ironic in the mouth of a mother speaking to her doomed child: "Christ died

[9] IV.556–560. When Muscatine (p. 193) compares Griselda's actions to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, he draws a parallel where none exists: Abraham was obeying God, whereas neither Griselda nor the reader can think of Walter as any more than a "mortal man."

for us and now *you* are to die for *me*." The Clerk's comment is also, in part, Chaucer's addition:

> I trowe that to a norice in this cas
> It had been hard this reuthe for to se;
> Wel myghte a mooder thanne han cryd "allas!"
> (IV.561–563)

Walter himself wonders whether or not Griselda is unfeeling toward her children when she says,

> "as I lefte at hoom al my clothyng,
> Whan I first cam to yow, right so," quod she,
> "Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee,
> And took youre clothyng."
> (IV.654–657)

After she has given up her son to the murderer, had the marquis not been convinced that "next hymself, certayn, / She loved hir children best in every wyse," (IV.694–695) he would have suspected her "of some subtiltee, / And of malice, or for crueel corage." (IV.691–692) Her patience in her third ordeal as the rejected wife convinces both Walter and the reader, however, that Griselda did not sell her conscience for the fine clothes and jewels of a marquesa, but simply lacked the understanding to distinguish between her old clothes and her "liberty and will," or between her husband and her God.

III

I anticipate at least two immediate objections to my reading of Griselda's character. First, the obvious allusions to the Book of Job and the moral comparison between Griselda's patience and the soul's submission to God seem to confirm the interpretation of Griselda as ideal, perhaps even an allegorical representation of the human soul in its relationship to God. But the Clerk very explicitly delineates salient differences between the tempting of Job and that of Griselda, stating unequivocally that there is a sharp disparity between Walter's testing of Griselda and God's treatment of men. In the first place, Griselda is much humbler than was Job: "Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse, . . . but as in soothfastnesse, . . . Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite / As womman kan." (IV.932 ff.) Though Job was proverbial for his patience, the Clerk, who knows the story firsthand, realizes (as few of the less learned pilgrims do) that Job's reaction was far more violent and active, far less "patient" than the completely passive behavior of Griselda. Though men speak of Job "*moost* for his humblesse," theologians and clerks must also have spoken of his bold refusal to surrender his

integrity and of his obedience to God's law in spite of the counsel of his spiritually blind "friends." (see Job 27: 2–6) Like Peter and John before Annas and Caiaphas, (Acts 4: 18–19) Job refused to hearken unto men more than unto God. Do his responses parallel those of Griselda, who becomes an accomplice to the murder of her own children without so much as a frown of protest?

One must remember that the Clerk is answering not one but two statements by the Wife of Bath, one that "no womman of no clerk is preysed" (III.706) and another that, since men preach so much about Job's patience, husbands should be "al pacient and meke." (III.434–442) Women, not men, replies the Clerk, have more patience, as the story of Griselda shows, and therefore wives, not husbands, ought to bow and remain "suffrable." Thus the Clerk's compliment to women—"Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite / As womman kan"—ironically turns the Wife of Bath's argument for female sovereignty against her.

Second, the Clerk explicitly declares that God "ne tempteth no man that he boghte." (IV.1153) Perhaps Job, who lived before the Atonement, could have been tested, for God has a right to prove that which He has created, (IV.1151) but the Clerk cites the Epistle of James, where the passage in question reads:

> Let no man, when he is tempted, say that he is tempted by God. For God is not a tempter of evils: and he tempteth no man. . . .
>
> Do not err, therefore, my dearest brethren.
>
> Every best gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change nor shadow of alteration.
>
> (1: 13–17)

The fifth chapter of James urges Christians to be patient and to follow Job's example, but preceding the exhortation is a passage that speaks to Walter's apparent crime ("Go to now, ye rich men: weep and howl in your miseries, which shall come upon you. . . . You have feasted upon earth: and in riotousness you have nourished your hearts, in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the Just One: and he resisted you not" [5: 1, 5–6]) and following it are verses that warn against Griselda's course: "But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, nor by the earth, nor by any other oath. But let your speech be: Yea, Yea: No, No: that you fall not under judgment." (5: 12) If one thinks Griselda is bound to obey Walter because of her oath to him, (IV.358–364) the Clerk's reference to the Book of James, with its full discussion of patience and suffering, shows that Walter mis-

used his power and that Griselda, even though she was "quakynge for drede," had no right to swear an oath of unqualified obedience to him.

