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Author(s): Robert Stepsis
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POTENTIA ABSOLUTA AND THE *CLERK'S TALE*

by Robert Stepsis

It may perhaps be, as Utley suggests, a sign of some new stage in Chaucer studies or even of a new phase in modern critical consciousness that the *Clerk's Tale* is receiving increasing attention as "a great poem" rather than as a by-product of Chaucer's unfortunate medievalism.[1] Beginning with James Sledd's article in 1953 and continuing to the most recent studies, there has been a growing conviction that the meaning of the *Clerk's Tale* resides less in the psychological realism of the characters than in the anagogical, iconographic, and allegorical quality of the tale.[2] The issue of Griselda's faulty maternal instincts in meekly allowing her children to be butchered by her "monstrous" husband Walter no longer exercises many critics, for we now seem generally to accept the idea of Griselda as an emblem of the patient human soul in its ideal response to the adversities visited on it by God or as a figure of the Virgin, Job, or Abraham in their obedience to the apparently arbitrary demands of the Lord.[3] Yet in the midst of this growing appreciation of Chaucer's methods and skill in setting out for us, through the Clerk, an aspect of the relation of human things to divine things, an aura of disquietude and an area of awkwardness still remain in reading the tale. It is an awkwardness that, I assume, at least partially motivated earlier critics in their negative attitudes toward the poem and that still causes some hesitation in us, as teachers and critics, when we confidently assert the figural and allegorical reading of the *Clerk's Tale.* What are we to do with Walter on this level of anagogical interpretation?

The problem, as I see it, is really two-dimensional. Any reading of the poem that has Griselda as a figure of the Virgin, Job, and Abraham or as an allegorical representative of patience or obedience logically necessitates that Walter be the figure of God. And this is the first difficulty. How can anyone who appears so cruel, vain, capricious, and unfeeling on the narrative level of the tale possibly be a figure of the divine on the anagogical level? In fact, Walter's actions become so extreme that the Clerk, as narrator, rebukes him several times during the course of the tale.[4] The other facet of the problem is: to what extent do we have to follow the logical necessity of the allegory? How consistent must the Clerk or Chaucer be in presenting us

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with this fictionalized representation of the human soul's relationship with God? Walter is, after all, referred to as a mortal man at the conclusion of the tale:

> For, sith a womman was so pacient
> Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
> Receyven al in gree that God us sent. . . .
> (E 1149-51)

Ought we not simply accept the anagogical quality of Griselda and not ask too many questions of the literal level of the story? This aspect of the problem includes also the Envoy to the tale in which the Clerk tells wives not to behave as Griselda did when tested by their husbands:

> O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
> Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,
> Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence
> To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille
> As of Grisildis pacient and kynde,
> Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hire entraille!
>
> Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence,
> But evere answereth at the countretaille.
> Beth nat bidaffed for youre innocence,
> But sharply taak on yow the governaille.
> Emprenteth wel this lessoun in youre mynde,
> For commune profit sith it may availle.
> (1183-94)

Thus on the literal level, which for the sake of convenience we might equate with the Clerk's response to the Wife of Bath on the question of marriage, we are specifically told *not* to make the anagogical connection—as a wife is to her husband, so a soul should be to God. Or more exactly we are told that a wife should not respond to her husband as Griselda responded to Walter. Which simply brings us back again to the question of who Walter is, now with the added problem of what the relationship is between the literal narrative and the anagogical, allegorical, and moral lessons of the tale.

Once again, I trust I am not being very original in bringing up these problems; they have been latent in the criticism of the tale at least from the time that Leigh Hunt spoke about "this divine, cruel story."[5] The recent advances in criticism have been made either by submerging the problem of the apparent inconsistency of Walter as a moral referent in the story or by presenting Walter as a flawed figure

while concentrating on Griselda's perseverance and constancy.[6] John McCall convincingly argues for the theme of obedience in the tale in the context of the monastic and religious vow of obedience. Obedience even to an unreasonable and unjust superior is proper exactly because that superior is the representative of God.[7] This is certainly an intriguing idea, but it does sidestep the problem of the Envoy and the relationship of a wife to her husband, which, we are taught, should be an analogous form of obedience;[8] but, once again, this is precisely the analogy the Clerk denies. Both Richard Lanham and Patrick Morrow see the inconsistencies between the literal and figurative levels of the tale as pointing toward an inherent ambiguity in the tale, which ambiguity they take to be the central meaning of the Clerk's performance.[9] This at least acknowledges the problems and the frustrations of attempting to deal with the tale. Joseph Grennen, in an admirable article, sees "Walter's lordship (as) not paradigm but parody of the divine lordship,"[10] and John McNamara carries this point to its logical conclusion by suggesting that Walter comes perilously close to being a figure of the devil.[11] Neither man is disturbed by what this does to Griselda's obvious reverence and love for Walter, but it seems to me that it is a dangerous position to take. Utley, who perhaps represents more of the critical norm, acknowledges the difficulty that Walter presents to a figural interpretation of the tale, but simply urges moderation in aligning the literal with the anagogical: "The theodicy is questionable if we push it to extremes."[12]

