

Check and Mate:

Chaucer's Clerical Tale of Oppression, Submission, and Obligation

by

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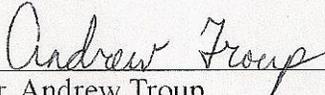
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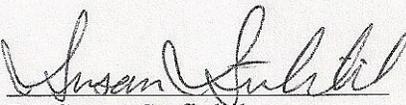
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Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale" often troubles modern readers, for it leaves them in an unresolved moral quagmire. The story's primary characters are central to the problem of interpretation: Walter, whose cruelty seemingly has no origin and whose mercy is unbelievable; and Grisilde, whose much-lauded patience goes a long way toward justifying cruelty for its own sake. There is also the Clerk, the tale's narrator and a young man who seems to undermine his tale even as he tries to instruct within it. Additionally, the tale's arbitrary conclusion leaves the reader with many self-contradictory meanings and an implication—imponderable in Chaucer's time—that becomes chilling and reprehensible.

What we could now see as a "Beauty and the Beast" variant, the story of Walter and Griselda was a long-standing folk tale before Boccaccio committed it to paper (though uncertainty clouds whether the story stems from the Cupid and Psyche myth or the Greco-Turk "The Patience of a Princess"); Petrarch then rewrote it for his own purposes, and Chaucer later adapted it to English. Yet despite Boccaccio's sarcasm, Chaucer's wit, and Petrarch's sentimentality, the story lacks the complexities of the traditional "Beauty and the Beast" narratives and consequently fails as a story, leaving the reader with conflicting notions of sovereignty, loyalty, justice, and more.

In the tale, Walter, Marquis of Saluzzo, marries the destitute peasant girl Griselda, seeing in her great spiritual nobility. But he has an ultimatum: never disagree with him, on pain of death, in any way; she must agree to be his extension, to be done with as he pleases. Clearly frightened, she agrees. They are married.

Yet Griselda inexplicably arouses Walter's suspicions. Faking distress, he tells Griselda that their newborn daughter must die, for the nobles reject her. He reminds Griselda of the marital ultimatum; she submits. Walter has the daughter taken away—to die, Griselda thinks, though Walter's sister will secretly raise the child. Walter examines his wife for any disapproval. Nothing. He is elated and satisfied, for she is loyal.

Years later, after his son's birth, Walter again becomes inexplicably suspicious. Testing Griselda's loyalty, he pretends that the townsfolk reject the boy. He must die. Again Walter reminds Griselda of the ultimatum; again she submits; again the child is secreted away to be “killed.” Again Walter finds no hint of contrariness in Griselda and again is satisfied that Griselda is true to him.

More years pass. Walter decides he is still uncertain of Griselda's loyalty. He requests the Pope issue a fake divorce proclamation commanding Walter marry a suitably royal woman. He tells Griselda she must return to poverty and reminds her of her marital promise. Again she agrees. Again Walter examines her for any contrariness. Again, nothing. He's elated, though feigns distress. Griselda, in her underwear, walks back to her poor father.

Walter requests that his twelve-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son be returned from exile, with the daughter unwittingly being the Marquis's new bride. Walter has Griselda return to his castle, dressed in the rags of her new poverty, and prepare it for the “wedding.” During the festivities, he asks if Griselda approves of the new bride. She does. Detecting absolutely no hint of contrariness, Walter finally—after 12 years of testing—decides his wife is loyal. He reveals his extensive ruse, that she is still his wife, and that the girl and young boy are the children Griselda thought lost. The testing ends, and they live happily ever after.

Reading “The Clerk’s Tale” can be a frustrating experience, for it seems to mean something, but—even barring modern sensibilities from the analysis—it seems confused or even self-contradictory in its conclusions. Is it the ideal marriage or not? A little overboard or a lot? And what of Walter’s thematic connection to God, if there is any? For that matter, does Griselda equate Job? Is she to be emulated or not? What of the Clerk? Yet analysis of the primary characters and their narrator can yield some interesting points about marriage, love, entitlement, sovereignty and, ultimately, despotism: the wife’s unthinking acquiescence to the husband’s tests justifies spousal abuse, and as royalty their twisted dynamic justifies the worst kind of tyranny. Therefore, this thesis will use theories and examples of modern tyranny and abusive relationships to examine Walter's disturbing power over Grisilde.

“The Clerk’s Tale” is one of the most controversial in *The Canterbury Tales*, second perhaps to “The Prioress's Tale.” In attempting to get at the core of what irritates readers so much, most critics skirt the issue, fail to come up with any concrete conclusion, or try to excuse the tale with weak or even self-contradictory rationalizations and pseudo-conclusions. Anne Laskaya (114) speaks of the “gymnastics” that critics have gone through to deal with the “problematic” tale, for it is one that almost defies analysis, or at least tests the would-be critic to confounding ends as much as Walter tests Griselda, so that those who end up admiring the tale also admire Griselda, and those who have no patience for her also cannot tolerate the tale.