Third, the Clerk declares that though God "suffreth us . . . / Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise," He does *not* do so for the reason Walter did, "for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he, / Er we were born, knew al oure freletee." (IV.1155–1160) Thus, one cannot identify Walter even as God's scourge, inasmuch as Walter tested Griselda "hir sadnesse for to know." (IV.452)

Fourth, although according to Muscatine "the poem's theme is in Job v, 17: 'Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty'," (p. 194) not only does the Clerk himself condemn Walter's testing of Griselda, (IV.456–462, 621–623) but he says that *God* knew the testing to be unnecessary: "Nedelees, God woot, he thoghte hire for t'affraye." (IV.455) Moreover, the Clerk at the end of the tale praises Walter's son for not putting "his wyf in greet assay." (IV.1138)

Finally, though the Clerk quotes "this auctour" as saying that the moral of the story is that "every wight, in his degree, / Sholde be constant in adversitee / As was Grisilde," this moral is explicitly *Petrarch's* reason for writing the story, "which with heigh stile he enditeth." (IV. 1141–1148) Since, however, the Clerk just as explicitly declares that he has abandoned Petrarch's high style, one might as well ask whether he also modifies the moral that he so carefully attributes to Petrarch. Muscatine says that in the *Clerk's Tale* "the high style is severely muted. . . . The description is in general remarkably plain." (p. 192) J. Burke Severs, who in *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's "Clerkes Tale"* (New Haven & New York, 1942) discusses Chaucer's additions to the story of Griselda as he had it from Petrarch's Latin and from a French translation of Petrarch, notes that Chaucer made "important and significant changes in characterization, in narrative technique, and in the whole tone and spirit which inform the tale." (p. 229) Among other touches Chaucer heightened the cruelty of both Walter and his creature the sergeant (pp. 229–233) and heightened Griselda's "humble obedience to the will of her lord and husband," though "he renders her submissiveness as active as possible, rather than passive." (pp. 233–237) James Sledd notes that Severs' defense of Chaucer's art seems to rest on the proposition that Chaucer, taking a story about uncreditable patience and humility, "did nothing to make the story less absurd. . . . It is hard to see how an already absurd plot could be made more effective by heightening its absurdity" (*MP,* LI [November, 1953], 76–77). One rather obvious possibility is that an artist who makes an absurd plot more absurd, as in *Shamela,* does so to parody the original situation.

"The second application of the tale [IV.1163 ff.] . . .," writes Robinson, "is the Clerk's direct reply in a satirical vein, to the Wife of Bath. It was obviously written when the plan of the Marriage Group was well under way." (p. 712) But as Kittredge pointed out, and as I have tried to show through additional examples, the entire *Clerk's Tale* is formed as a counterpiece to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and is filled with ironic allusions to her arguments. Thus the "second application" of the Tale and the "Lenvoy" are not tails pinned blindly on a donkey of a different color, but are integral in tone and implications to the *Clerk's Prologue* and to his story. In the two final rime-royal stanzas the Clerk suggests that men in his audience may not get the same response from their wives that Walter did, since "it were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes / In al a toun Grisildis thre or two," (IV.1164–1165) and he tells the Wife of Bath (who had declared: "The clerk, whan he is cold and may noght do / Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho, / Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage / That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage" [III. 707–710]) that he will "with lusty herte, fressh and grene, / Seyn yow a song to glade yow." (IV.1173–1174) The "lenvoy" is ironic in the vein suggested by Kittredge, but it contains one line that seems to have a double irony, harking back to the Clerk's attitude toward Griselda throughout the tale: "Beth nat," the Clerk cautions wives, "bidaffed for youre innocence" (IV.1191) as was Griselda. Don't give a clerk an opportunity "to write of yow a storie of swich mervaille / As of Grisildis pacient and kynde," (IV.1185–1187) for Griselda was made a fool of because of her naïveté. The Clerk's moral, added to Petrarch's, is then a two-edged one: husbands shouldn't try to act like Walter, because wives won't—and shouldn't—act like Griselda. As the Clerk's very language suggests, the mastery over husbands advocated by the "secte" of the Wife of Bath, "archewyves . . . strong as is a great camaille," is an excess as flagrant as is the hyperhumility of Griselda, "ay sad and constant as a wal." Only in a Golden Mean between these two extremes are reason and the will of God fulfilled. The celibate Clerk, remembering that "deeth . . . wol nat suffre us dwellen heer," acknowledges the ultimate sovereignty of neither husband nor wife but of God, and he sees the marriage relationship as a means to fulfilling God's will through procreation, a yoke that binds both husband and wife in holy service.