I do not want to give the impression that I am setting up pigeons in this review of some recent scholarship. Each of the articles that I have cited adds valuable insights to our conception of the tale and to what the Clerk may be about. I merely want to establish that, while we may proceed with some confidence in our interpretation of Griselda and even of the general configuration of the tale, we cannot have that same confidence about Walter and the related problem of the Envoy. What I want to propose here is a possible way of reading Walter as a figure of God that will eliminate some of the obvious difficulties of such a reading and that will be faithful to the historical circumstances of Chaucer's writing. I do not intend to solve all of the conflicting thrusts of the tale, nor do I propose that we read Chaucer simply as a gloss on certain theological writings, no matter how helpful these writings may be as a means for understanding Chaucer. I am attempting to deal with only one perspective in an extremely complex tale.

Some recent studies have taken notice of the fact that the Clerk is

a philosopher and that he is from Oxford.[13] As a consequence, it may be useful to investigate some of the contemporary philosophical and theological thinking on the nature of God and of the relationship of the divine to the human, thinking which the Clerk, as a scholar and student, might be imagined to be familiar with.

As Gilson points out, the philosophical climate of the fourteenth century was determined in large part by a reaction against certain Aristotelian and Averroistic tendencies of thirteenth-century scholasticism and by a response to the attack on Averroism in the Condemnation of 1277 by Etienne Tempier, the Archbishop of Paris. The Paris Condemnation was followed in a few months by a similar one by Robert Kilwardby, Archbishop of Canterbury and former teacher of theology at Oxford.[14] One of the consequences of the condemnations of Averroism was a massive attempt in the fourteenth century to separate what was accessible to reason from what could be known only by faith, which, in turn, in the nominalist movement meant a severe restriction on what could be predicated about God and divine things by the unaided, rational human mind. The emphasis came to be placed on an ever wider scope for faith in defining the nature of God.

The central issue of the Condemnation of 1277, and the main one for our purposes, concerned the Averroistic notion of a necessitarian limitation on the effects that God could produce in His creation. Based on the principle that the First Cause, which is singular, can only produce a single effect and must, therefore, work through a multiple series of intermediary causes in order to produce any effect in this world, Averroists like Siger of Brabant argued that God cannot immediately and freely act in the human world but must, instead, follow the rigorous necessities of rationally ordered intermediary causes. From this it followed that the world is such as it is because God could not produce it other than it is. Although Thomas Aquinas specifically argued against the Averroism of Siger in his *De Unitate* (c. 1270), nevertheless his conception of a rationally ordered world and his proof for the existence of God as the First Cause of a finite series of intermediary causes appeared to many of his immediate successors as another attempt to limit the notion of God to a rationalistic necessitarianism.[15]

In response to the condemnations of this position of limiting the operation of God's will to the necessities of intermediary causes, the philosopher/theologians of the fourteenth century, despite their differences on other issues, almost universally insist on God's freedom to do absolutely anything He wants to do. The emphasis is on the

divine will, on God's freedom to act without intermediary causes and on His ability to produce a plurality of effects while still remaining a single and final cause. As an attempt to further counteract the necessitarianism and rationalistic thrust of thirteenth-century scholasticism, thinkers such as Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Thomas Bradwardine, Robert Holcot, and Adam Woodham insist on the infinitude of God, and hence, the inability of finite human minds to understand His ways and, as an ultimate consequence, the radical contingency of all earthly things.[16]

There were, of course, many other issues among the philosophers of the fourteenth century and other influences besides a reaction to Averroistic necessitarianism; and Duns and Ockham, particularly, continue to depend heavily on Aristotle for some of their formulations. Also, they often disagreed among themselves. Ockham frequently contradicts Scotus' conclusions, while Bradwardine writes explicitly to attack people like Ockham and Holcot. But what unites these diverse thinkers, what is, in fact, a fundamental premise in each one of them, is the concept of God's *potentia absoluta,* which is based on the notion of His infinity and from which grows the absolute freedom of His will and the close proximity of His willing to His knowing.[17] What unites them also, curiously, is the fact that these major fourteenth-century philosophers are all English and all, except Holcot, taught at Oxford at one time or another in their careers. There were other thinkers, like the Frenchmen John of Mirecourt and Nicholas of Autrecourt, who shared this emphatic insistence on God's *potentia absoluta* in the fourteenth century, and there were other centers of similar philosophical thought—in fact Scotus did his most important work at Paris, and Ockham was in exile in Avignon and Germany during the latter part of his life. But it was at Oxford that these men were trained, and it was at Oxford that the consequences of their positions continued to be debated until Wyclif's time. It would be appropriate for Chaucer's fictional Oxford Clerk to incorporate in his tale certain of the ideas of the great philosophers who had passed through Oxford in the earlier part of the century.[18]