Yet many critical analyses contain an unwillingness to admit, finally, that the story just does not work; many critics head toward this conclusion, but stop short. Yet while Geoffrey Chaucer is one of our most important writers—“English” would be much different without

him—critics should not praise a work merely because it is Chaucer. After all, “The Prioress's Tale” has been dismissed because of blatant anti-Semitism and is not a strong enough story to transcend that criticism like *The Merchant of Venice* does.

Certain critics’ failures to properly wrestle with the material are the result of failing to get at the two implications within the tale, implications that have very troubling results for modern readers: the spousal abuse and extreme autocracy that the story ultimately promotes, two ideas that, since they are connected within Walter’s actions, can be seen as therefore justifying abuse and autocracy as well as such actions as slavery and even genocide. Some previous critics have hinted at the implicit spousal abuse and tyranny, but they have done little with either. This is a significant problem, for what offends modern readers is a perceived anti-woman stance and an anti-Other stance, one that is despotic and autocratic.

Jill Mann has written much on Chaucer and “The Clerk's Tale.” *Feminizing Chaucer* looks upon *The Canterbury Tales* in a way Mann terms “feminized;” for her, the work places women central to its moral and religious discussions. Her work responds to the many feminist writers that wrestled with Chaucer in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and she also devotes considerable time to “The Clerk’s Tale” in conjunction with her “feminized” view. She acknowledges Walter’s tyranny—chiding those who would try and weasel around it—and the suggestion of God as bully, but sees these details as a Medieval attempt to confront such theological realities. Moreover, she sees Griselda's patience as ultimately powerful and triumphant, for this character trait defeats Walter’s cruelty. For Mann, Walter gives in to Griselda. Patience, then, ties in with subordination and suffering, and all reflect a Christ-like state of being and therefore a superior ideal in Chaucer’s world, making women like Griselda

superior icons.

The book *Chaucer's Religious Tales* focuses on those of the Clerk, Man of Law, Prioress, and Second Nun, those four being the only ones written in “rhyme royal” and specifically concerned with moral illustration. As defined in the book, rhyme royal uses seven line stanzas in an *ababbcc* rhyme scheme and contains a grave tone; additionally, the poets use the format to discuss spiritual matters (23). Certainly the Clerk is noted for his gravity and such a form of poetry would be appropriate for him. One of the book's contributors, Barbara Nolan, points out how Chaucer works on political and spiritual transcendence through Griselda's habit of speaking in prayer. Her responses reflect the concerns of specific scenes, and always her voiced actions allow the Clerk to focus the audience on Christian *exemplum*. For Nolan, Griselda speaks to Christ, not Walter; her speeches develop Christian ideas of transcendent powerlessness, especially the paradoxical nature of finding joy in the wake of suffering. Elsewhere in the book, Charlotte C. Morse examines critical reactions to the Clerk's tale over the previous 100 years and how critics have wrestled with the story's difficulties in terms of character, morality, style, allegory, and more, and how in recent decades Griselda defenders have become rare. Her analysis makes a few key points, like that European experiences with theocracies and dictatorships encourage a hostility toward the tale unmatched by Americans. Finally, Elizabeth D. Kirk's entry discusses how Chaucer works on two levels in the tale: as a religious writer and as a writer of a woman's place in Medieval society. In doing so, he not only addresses how women are defined via images, language, and limitations in a male-centric society, but he also uses them as stand-ins for men vis-a-vis their relation to God. This allows him to address men's (and Man's) struggles with God in a harsh and seemingly arbitrary moral universe. In this

context, what may be seen by others as flaws within Chaucer's text—its portrayal of women, its conflicting techniques, Walter's belligerence—for Kirk become virtues: Griselda's passive selflessness defiantly creates a self against a hostile, hierarchical universe.

For J. Allan Mitchell, in “Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity,” Chaucer's story questions moral thinking, yet the tale's moral raises problems: the concept of “patience” will differ by person, time, and place, for Griselda is an abstraction; the tale is parabolic for the pilgrims, more direct for the reader, yet simultaneously diluted by aspects such as the Envoy; and it functions like a parody, but one with a serious purpose. The Clerk's purpose is spiritual, so modern literal interpretations—like feminism or anti-feminism—cannot work, yet he idealizes Griselda as a “textbook” wife—both spiritually and domestically—even while admitting such is unattainable. Mitchell considers that since Griselda readily adds more restrictions to her marriage vow, her actions can be seen as unethical, irresponsible, and even idolatrous. Walter becomes God for her. The concern here, then, is whether or not readers accept Griselda as exemplary. Mitchell develops an idea of responsibility of action, discusses how such responsibility often goes missing in life and texts, and considers the radical nature of Griselda’s decision to “kill” her kids: it refutes a dynamic of “exchange” and the author wonders whether Griselda can be held accountable. For Mitchell, the tale thus both attracts and repels readers' interpretations, and therefore we cannot really interpret it. The moral dilemma stays unresolved, but such ambiguity can, for the author, somehow result in a concrete decision.