A second objection to my reading of the *Clerk's Tale* may be that neither the other pilgrims nor the numerous commentators on Chaucer realized that Griselda was being satirized. To answer the second part of this challenge first, several aspects of Chaucer's works which impress and delight readers today were less palatable to most readers during the nineteenth century. If our age, like Chaucer's, is frank in its discussion

of sex, it also shares with Chaucer's world a keener taste for satire than did the critics of the preceding age. And if the suspicion that the portrait of the Prioress may be satirical did not flourish until the twentieth century, it is hardly surprising that the tale of the Clerk should have been taken at its face-value. Kittredge's article on "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage" has, moreover, focused attention on the question of whether or not Chaucer intentionally created a "Marriage Group" or whether this scheme is imposed from without. When one approaches a poem seeking evidence for or against a thesis, he is unlikely to find any answer but "yes" or "no." By returning to Kittredge's basic assumptions (that Chaucer was a great artist and a sensitive moralist) and re-examining the *Clerk's Tale,* one can reason in another way: Chaucer is unlikely to have made the *Clerk's Tale* dull or immoral unless he intended to satirize the Clerk; since nothing in the *General Prologue* or later indicates that the Clerk is other than devout and intelligent, one must begin to re-examine his tale to see whether this best educated of all the pilgrims is, in fact, subtler than his fellows and the critics have recognized. A close reading of the relevant portions of *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrates, I believe, that this is the case.

The Clerk's single-minded passion for knowledge has made him the most cloistered and least worldly of the pilgrims. The Knight, the Parson, and the Plowman seem to represent various ideals within the medieval world-picture. Certainly the Parson, both rich "of hooly thoght and werk" and "also a lerned man, a clerk," represents a higher religious ideal than the Clerk, though the Parson's moralism gains him little sympathy among his fellow pilgrims. The Knight, Squire, and Yeoman well represent their respective stations in the feudal hierarchy, the Plowman is a noble example of the common laboring man, and the Franklin and the Man of Law may, perhaps, deserve honor as worthy representatives of the middle class. The Clerk, then, though acknowledged by both the *persona* Chaucer and the Host to be an excellent scholar and a serious moralist, can by no means be designated Chaucer's sole ideal; among his limitations—an occupational hazard—seems to be failure to communicate with the less erudite pilgrims: "Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye, / That we may understonde what ye seye." (IV.19–20) If the Clerk's heightening of the contrasts in Petrarch's version of the tale of Patient Griselda becomes, as I think it does, an elaborate academic joke with a moral lesson embodied in subtle irony, the Host, the Merchant, and the Franklin understandably fail to detect all its implications. One moral lesson they surely do understand—that explicitly said to be Petrarch's. The story has, therefore, lost nothing in

retelling, while gaining an added dimension for the Clerk's peers—those who are able to recognize irony, understand Aristotelian ethics, read the Epistle of St. James, and remember the difference between God and man. Since Chaucer himself uses exactly the same kind of irony in the *General Prologue,* damning with his *persona's* undeserved praise that "gentil harlot and a kynde," the Summoner, and that "noble ecclesiaste," the Pardoner, it is fitting that he attributes this same sophisticated manner to the most intellectual of his characters.