The concept of God's absolute power was not new in the fourteenth century; it is inherent in Jewish and Christian theology from the beginning, and it had been an issue of philosophical discussion in at least the eleventh century by Peter Damien, again in the context of asserting God's freedom of action.[19] But not until the fourteenth century was the idea of God's *potentia absoluta* and the total freedom of His will taken to the radical juncture of being the foundation for assertions about the absolute contingency of this world. Nothing in

this created world is necessary, all is merely the product of the arbitrary will of God and He is free to change that will at any moment. Thus it is entirely possible that God could command his creatures not to love Him, and it would be perfectly proper for them to do so. While this is only the extreme theological hypothesis of the notion of *potentia absoluta,* its moral concomitant is that the proper human response to this divine power, infinitude, and incomprehensibility is simply to be obedient to the will of God. Human freedom resides in the ability of the creature to conform his will to the infinitely free will of the Creator.[20]

Most of these ideas are developments of concepts first emphasized by Duns Scotus. Although presumably Duns would not have acknowledged some of the extreme positions to which his concepts were extended, nevertheless we can see the starting point in his work for many of the later elaborations. After proving the existence of God on the principle of the univocity of being, Duns goes on to define God as Infinite Being; but instead of positing a necessary relationship between Infinite Being and finite creatures as had been done in the thirteenth century, Duns argues for a radical contingency between God and creation because there is absolutely no rational or necessary relationship between infinity and the finite: "God is infinitely distant from the greatest possible creature."[21] As a consequence, all creation, everything that is, is the product of God's supreme power, by which the distance between the Infinite and the finite is overcome, and of His free will, by which we have being in the first place and by which this world is what it is, rather than something else: "Therefore, although I believe that omnipotence, properly so called according to the intentions of the theologians, cannot be proved by natural reason, but is to be believed . . . , nevertheless an infinite power can be proved naturally, which possesses in itself all causality and which could cause an infinite number of things simultaneously, if they could exist simultaneously." Also, "It behooves one to seek prime contingency in the divine will."[22] This emphasis on the freedom of the divine will is a result of Duns' close equation of God's knowledge and His will. Although God knows everything, both that which is and that which is not, that which is exists only because He willed its being rather than its non-being. Thus the world-that-is is directly subject to the divine will for its being what it is. Consequently, that which is good is not good *per se,* but is good because God willed it to be good; and, since His will is free and all-powerful, it is entirely conceivable that He could will something else to be the good, rather than that which is now the good: "the divine will desires the divine good. . . ; thus

the divine will wills good contingently or the existence of another (good) . . . because the infinite will necessarily has infinite acts with respect to objects, because this is perfection."[23] Thus not only is the world radically contingent with respect to its being *per se,* but more importantly it is radically contingent with respect to its being what it is at this moment.

While these speculations form only a small part of Duns' thought, they become central to Ockham, who, in fact, criticizes Duns for not carrying his ideas to their logical conclusion. What Ockham objected to was the fact that when Duns discussed God's infinity or His omnipotence he treated them as attributes that could be distinguished and analyzed. Instead Ockham argued that these are merely verbal distinctions (his nominalism) and that the only legitimate way to consider God was in terms of His *potentia absoluta:* a single being without attributes whose only predication was the supremacy and freedom of His will.[24] The only absolutely true statements that man can make about God is that He can do whatever He wills and He can will anything because He knows everything. Again and again, Ockham returns to this concept of God's absolute power as he discusses such things as the possibility of a man being free from sin: "God, by means of His absolute power, is able to make any child be born without either actual or original sin."[25] This, in turn, means that God is free to confer grace and charity on man without saving him or to save him without grace and charity: "Neither charity nor any other habit [of virtue] is necessary for God to give eternal life to anyone, indeed because of God's absolute power He is able to confer charity on anyone and He is able to annihilate anyone." In fact, "God, by means of His absolute power is able to justify a sinner . . . without contrition or the remission of his sins."[26] Of course, why or if or when God acts this way is beyond the intelligible scope of man. It is precisely this incomprehensible and absolute freedom of God that marks the separation of divine from human for Ockham, as the absolute distance between infinite and finite did for Duns.

The consequence of God's incomprehensible power and freedom and the ontological distance between God and man is that human acceptance of the divine becomes in itself a free act not predicated on reason or the expectation of a reward, but simply on the submission of our will to His.[27] Thus, for Ockham, not only is the world itself radically contingent, as it was for Duns, but every human act within the world is likewise contingent: "no act could be intrinsically and necessarily virtuous, but only extrinsically contingent," i. e. free.[28]

Thomas Bradwardine, after teaching theology at Oxford and a

brief tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury, died in 1349 of the plague. Ockham died about the same year, probably of the same cause. Bradwardine was appalled by Ockham's ideas of salvation without grace and by the apparent consequences of Ockham's system in which human action became morally neutral and liberated from a relationship with the divine. To counter Ockham and his followers, Bradwardine insists on God's power to control even the minutest acts of man and to direct them, through the dispensing or the withholding of grace, towards good or evil. While, as we will see, there is no diminution of the absolute power of God's will in Bradwardine's thinking, there is the important corollary in his writing that God acts justly and rationally in everything He does: "It ought to be sufficient for us that the will of God acts with reason in everything, although we do not see why it wills. For the will of God is never irrational, therefore reason moves the divine will and effects it to will."[29] Although in this way God's will appears subordinate to His intellect, for Bradwardine, as for Ockham, as far as human beings in this world are concerned, their relationship to God is determined by the operation of His totally free will. The only real difference is that where for Ockham God acts in the world in an unpredictable way, for Bradwardine the reasons for His actions are merely inaccessible to us.