Linda Georgianna's article “The Clerk's Tale and the Grammar of Assent” addresses the tale's moral quagmire: that it seems to be in a secular vacuum. Religious references in the story do not contradict its main point of rightful sovereignty; rather, the tale “gradually and painfully

becomes” a religious tale (794). A key point regards Chaucer's use of certain words like *will*, *lord*, and *werk* that, already loaded with religious significance for a Medieval audience, take on an intentionally shocking quality after Griselda's agreement to Walter's perverse demands. In Georgianna's analysis, Chaucer sought to agitate an audience grown placid in matters of faith; his results, not without their flaws, managed to vex readers for generations to come. Further close reading of other terms related to advisement, assent, and obedience reveal the story's concern with a radical, willing submission to the rigors of faith, a concern that challenges its initial audience and even more so modern readers, who must resort to some rationalizations in order to accept Chaucer's unsettling purpose.

In “A Woman in the Mind's Eye (and not): Narrators and Gazes in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and in Two Analogues,” Robin Waugh focuses on the aspect of gazing within the text, analyzing the text's puns on *eye*, *I*, *ye*, and *yes*. Sight, insight, and gazing are important but poorly defined concepts for the participants, and Waugh sees the story as criticizing perception. She first analyzes Christine de Pizan's version of the Griselda story and notes that de Pizan removes almost all “gazing” from her story until its end. But Chaucer's version emphasizes gazing, doing so in a way that Waugh sees as both promoting and undermining masculine reading. Walter, the Clerk, and even Saluzzo's people gaze at Griselda, creating an obsessive, near-totalitarian existence. The Clerk sympathizes with Griselda, criticizing Walter's domineering gazing even as he invites fellow men to gaze upon Griselda's plight. Yet even though Walter is oppressive, Griselda's passivity defeats him, for he sees Griselda only as an object and can never know her thoughts. Her unchanging face also defeats public scrutiny; from here, Waugh concludes that Griselda defeats male readers in their gazing, because she is a great work of art. Griselda is,

therefore, assertive even in passivity.

As the title “Reading Like a Clerk in the Clerk's Tale” suggests, critic Laura Ashe concerns herself with “reading:” how the Clerk reads the characters, how Griselda and Walter read each other, and how readers receive the text. Similar to Waugh's concern with gazing—wherein characters merely examine others somewhat oppressively—Ashe's analysis shows characters trying to understand one another through their reading, with only Griselda succeeding. She points to a conflict between the Clerk and the Pardoner, with the former a “reader” and the latter not, the Clerk wanting to know and the Pardoner not. She also connects Griselda with the Clerk: not only does he “read” the tale and characters, but Griselda does likewise—even reading herself! In Griselda's reading, she sees that Walter's actions—even those that may cause her death—are done out of love. For Ashe, this is an example of Griselda's Clerk-like use of logic. Her ability is a Christian one in the Augustinian sense; her faith, and faith in Walter, creates goodness in him. Ultimately, Williams concludes that Griselda's reading changes Walter so that *his* mind becomes one with *hers*. Here, Griselda is the one with all the power.

In Edward I. Condren's article “The Clerk's Tale of Man Tempting God,” the author argues that Griselda is actually a Christ-figure being abused by Man in the form of Walter (as opposed to Walter equaling God and Griselda equaling Man, as in Petrarch's version and most interpretations). He acknowledges other approaches to the tale, breaking them into categories—dramatic, symbolic, artistic—and discusses the structural and moral problems that inevitably arise for readers. However, for Condren, close reading shows that these problems decrease when Griselda is seen as a Christ figure. He cites numerous examples within the text that Chaucer specifically uses to allude to Christ. In Condren's analysis, “The Clerk's Tale” is only as

troubling as it needs to be for a story of Man abusing God.

In her book *Chaucer's Women*, Priscilla Martin seeks to address a gaping hole she sees in the lack of critical treatment of Chaucer's female characters. Within her analysis of "The Clerk's Tale," she deals more directly with the story's religious implications and addresses both its nature as allegory and the perceived problems of interpreting it as a literal story about marriage. It is, in contrast to the story of Constance in "The Man of Law's Tale," a tale of oppression and conservatism, with Griselda akin to a saint. Martin concludes that the Clerk finds Griselda not only superior to Walter, but by extension that women are superior to men, and that therefore the tale itself is one of exalting women, even while chiding the Wife of Bath's beliefs.