Even though the full implications of the *Clerk's Tale* seem to be lost on the other pilgrims, Harry Bailly's response suggests that the Clerk related the story vivaciously and without the sententious seriousness against which the Host had warned him. After the "Lenvoy" the Host "seyde and swoor, . . . This is a gentil tale for the nones." (IV.1212^{b}, 1212^{e}) That the Host enjoyed the subject matter of Griselda's wifely obedience only demonstrates that Harry Bailly had been outwitted by a "subtil clerk," who could create the illusion that all the theological rocks had been removed, whereas they merely remained submerged beneath the surface of his story.[10]

IV

That the pilgrims miss the Clerk's underlying theme, which is the need for a perspective larger than the pleasures and glories of this life, contributes to Chaucer's characterization of them. The Host, whose wife is a shrew, wishes that Griselda's extreme patience were a more common wifely characteristic. The Merchant, cynically disillusioned about women, responds with the story of a wife as completely unfaithful and shameless as Griselda is patiently loyal. Neither of these men could really imagine "patient Griselda" as a human possibility, but that she has their will to be so, if she can, shows that their hearts are set firmly on the things of this world, that in their own wills—not God's—is their peace.

In the tale told by the Franklin, however, "patience" takes on a new meaning, one not quite consonant with the picture of "patient Griselda" accepted with deadpan literalness; she and her long-suffering love for Walter are too good to be true, for "Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye. / Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon / Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!" (V.764–766) Patience is a virtue, the

[10] The Franklin's portrait of the powers of a "subtil clerk" (V.1261) might indicate that the Franklin did appreciate the *Clerk's Tale,* did not V.773–775 clearly show what the Franklin believed the Clerk's moral to be. The description of the clerk of Orleans remains, however, Chaucer's own compliment to his cleverest pilgrim.

Franklin avers, but like sovereignty it must be mutual, "For in this world, certein, ther no wight is / That he ne dooth or seith somtyme amys." (V.779–780) Quite naturally, the Franklin, "Epicurus owene sone," concerns himself with the situations "in this world," and not under the eternal aspect. Thus his tale, like the Knight's, unfolds in a non-Christian setting (cf. V.1131–1134) and recommends the natural or moral virtues. When Dorigen faces the choice between death and dishonor, the Franklin smuggles in *his* educational pretentions by having her cite no less than twenty-two precedents—all from classical legend rather than from the Christian tradition. Dorigen, who has earlier questioned God's wisdom in creating the black rocks along the Breton coast, (V.865–893) declares that her predicament is "too muche, and [if] it were Goddes wille." (V.1471) But, of course, Dorigen's predicament is even less the work of God than was Griselda's; Dorigen gave her promise in full knowledge that it would be sinful to keep it because she had given a prior pledge to her husband-master.[11] Hers is Griselda's situation, translated into purely human terms: if Griselda is symbolic of the human soul, then she has a prior pledge to God that renders her unmurmuring obedience to Walter, a "mortal man," in itself a sinful act. Had Griselda reminded Walter of her prior loyalty (as Dorigen reminds Aurelius), Walter, who owed that same allegiance to God's sovereignty, might have risen to the same "gentillesse" as does the Franklin's squire and released her without dishonor from her ill-advised promise. "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe," says Arveragus, but he is speaking of earthly categories; "How much higher," might add the Clerk, "is the loyalty owed by man to God?"

The modified reading of the *Clerk's Tale* presented in this paper turns the chief emphasis from the question of sovereignty in marriage to the larger question of the proper object of human desires and loyalties. Is there then a "Marriage Group" in *The Canterbury Tales*? Yes and no: yes, there are tales whose chief vehicle is a discussion of marriage, and these tales interrelate in somewhat the way Kittredge suggested; no, Chaucer's primary concern in these tales is not to present different views on marriage, with the Franklin's Tale embodying his ideal. The central conflict throughout these characterizations and tales is the same one that is pivotal from the *General Prologue*[12] to *Chaucer's Leave-taking*—the

[11] This promise, as Charles A. Owen, Jr., has shown (*JEGP*, LII [July, 1953], 295–297), demonstrates the limitations of "gentillesse" or courtliness on the merely human level. Though "gentillesse" may save each character from the fatal reckoning, a false sense of "gentillesse" induced each to jeopardize his honor in the first place.

[12] See Arthur W. Hoffman, "Chaucer's Prologue to Pilgrimage: The Two Voices," *ELH*, XXI (March, 1954), 1–16.

tug of war between this world and the next. If Chaucer can treat tolerantly those who testify in behalf of both claimants to man's loyalty, it is because he had those two minds in him also, and not until his *Leave-taking* was he forced to choose between his own children according to the flesh and those according to the spirit.

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