Even in asserting that the divine will is subject to a rational divine intellect, Bradwardine does not thereby contend that intellect and will are separate attributes of God. Rather, God is prime simplicity; all attributes are one in Him. It is not as if the divine will could desire something only to be checked by the rational mind of God. What He wills is rational and just; and what He wills He does.[30] As a consequence, the essence of the divine will is freedom: "Therefore freedom is only fit to be placed in the will, and prime simplicity in prime simplicity, which is God."[31] Again, as with Duns and Ockham, for Bradwardine the ultimate source of this freedom is God's *potentia absoluta*, which Bradwardine invokes to explain the relationship between the divine and the human in regard to grace and salvation: "God, by means of His absolute power, has sufficient power for the salvation of all men and men have sufficient passive power by which they are able to be saved."[32] This is in the context of Bradwardine's argument about future contingents, but it also applies to Ockham's conclusion that God's erratic relationship to the process of salvation makes virtue and grace irrelevant for justification. Bradwardine insists, instead, that it is the pressure of God's continuous presence, through grace, that makes salvation possible. He adds that man's responsive action in this process is a "passive power" by which he is

open to and accepting of the prevailing influence that God has over human events. But what is significant for our purposes is that these two apparently diverse opinions as to the relationship between the divine and the human both begin with the same fundamental premise. Where Ockham concludes that human action is radically contingent and therefore free, Bradwardine asserts that the valuation of human action is contingent on God's grace and is therefore determined by and subject to the operation of that grace; nevertheless both men reach these conclusions from an emphasis on the freedom of God's will and the operation of His *potentia absoluta.*

The evolution of this debate and its multiple ramifications on the questions of merit, free will, future contingents, and predestination continued throughout the century with increasing emphasis on the possible manifestations of God's *potentia absoluta.* Robert Holcot and Adam Woodham, who like Ockham and Bradwardine died in the early plague year of 1349, continue Ockham's insistence on the consequences of God's absolute power, consequences that include the possibility of God's lying to and deceiving His creatures. Holcot says: "God could lead astray and deceive, I say; not from having respect for authority, but respecting the virtue of freedom, I grant that God is able to lead astray and deceive; that is, to cause voluntarily [deliberately?] error in the mind of man and to make him believe a thing to be other than it is."[33] And Woodham takes the ultimate, logical step in this argument: "and therefore God is not to be called a liar although He could or would be able to falsely uphold what He knows to be false . . . . (He) would be able to lie just as He would be able to sin."[34]

While these views were appropriately condemned and a contemporary moralist might view with a certain satisfaction the susceptibility of theologians like Ockham, Holcot, and Woodham to the plague, the issues raised did not die in 1349. Wyclif was heavily influenced by Bradwardine,[35] and Chaucer at least knew something of Bradwardine since he mentions him, along with Augustine and Boethius, in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (B^2 4431-32) as a learned man who had discussed the problem of foreknowledge and predestination. In fact, Chaucer's interest in the problem of future contingents, free will, and predestination, which is so central to *Troilus* as well as to the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, can be attributed not merely to the influence of Boethius but to his awareness, in some way, of the fourteenth-century debates we have been alluding to. As a consequence of the emphasis on God's *potentia absoluta* and on His unrestricted will, the question of future contingents was a very volatile issue for Ockham, Bradwar-

dine, *et al.* Ockham, Holcot, and Woodham all argued for a concept of man's free will based on an indeterminate future, while Bradwardine and Wyclif stressed the necessity of God's not only knowing but predetermining future events: "The divine will is the cause of everything in the future and in the past."[36]

In another way Bradwardine's influence may be implicit in Chaucer in the *Man of Law's Tale.* The assertions there that the movement of human events is directly controlled by God, that the rationale for specific divine acts is incomprehensible to man, and that the proper human response to this presence of divine grace is a passive acceptance of events are all ideas that are explicit in Bradwardine:

> Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn
> Eek at the feeste? who myghte hir body save?
> And I answere to that demande agayn,
> Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave
> Ther every wight save he, maister and knave,
> Was with the leon frete er he asterte?
> No wight but God, that he bar in his herte.
>
> God liste to shewe his wonderful myracle
> In hire, for we sholde seen his myghty werkis;
> Crist, which that is to every harm triacle,
> By certeine meenes ofte, *as knowen clerkis,*
> Dooth thyng for certein ende that ful derk is
> To mannes wit, that for oure ignorance
> Ne konne noght knowe his prudent purveiance.
> (B 470-83 my emphasis)