Robert Emmett Finnegan takes a contrary approach in "She Should Have Said No to Walter," arguing that the key moment of revulsion for most readers comes with Griselda's agreement to send the daughter to a perceived death. This agreement to commit homicide—doubled later in the story—puts Griselda in a moral predicament where she lacks moral conscience, even to the point of personal extinction. Close textual reading, in addition to discussions of Aquinas and other Medieval writers, allows Finnegan to discuss the significance of oaths—and especially Griselda's—in the era's context. The tale, for Finnegan, functions partially to warn against the dangers of improper oaths, for Griselda's oath thus encourages and cements autocracy and villainy. His most crucial point is in analyzing the use of *yvele* to describe Walter's testings, for in such a narrative atmosphere, the word condemns Walter beyond merely being wrong, but evil; by extension, Finnegan sees Griselda's response therefore being likewise *yvele*. Her faith corrupts her. For Finnegan, Griselda is not like Abraham but is a destroyed version.

Finnegan's article shows the difficulty of interpretation. He is against Griselda giving her promise and suggests she “should have rescinded it” upon realizing the promise's dire extent (303). Grisilde is “an accomplice to homicide.” His close reading of specific words in Chaucer's text, their etymology, and how such words influence the narration reveals how Grisilde's “assent” becomes “consent” (304). This consent—and all that comes with it—has the effect of turning Grisilde into a non-person. Key is the oath and the significance of such in Medieval time. Using Aquinas, the author examines the theories behind vows and their relations to God or sin, and how oaths may change due to circumstance. Other Medieval authors also confirm this belief, so that Grisilde's actions in the context of the time would be committing sins such authors argued against. Crucial, then, is meaning of “assaien” or “assail(l)en” as used by Chaucer and in his era's context. Since the author sees this varying word often associated with “tempten” the idea becomes clearer that Grisilde's actions (or inaction) are sinful. The implication is that Walter's testing is temptation which Grisilde fails by agreeing to.

Finally, Judith Bronfman's book *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated* seeks to have a greater understanding as well as appreciation of the tale. She examines the critical history of the story, focusing on the attempts by several to specify the story's origins: is it a variant on Cupid and Psyche, or is it related to some other branch of folk tales? Additionally, she examines the three most famous versions and what (possibly) motivated their authors in their adaptations. This leads to a discussion of the texts as politically or spiritually motivated, with various critics cited as supporting either view. Related to this, Bronfman also has a section on the tale's popularity through the centuries, detailing the various positive and negative reactions that have appeared as new reworkings of the established tale.

What she reveals returns to Boccaccio's version, in that audiences—critics as well as artists and casual readers—react in much the same way as Dioneo and the ladies: positively or negatively, with passion or not, and for different reasons which change over time.

As mentioned earlier, the material of “The Clerk's Tale” deals with such troubling themes as spousal abuse and extreme autocracy. Therefore, books examining totalitarianism, authoritarianism, spousal abuse, and the types of abusers are important for this discussion and will be used in relation to the upcoming relevant sections (Walter as dictator, Grisilde as suffering wife).

Bob Altemeyer's *The Authoritarian Specter* focuses on right-wing authoritarianism but also discusses the possibilities of a left-wing equivalent, examines the genetic and environmental origins, cognitive behaviors, and compartmentalized thinking among authoritarians, considers the roles played by religion, sex, dogma, and hate literature in shaping authoritarians, and concludes with a discussion of authoritarianism among America's political elite. Richard Overy's *The Dictators* compares and contrasts the two countries of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia under their respective rulers, examining governing styles, social and moral beliefs, military and economic goals, worldviews, and their treatments of the populace (via media-social manipulation and law enforcement). Henry Russo's *Stalinism and Nazism* unites several authors and is divided into three parts focusing on history, legacy, and analysis wherein the various essays examine communism under Stalin and fascism under Hitler, consider connections between leader and system (i.e. persona and cultishness) how power was used and to what extent it affected the lives of the populace, the people's acceptance of a totalitarian state, and the results of communism in the former Eastern Bloc.

In *Men Who Batter*, Edward Gondolf looks at programs to help abusers recover, understand, and control themselves, examines types of abusers, the broadness of their backgrounds and attitudes, and examines counseling services and what steps there are in counseling. Donald Dutton's *Rethinking Domestic Violence* examines documented histories of spouse assault, theories about such violence—including feminist and psychoanalytic—the types of perpetrators, their mindsets, relationships between victim and abuser, the potential for risk among couples, the justice system and its dealings with abuser and abused, and cycles of violence. *Next Time, She'll Be Dead* uses author Ann Jones' personal history as well as independent scholarship in the field of spousal abuse, historical data, how social and legal terms give power to the male and reinforce abusive paradigms, how law enforcement has repeatedly failed to protect or save the abused, the implications and meaning of the shifting terms for abuse, how it comes about, the mindsets of those involved, how it is reinforced, how society often blames the victim as a means to cope with a seemingly unsolvable problem, and what we can now to do solve this ongoing problem.

Part One: Walter, the Marquis of Saluzzo

In Chapter 1 of Judith Bronfman's *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated*, the author notes that the oldest written version of the “Griselda” story as we know it is Boccaccio's (7); however, she goes on to show that—after the efforts of scholars such as D.D. Griffith, J. Burke Severs, Jan-Oyvind Swahn, and William Edwin Bettridge—we know of other oral antecedents to the narrative, stories such as “The Patience of a Princess” and the Greek Cupid and Psyche myth (11-15). In all of these older versions, the names are different from those used consistently after Boccaccio. This is significant, for while the location for the action may be specifically Italian (especially in Petrarch's version), the names for the Marquis and his wife are not natively Italian. Boccaccio names his Marquis “Gualtieri,” as does Petrarch, and Chaucer uses the similar “Walter.” All of these are Latinized or Anglicized variants of the ancient German *wald heri*, meaning “ruler (*wald*) of the army (*heri*)” (behindthename.com). Whether Chaucer knew the name's meaning is unknown, but the name is so appropriate for Boccaccio's purpose (and even Petrarch's) that it seems the Italians were indeed aware of the name's origin. The meaning defines the character in terms of war, aggression, and military dictatorship; these traits are aspects of villainous despotism for Boccaccio and Chaucer but less so for Petrarch.

In “The Griselda Game,” Amy W. Goodwin's analysis shows that, unlike the diverse opinions interpreting Chaucer, the critical wrangling over Petrarch's purpose generally agrees that Petrarch wanted an *exemplum* (41). *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines an *exemplum* as allegorical and “told to validate a general moral point,” especially within the works of Medieval preachers; it was common enough for Dante to mock its overuse, and

Chaucer uses it often in *Canterbury Tales* (115). While Goodwin suggests there is more to Petrarch's Grisilde than just this *exemplum*, she also delves into critic David Wallace's research on Petrarch, showing the author's "service to tyrants in exchange for their patronage" (42-43). Moreover, Goodwin claims that Wallace "cites chilling passages from Petrarch's works to give examples of Petrarch's elitism and ruthless exclusivity" (43). Michaela Paasche Grudin takes these implications further, showing that Petrarch, like Dante, was a monarchist who hoped for Roman Imperial revival, often supporting those would be rulers who showed such a promise (73-75). In Petrarch's story, authoritarian rule is correct and should not be questioned. His stated goal at story's end is that it be a guide for men dealing with God, but by making crucial omissions to Boccaccio's text (specifically in eliminating Dioneo's condemnations) Petrarch also turned his story into one of championing dictatorial rule. This was not accidental, and while Boccaccio disdained such "wretched rulers," Petrarch did not (72).

In Chaucer's take on the tale, the Clerk initially praises Walter as a good man, but that praise is couched in a single, glaring flaw:

[. . .] that he considered noight
 In time comynge what myghte hym bityde,
 But on his lust present was al his thought,
 As for to hauke and hunte on every side.
 Wel ny alle other cures leet he slyde. (78-82)

For the Clerk, Walter is a capable ruler except that he is always hunting and never ruling. An unyoked young man, with playful malevolence entering his mind, Walter acts on his instincts without further thought, especially since there is no one to counteract his desires with reason or restriction. The Clerk's assessment colors Walter's (mis)rule and marriage: with no experience in

the matters of the heart or the State, emotionally he is no more than a toddler in charge of a kingdom, and not surprisingly is tyrannical. Everyone, whether Grisilde, Janicula, or the crowd in Part 1, trembles in his presence.

Their fear partially stems from the social structure in Walter's Saluzzo. As Michaela Paasche Grudin points out, the Clerk introduces Walter "only after the portrayal of an ideally ordered state which stresses obedience, diligence, and reverence" (64). Furthermore, she reveals that Grisilde and her father live in a way appropriate to their status, and Walter's marriage proposal is "cast in legal language which echoes the language and political concepts found in the earlier negotiations between Walter and his people regarding the choosing of a wife." Yet such an analysis goes only so far. Janicula, Grisilde, and others do not react to Walter with mere "Yes, Your Holiness, thank you, Your Holiness" platitudes; the Clerk always points out the "quakyng for dredde" such persons experience.