But however these influences may have operated on Chaucer, it seems reasonably clear that a way of accounting for the activities of Walter in the *Clerk's Tale* and for establishing the validity of the allegorical reading of the tale, in which Walter is seen as a figure of God, is to compare him to the figure of God established by the theologians in Chaucer's own century. From this perspective Walter's testing of Griselda is explicitly a test of her loyalty to, or faith in, him. In general, but none the less clear, terms Griselda is being asked to respond with faith rather than reason to the demands made on her by Walter, and, like Job, to whom she is specifically compared, her faith is in the unquestionable right that Walter has to do anything that he wants to do to her.[37]

It has been recognized since Severs' study that Chaucer's changes and additions to his sources serve to increase the moral distance between Walter and Griselda. As Walter is made "more obstinately

wilful," so Griselda is made more tender and more human.[38] Now there have been many explanations for this; mine is simply that Chaucer is emphasizing, even more than his sources, the incomprehensible distance between the divine and human realms. Whether consciously or not, he is working on the principle articulated by Duns that "God is infinitely distant from a creature" and "what is infinite is greater than every finite being."[39] This same is true of the ontological distance between Walter's castle and Griselda's ox stall, which Chaucer again heightens beyond his sources. Severs' conclusion stresses this distancing: "[Chaucer's] chief contribution [to the story] seems to have been a heightening and intensification of the contrasts which it offered: a crueler sergeant, a more unfeeling marquis, a more submissive (though not less real) Griseldis; greater splendor in the equipage of the nobles, starker realism in the hut of Janicola."[40] But rather than simply to make a "more arresting plot" Chaucer's purpose seems to have been to attempt to emphasize, in the allegory of the story, that Griselda's responses are appropriate precisely because she realizes that she is dealing with a God whose radical "otherness" is such that His purposes are incomprehensible to the human mind and that submission to His will must replace understanding of His ways:

> "My lord," quod she, "I woot, and wiste alway,
> How that bitwixen youre magnificence
> And my poverte no wight kan ne may
> Maken comparison; it is no nay."
> (E 814-17)

The central issue, however, is Walter's willfulness, both as a bachelor and as a "testy" husband. His hunting, his desire to remain free of marital entanglements, his insistence on finding his own bride, his choice of what is, socially, the most unlikely bride, and his testing of Griselda beyond the level of apparent necessity (as if the first test of pretending to kill their daughter was not already one too many), all these reiterate the central fact of Walter's character: his arbitrariness, capriciousness, and willfulness. As has been pointed out many times, these traits make Walter an unpleasant human being; but in the context of fourteenth-century theology they are appropriate fictional devices to highlight the fact that on the most important level of the tale Walter is not to be taken as a human being, but as God, a God whose only recognizable trait is the absolute, unbounded freedom of His will. I do not think that we need to go to the lengths of Holcot and Woodham in their positions that God's *potentia absoluta* makes it conceivable for Him to deceive and to sin in order to understand

how the Clerk or Chaucer could create in Walter a figure of capriciousness and apparent malevolence and at the same time want us to see in him a figure of God. But we can see that the atmosphere of theological speculation in the fourteenth century made it possible to conceive of God as willful and arbitrary. In fact, what we do learn from Holcot and Woodham in this respect is that in the process of defining God as completely transcendent and free from the limits of human rationality, it was necessary to attribute to Him ever more shocking capabilities. The purpose for Ockham, Holcot, and Woodham is, of course, not blasphemy but the attempt to assert God's absolute power and freedom; to assert that He works in His own way, not as human morality and rationality expect Him to work.

Actually, it turns out that Walter's capriciousness and willfulness are grounded in a deep-seated purpose. He does not act wildly and irrationally, but he knows what he is doing at all times, like an incipient prince Hal. He has already marked out Griselda before the delegation of citizens comes to ask him to marry:

> 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,
>
> 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 hire oonly, if evere he wedde sholde.
> (232-45)

Besides this, he knows the values of "true gentilesse" and recognizes the substance of virtue rather than the accidents of noble birth:

> For God it woot, that children ofte been
> Unlyk hir worthy eldres hem bifore;
> Bountee comth al of God, nat of the streen
> Of which they been engendred and ybore.
> (155-58)[41]

Finally, his testing of Griselda is not arbitrary and capricious, but fully planned and calculated. In this way the picture of Walter in the

tale partakes of the slightly more rounded conception of God and His *potentia absoluta* that is found in Bradwardine, where the freedom of His will does not contradict the rationality and justice of His intellect.

The testing itself, which is the most shocking aspect of Walter's character from the human perspective, is perfectly consonant with the renewed emphasis in the fourteenth century on the traditional Judeo-Christian concept of God as free and all-powerful. In effect, it marks the attempt to replace the rational and necessitarian God of Greco-Arabic philosophy with Yaweh. We have already mentioned the comparison of Griselda with Job, who was tested precisely because he was virtuous. The comparison with Abraham, who was also asked to sacrifice his child as a sign of obedience and submission of his will to God, is only implicit in the tale; but the sacrifice of Isaac is mentioned in the Epistle of St. James to which Chaucer (and he is here following Petrarch) refers us at the end of the tale (1154).[42] The allusions in the tale to Griselda as Mary, who was also asked by God to give up her child to death, have been sufficiently worked out to need no elaboration here.[43] Walter has worthy precedents for his severe testing of Griselda.

However, it is important to remember, despite the thrust of this paper, that Chaucer's tales are only incidentally vehicles for theological and philosophical speculation. They are works of art and, as such, contain more perspectives than the single view of God that I have been trying to outline. The *Clerk's Tale*, in particular, is complex in its operation, and there are many aspects of it that are not solved by this approach to Walter as a figure of God's *potentia absoluta*. He does remain, on some level of the story, simply the figure of a human husband and a mortal man (1150), who is criticized by Clerk-narrator for his excessive testing of his wife (although this also may be part of the Clerk's lesson—as a human being even he does not understand why his God figure acts the way he does). The tale is is also quite clearly a response to the Wife of Bath on the question of the relationship of men and women in marriage, and Walter seems, at times, to regard both marriage and lordship as conditions of servitude rather than freedom:

> I me rejoysed of my liberte,
> That seelde tyme is founde in mariage;
> Ther I was free, I moot been in servage.
> (145-47)

All of this does cut against the anagogic reading of the tale which, I have been arguing, presents Walter as a figure of a voluntaristic

God. The question of how one resolves the obvious discrepancies in the tale, how one coordinates a theological argument with a social or inter-sexual one, and how one reconciles the different narrative levels of the tale is at the heart of the complex problem that the Clerk presents us on the relation of things divine to things human. What answers are possible must be found in the ending of the tale and in the Envoy.

As I stated in my earlier remarks about the end of the tale, the Clerk first points his moral and explicitly states the analogy that he wants to make (1149-51). He then proceeds, in the Envoy, to dissociate the tale and its allegory from a further moral about how wives should obey their husbands (1183-1212). That is, mankind should respond to God the way Griselda responded to Walter, but wives should not respond to husbands the way Griselda responded to Walter. Chernis explains this dissociation in terms of a complex theory of a "double irony."[44] His argument is interesting and enlightening; but if I may, for the sake of consistency, apply the principle of Ockham's razor here, a simpler explanation offers itself: the Clerk means what he says. He is undoubtedly overstating the case, for the benefit of the Wife of Bath, when he describes how wives ought to treat their husbands; but he is serious in his attempt to divorce the religious allegory from any social application. The principle behind this is the same principle that has shaped the religious level of the tale: the incomprehensible and absolute distance between the infinite and the finite, the divine and human worlds. The narrative, marital, human level of the tale, in which Walter is a mortal husband, is not supposed to be reconciled with the moral and allegorical level, in which Walter is a figure of a free and powerful God. The Clerk is, in effect, telling two different stories which deliberately do not coordinate, just as the incredible otherness of a voluntaristic God, possessed of His *potentia absoluta*, moves in a radically different universe of discourse from the common concerns and limitations of His creatures. The purpose of the Envoy is to enforce this separation of meanings in the tale.

Finally, it is impossible to prove, outside the *Clerk's Tale* itself, that Chaucer was conscious of these theological positions or that he was aware of what was going on at Oxford, although Wyclif's activities certainly would have brought that institution to his attention. Also, even though Chaucer changes the details of his story precisely in the direction of heightening the distance between Walter and Griselda, it is entirely probable that Petrarch would have been alive to this same meaning in the tale and that, hence, it was implicit in the story

as Chaucer found it. We do know that Petrarch was violently opposed to those remnants of Latin Averroism which he encountered in his lifetime and that he lived in Avignon as an unengaged young intellectual at exactly the same time that Ockham was in Avignon to be examined on his radical theological views.[45] What we can say about Chaucer, however, is that the prominence of these positions in the fourteenth century on the freedom of the divine will and the absoluteness of God's power makes it conceivable that, for him, there was no inconsistency between Walter's apparently capricious willfulness and his being a figure of God on the allegorical level of the *Clerk's Tale;* that, as long as we recognize the necessary separation of the allegorical and literal in the tale, there need be no hesitation in sustaining the full scope of the Clerk's moral *exemplum.*

Saint Louis University

1. Francis Lee Utley, "Five Genres in the Clerk's Tale," *ChauR,* 6 (1972), 199, 228.

2. James Sledd, *"The Clerk's Tale:* The Monsters and The Critics," *MP,* 51 (1953), 73-82. Both Utley, "Five Genres," p. 217, and John McNamara, "Chaucer's Use of the Epistle of St. James in the *Clerk's Tale,*" *ChauR,* 7 (1973), 184, review the critical debate on the *Clerk's Tale* and give the relevant citations. Two recent studies upholding the serious moral/allegorical reading of the poem not cited by them are Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 143-52; and Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition* (Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 157-71. The movement has not been unanimous, of course; although concern with the psychology of the tale has been replaced by an interest in its psychiatric possibilities in Lloyd Jeffrey, "Chaucer's Walter: A Study in Emotional Immaturity," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology,* 3 (1963), 112-19; Norman Lavers, "Freud, The Clerkes Tale, and Literary Criticism," *CE,* 26 (1964), 180-87; and James W. Cook, "Augustinian Neurosis and the Therapy of Orthodoxy," *Universitas,* 2 (1964), 51-62. Also, Michael D. Cherniss, "The *Clerk's Tale* and *Envoy,* The Wife of Bath's *Purgatory,* and The *Merchant's Tale,*" *ChauR,* 6 (1972), 235-45, reaffirms the importance of the literal, marital level of the tale.