Walter's speech to Janicula (309-315) reinforces what his earlier speech hints to his people: Walter has total authority and is unconcerned with notions of consensus. There is no choice for Grisilde or her father, either in her obedience or the marriage. Lines 311-12 are especially threatening: "And al that liketh me, I dar wel seyn/It liketh thee." As written, Walter's dialog to Janicula carries a mild threat; citizens do not refuse a request by a Marquis Walter or King Henry VIII any more than they would a request by Stalin. Janicula thus has no choice but to "allow" the Marquis to marry Grisilde, and Grisilde has no choice but to agree to Walter's command. Had Walter been known to be a better man, Janicula or Grisilde might actually be able to refuse; had such been the case, though, the Marquis never would have made the demand.

His paranoid intent and irrational behavior unsettle us. Though he kills no one in the story, his actions remind the modern reader of such men as Stalin or Hitler who, while they ruled,

also did not personally kill anyone but were equally and irrationally paranoid. We are also just a bit offended at his inquisition: he *chose* his wife and did so after assessing her virtue, so why the test? His story-ending justifications (to know Grisilde's will) ring hollow. After a year, two years, three years together day in and day out, he could not see her loyalty and had to test her daily for *twelve years*? As the narrator says,

This markys in his herte longeth so
 To tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe,
 That he myghte out of his herte throwe
 This merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye. (451-454)

In other words, his desire is to know if he should desire to know if he should desire to know

This stanza implies Walter could *never* be satisfied.

The Marquis displays classic traits of what we now term authoritarianism. In his book *The Authoritarian Specter*, Bob Altemeyer outlines three “attitudinal clusters” an authoritarian person possesses. In the first, called *authoritarian submission*, Altemeyer writes of the willing submission of authoritarian types to powerful authorities, with both leaders and the lead placing “narrow limits on people's rights to criticize authorities” (9). The second cluster is termed *authoritarian aggression*, which Altemeyer states as “intentionally causing harm to someone,” whether that harm be in the physical, mental, emotional, or even monetary realms (10). Not only is this analysis perfect regarding Walter, but Altemeyer's further analysis of authoritarianism says something else about Walter: such aggression is “accompanied by the belief that proper authority approves it or that it will help preserve such authority” (10). The third trait, *conventionalism*, is more difficult to apply to Walter simply because there is more in the category than can be found in the story; it is a trait regarding sexuality, religious laws, dress codes, national reverence, and

other customs. However, one aspect of this particular attitudinal cluster—that “women should . . . keep to their traditional roles in society [and be] subservient to their husbands” (11)—parallels Walter's command to his wife and subsequent test of her.

In addition to Walter's authoritarian impulses, we can see that his tyranny comes in phases, the bulk of which is focused on his wife. In *Stalinism and Nazism*, Nicholas Werth discusses what he sees as the two phases of Stalinism:

The first is characterized by excess, “outrageousness,” the refusal of any stabilization, an ongoing delegitimization of social positions, and [. . .] the severe tensions between the two strategies of power, which generated the confrontations that peaked in 1937-38. The second is conservative and nationalist, marked by the resurgence of “archaic,” regressive, and reactionary elements such as xenophobia, “Great Russia” chauvinism, and anti-Semitism. (47)

These two eras of Stalinism are similar to Walter's two eras. Prior to being married, Walter is the hunter, like a “revolutionary” Stalin. “I me rejoysed of my liberte,” he says, “That seelde tyme is founde in mariage;/Ther I was free, I moot been in servage” (145-147). After marriage, his aggression is internalized. The yoke of sweet bliss does not calm him.

Constrained by the bonds of marriage or society, the despot turns against those closest to him, wife or populace (and Stalin's own wife, unhappy with her husband's rule, died under suspicious circumstances (Werth, 47)). Since Walter, like Stalin, can no longer assault the outside world, he needs an outlet for his aggression, and thus busies himself with determining his wife's loyalty:

For now gooth he ful faste ymaginyng

If by his wyves cheere he myghte se,
 Or by hire word aperceyve, that she
 Were changed; but he nevere hire koude fynde
 But evere in oon ylike sad and kynde. (598-602)

But why does he? Saying that the Marquis is still ever the hunter is insufficient. The Clerk himself claims mystification regarding Walter's acts and motives; he gives us inner details of Walter's curiosity during and after each test, but as to motivation, the Clerk can only muster a vague analogy about Walter being like someone tied to a stake (701-705).