3. John P. McCall, "The *Clerk's Tale* and the Theme of Obedience," *MLQ,* 27 (1966), 260-69, emphasizes the idea of obedience.

4. E 456-62, 621-23, 785. All citations from the text of the *Canterbury Tales* are taken from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

5. Cited by Utley, "Five Genres," p. 208.

6. This is not true of Cherniss, "The *Clerk's Tale,*" who recognizes the problem and tries to solve it with a theory of "double irony."

7. "The *Clerk's Tale,*" pp. 256-66.

8. Ephesians, 5:22-24.

9. Lanham, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale:* The Poem Not the Myth," *Literature and Psychology,* 16 (1966), 157-65; and Morrow, "The Ambivalence of Truth: Chaucer's 'Clerkes Tale'," *Bucknell Review,* 16 (1968), 74-90.

10. "Science and Sensibility in Chaucer's Clerk," *ChauR*, 6 (1971), 90.

11. "Chaucer's Use," p. 192.

12. "Five Genres," p. 225.

13. J. Mitchell Morse, "The Philosophy of the Clerk of Oxenford," *MLQ*, 19 (1956), 3-20; Huling E. Ussery, "Fourteenth-Century English Logicians: Possible Models for Chaucer's Clerk," *TSE*, 18 (1970), 1-15; and Grennen, "Science and Sensibility," 81-93.

14. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 402-10.

15. Gilson, *History*, pp. 404, 407, 409; Heiko A. Oberman, *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine: A Fourteenth Century Augustinian* (Utrecht: Kemink & Zoon, 1957), pp. 6-8.

16. Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of His 'De Causa Dei' and Its Opponents* (Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 127-39; Leff, *Medieval Thought: St. Augustine to Ockham* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 258-61; Oberman, *Archbishop*, pp. 28-48; Oberman, "Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism With Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance," *Harvard Theological Review*, 53 (1960), 56-60; and David Knowles, "A Characteristic of the Mental Climate of the Fourteenth Century," *Mélanges offerts à Etienne Gilson* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1959), pp. 321-23.

17. Oberman, "Some Notes," pp. 60-61.

18. K. Michalski, *Le Probleme de la volonté à Oxford et à Paris au XIVe siècle*, in *Studia Philosophica*, Lemberg, vol. 2 (1937), pp. 233-365, shows that there was a 'school' of nominalist philosophy at Oxford in the fourteenth century; and Gordon Leff, *Paris and Oxford Universities in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: An Institutional and Intellectual History* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968), pp. 294-308, describes the effect of these doctrines on learning at Oxford until the condemnation of Wyclif in 1382.

19. Leff, *Medieval Thought*, p. 288.

20. David W. Clark, "William of Ockham on Right Reason," *Speculum*, 48 (1973), 34-35.

21. "Deus distat in infinitum a creatura . . . suprema possibili." Duns Scoti, *Opera Omnia* (Paris: L. Vives, 1893), vol. VIII, *Quaestiones In Librum Primum Sententiarum:* Distinctio II, Quaestio II, n. 29, p. 465b. Except as noted, all subsequent references to Duns will be from the Vives edition. For a general explication of Duns' thought see Gilson, *History*, pp. 454-71; Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1952); and Leff, *Medieval Thought*, pp. 262-72.

22. "Licet ergo omnipotentiam proprie dictam secundum intentionem theologorum tantum creditam esse et non naturali ratione credam posse probari . . . tamen probatur naturaliter infinita potentia, quae simul, quantum est ex se, habet omnem causalitatem, quae simul posset in infinita, si essent simul factibilia." Distinct. II, Qu. II, n. 27, p. 463b. "Primam . . . contingentiam oportet quaerere in voluntate divina." Distinct. XXXIX, Qu. I, n. 14, vol X, p. 626.

23. "Voluntas divina vult bonitatem divinam . . . sic voluntas divina contingenter vult bonitatem seu existentiam alterius . . . quod voluntas infinita necessario habet actum circa objectum infinitum, quia hoc est perfectionis." *Quodlibet XVI*, n. 9, vol. XXVI, p. 194. Also see Gilson, *History*, p. 461.

24. Leff, *Bradwardine*, pp. 159-60.

25. "Deus de *potentia* sua *absoluta* potest facere puerum aliquem nasci sine peccato actuali et originali." Guillelmus de Occam, *Opera Plurima* (Lyon, 1494-96), *Questiones super* IV *Libros Sententiarum*, bk. III, quaestio V, E. All subsequent

references to Ockham will be from the Lyon edition. For general explications of Ockham's thought see Gilson, *History,* pp. 489-99; Leff, *Medieval Thought,* pp. 279-91; and P. Boehner, ed. and trans, *Ockham: Philosophical Writings* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1957), pp. ix-li.