Yet the curiosity presented in the above block hints at a paranoia which subsequently emerges at the start of his second test, where he at first tells Grisilde that the people are speaking ill of him (631); he then qualifies that a few lines later: “Wel oughte I of swich murmur taken heede,/For certainly I drede swich sentence,/Though they nat pleyn speke in myn audience.” In other words, he *thinks* people are being seditious against him, though he has never actually heard them complain. (*Yet*. Later in the story, the Clerk reveals that the people are indeed openly critical of Walter (722-726), and the Marquis warns them that his test was not malicious or cruel but done to know Grisilde’s will. But that’s for later.) Granted, this is all an act, but it does finally reveal his innate paranoia, which is what really drives his campaign against Grisilde, for on lines 691-693, Walter truly wonders if *Grisilde* is being cruel to *him*.

When examining totalitarian societies, we find paranoia to be part of the social fabric, at least of the elite, and so it is unsurprising to look back on Walter and find the same. Stephen J. Whitfield, author of *Into the Dark*, affirms that “The paranoid style was clearly characteristic of Nazism,” with Hitler blaming World War Two on global Jewish instigators, and that “Stalin's purge of the opposition was officially justified . . . as obligatory warfare against conspirators”

(65). More specifically, Whitfield points to Hannah Arendt's analysis that the Nazis and Stalinists were founded on a conspiracy against that which came before, and as this was their impetus, it was thus their inevitable worldview: all is a conspiracy, all are conspiring against the leader(ship), and no one is to be trusted. Everyone must be watched for hints at potential betrayal. We can therefore reassess Walter and have a better appreciation for his motives. They are still psychotic and mysterious, but our *appreciation* of them is clearer: Grisilde holds a special place in Walter's world, for she is both of the people and, via marriage, of the aristocracy; as such, she must be watched, must be examined—and through her all of Walter's people are likewise watched and examined. Of course, Walter has good reason to be paranoid. Gordon Tullock, in *Autocracy*, talks about the danger a strong military or secret police poses to the dictator: they are necessary for the dictator to maintain power, yet the nature of their abuses creates an ethic that can and often will lead to a dictator's demise. Hence, Stalin's particular paranoia, through which he “quite regularly killed the leaders of his secret police because he thought they were conspiring against him” (37-38). Relating this to “The Clerk's Tale,” we see that Walter trusts no one beyond his henchman the sergeant, and his paranoia suggests that he probably does not trust even that man. His climactic self-justification certainly implies that he seeks to know that the people are of one mind with him.

A passage on lines 410-413 suggests the root of Walter's paranoia: “So benigne and so digne of reverence,/And koude so the peples herte embrace,/That ech hire lovede that looked on hir face.” Griselda has a divinely gifted beauty that, once unleashed, causes all to love her spiritually and emotionally, as Walter thinks he does. More specifically, in lines 399-441 Grisilde appears to be so good, almost divine, that to the people she seems to have been raised as an empress, and she becomes famous because of her virtue. She is a threat to Walter. His

paranoia therefore stems from jealousy; essentially, he is thinking, “How could a lowborn *woman* possibly be the equal of a Marquis? I must test her worthiness.” Up unto their marriage, Grisilde has been a hard worker while Walter has been playing; and her apparent moral worthiness—combined with her work ethic—would then make her not just a surprisingly effective ruler, but one far superior to Walter; thus his effort to test her is then an effort to beat her down, keep her there, and in the end remind her who has the (arbitrarily “given”) power. As he says in lines 475-478,

Taak heede of every word that y yow seye;
 Ther is no wight that hereth it but we tweye.
 Ye woot youreselt wel how that ye cam heere
 Into this hous, it is nat longe ago;

This is another of his threats, and it is particularly lengthy—over 120 words, starting with line 466 and ending with 480—all obsessively circling the same subject: Grisilde is rich now, was once poor, and can be so again.

Consequently, it is hard to imagine Walter’s initial command to Grisilde being spoken with anything other than a stern, threatening countenance.

I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
 To al my lust, and that I freely may,
 As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
 And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
 And eek whan I sey „ye,“ ne sey nat „nay,“
 Neither by word ne frowning contenance? (351-356)

Walter's command is a more detailed equivalent of the instruction to his nobles (169-171), and he

states it to a girl in poverty and of his choosing; we can thus see that his motivation for selecting her is entirely for power: he wants someone so lowly and servile that she will not dare question him or goad him into doing what he does not want to do. Robert Emmett Finnegan affirms that, “What [Walter] describes is a quality of obedience similar to what he demanded of his people in the matter of the bride choice: Grisilde is to make no external sign of disagreement or dissatisfaction to whatever Walter does to and with her” (306). We can therefore presume that Walter acts toward his people just as he does toward his wife.