26. "Caritas nec quicumque alius habitus necessitat deum ad dandum alicui vitam eternam; imo de *potentia* dei *absoluta* potest alicui conferre caritatem et eum potest annihilare." *Sententiarum,* bk. III, qu. 5, H. "Deus de *potentia* sua *absoluta* potest iustificare impium . . . sine contritione vel attritione de peccatis." *Sent.* IV, qu. 9, Q.

27. Clark, "Ockham," p. 35.

28. "Nullus actus esset intrinsece et necessario virtuosus; sed solum contingenter extrinsece." *Sent.* III, qu. 13, E.

29. "Sufficere nobis debet ad rationem voluntas Dei cum aliquid facit, licet non videamus cur velit. Voluntas namque Dei nunquam est irrationalis: ergo ratio mouet voluntatem divinam, et efficit eius velle." Thomas Bradwardine, *De causa Dei,* ed. H. Savile (London, 1618), p. 230. Except as noted, all subsequent references to Bradwardine will be from the Savile edition. For general studies of Bradwardine's thought see Leff, *Bradwardine,* pp. 23-124, and Oberman, *Bradwardine,* pp. 49-185.

30. Leff, *Bradwardine,* pp. 42-43.

31. "Libertas ergo est in sola voluntate ponenda, et prima simpliciter in prima simpliciter, quae est Dei" (p. 197).

32. "De *potentia absoluta* Deus habet potentiam sufficientem ad salvandum omnes homines et homines habent potentiam passivam sufficientem qua possunt salvari." *Utrum Deus habeat praescientiam futurorum contingentium ad utramlibet,* Vatican Library, cod. Vat 813, fol. 1bR. Cited in Oberman, *Bradwardine,* p. 112.

33. "Deus posset fallere et decipere, dico quod non habendo respectum ad auctoritatem, sed respiciendo ad virtutem voluntatis concedo quod deus potest fallere et decipere, id est voluntarie causare errorem in mente hominis et facere eum credere aliter quam res se habet." Robert Holcot, *In quattuor libros sententiarum quaestiones* (Lyon, 1518), bk. I, qu. I, R. See also Leff, *Bradwardine,* pp. 216-27.

34. "Et ideo deus non potest ut dicit mentiri quamvis possit vel posset asseverare falsum scitum esse falsum . . . posset mentiri sicut posset peccare." Woodham's works have not been printed; the quotation is from MS. F.L. 15, 892, Bibliothèque Nationale, and is cited by Leff, *Bradwardine,* p. 254.

35. He quotes Bradwardine more than fifty times in his writings on future contingents. See Oberman, *Bradwardine,* pp. 198-204, and J. F. Laun, "Die Prädestination bei Wyclif und Bradwardin," in H. Bornkamm, *Imago Dei* (Giessen: A. Töpelmann, 1932), pp. 63-84.

36. "Divina voluntas est causa cuiuslibet futuri atque praeteriti." Bradwardine, Savile ed., p. 208. See also Morton W. Bloomfield, "Distance and Predestination in *Troilus and Criseyde,*" *PMLA,* 72 (1957), 14-26.

37. The Job comparison is not in any of Chaucer's sources, but J. Burke Severs, *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerkes Tale* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1942), p. 115, reports an interpolated reference to Job in a late fifteenth-century manuscript of the Latin version of the tale at the same point in the story as Chaucer's mention of Job. He concludes that the manuscript Chaucer was using probably contained the same interpolation and that the comparison cannot be considered an original addition of Chaucer's. Whatever the value of Severs' hypothesis, the point is that Chaucer saw the significance of the allusion to Job.

38. *The Literary Relationships,* pp. 231, 236.

39. "Deus distat in infinitum a creatura." Also, "omni finito maius est infinitum." *De Primo Principio,* trans. Evan Roche (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, 1949), pp. 132 and 118.

40. *The Literary Relationships,* p. 247.

41. Donald C. Baker, "Chaucer's Clerk and the Wife of Bath on the Subject of 'Gentilesse'," *SP,* 59 (1962), 631-40, explores this issue.

42. McNamara, "Chaucer's Use," p. 186, quotes the reference to James 2:14-26.

43. For instance by Utley, "Five Genres," pp. 217-22.

44. "The *Clerk's Tale,*" pp. 241-45.

45. For Petrarch's reaction to the tale as he found it in Boccaccio's *Decameron,* see Severs, *Literary Relationships,* pp. 7-11. For his life in Avignon see Thomas G. Bergin, *Petrarch* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), pp. 41-45. For his attitude toward Latin Averroism see E. H. Wilkins, *Life of Petrarch* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 241 and Morris Bishop, trans., *Letters from Petrarch* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 246-47. Petrarch settled in Avignon in April, 1326, the same year that fifty-six articles of accusation were drawn up against Ockham by a papal commission. The inquiry was never finished and Ockham was never formally censured because in 1328 he fled Avignon in the company of Michael of Cesena, embroiled in the question of Franciscan poverty (one thinks of Griselda in her ox-stall). See Boehner, *Ockham,* pp. xiii-xv.