A close textual reading reveals this to be so when we examine the Clerk's choice of pronouns. In the “Language and Versification” section of *The Canterbury Tales Complete*, Norman Davis notes that “Chaucer is seldom completely consistent when employing the 'plural of respect'; nevertheless, the use of the 'polite' and 'familiar' forms [of pronouns] allows for subtle definitions of the relations between the characters,” and he cites “The Clerk's Tale” as a specific example (xxxiii). On line 141, Chaucer writes “hir meek,” which can mean “their meek” as well as “her meek.” As the *Canterbury Tales* index reveals, “hir” and “her” can both be third person (and neutral) plural possessive pronouns while also functioning as feminine singular pronouns. The alternative would be “hem,” a third person—and non-feminine—plural pronoun, but the Clerk does not use it in this context. Thus the Clerk makes a connection between women and the undistinguished masses, and both with meekness, a benefit of Middle English and exploited by Chaucer for his narrator's tone. After all, in Part 1 only *one person* from the group spoke to the Marquis, but the Clerk specifically uses the feminine *plural*. Additionally, on line 141 the Clerk uses “hir,” associating the group with meekness; lines 193 and 195 use “hem” for the people when they undertake Walter's command. On 185, the Clerk says, “And seyde he dide al this at hir requeste;” Walter acts here under the group's request, but

the pronoun places them in an inferior position: the Marquis always has dominance. This distinction continues through to story's end. Moreover, throughout the story Chaucer consistently uses articles more specifically masculine when specifying the Marquis (“he,” “his,” and “hym”). And at story's end we see something else: the Clerk says, “Ful lyk a mooder, with hire salte teeres/She bathed bothe hire visage and hire heeres” (1084-1085). In this passage the narrator uses “hire” to refer to the children. Again, the children are a pair—a group, as with the townsfolk—yet do not get the neutral plural pronoun “hem,” but rather the feminine equivalent, which has just been used to refer to Grisilde herself. Whereas the use on the townsfolk establishes their inferiority to the Marquis, here the use establishes that women are at the status of children. The people equal women; women equal children; all subjects are therefore children to Walter (the irony being that Walter is the real child). Most importantly, though, these distinct pronoun uses establish that connection among Grisilde, her children, and Walter’s people: Grisilde and her offspring are stand-ins for the populace as a whole in this allegory; how Walter treats Grisilde is thus how he treats his people.

This connection’s grim implication steadily emerges, first in how Walter chooses to test his wife: by pretending to kill her children. Certainly, he does not go through with the murders, nor does he ever intend to. Still, he could have imagined a different fate for the kids, like that they would be banished and that Grisilde could never see them again; instead, he imagines a fate where they must die. Even though he is faking, it is telling that the only subterfuge he can imagine is one that still depends upon death and the threat of death. Walter's actions are all ultimately a ruse, but they nonetheless stem from a real, unknowable, and irrational desire. Walter may say his villainy may be artifice, but this deception *itself* is pretended; he really *is* the type of brute he otherwise acts as. The Clerk's narration, and Dioneo's as well, support this

understanding: 460-462, 621-623, 697-707. He even threatens the sergeant with death while bidding him to be tender with the children (585). These “killing” urges come just after Grisilde gives birth, which points to a male distress at a woman’s biological creativity; the response is to do the opposite: kill, and do it to what the woman has created. Additionally, when we consider that Walter is introduced as doing little beyond hunting—and has never had to properly woo a woman (no doubt getting any woman he wants because of his status)—he has thus never had to control his base, self-preserving impulses, the need to destroy things for his own benefit. He has never had to see anyone or anything as more than a mere prize to be captured, a mark to be hit, an enemy to be defeated. For him all things are mere abstractions; he is disconnected from everything until forced to be otherwise (and he responds by pursuing an abstraction).

Though he does no physical harm to anyone, we find his paranoia and mischief unacceptable—especially since it is the only action we see him take, leading to our judgment that he is only investigating his people, not ruling them. In his book *The Dictators*, Richard Overy examines Stalin’s “Kirov Law” which “like the law pushed through by Hitler two days after the murder of Rohm, was used by Stalin to put himself effectively above the law” (53). This was in response to the murder of a party member who was a threat to Stalin, and the law allowed Stalin to eliminate other major and minor threats. Overy goes on to point out that “[m]ore than 1,100 of the delegates who had applauded Kirov with such unguarded enthusiasm . . . were dead or imprisoned four years later.” This law created an air of paranoia where law was moot: people could be arrested, convicted, and executed on a whim and without trial. What becomes inevitable in such states is the swift descent into absolute secrecy, as the state grows fearful of the people and any potential deviation from an idealized norm. The people become targets; in Stalin’s case, a Secret Department forms with dossiers on thousands of party leaders (67). If the

state's elite are not safe from the leader's aggressive paranoia, how helpless is the state's populace? If Grisilde will suffer endless, meaningless tests, what of Walter's subjects? What will really happen once the narrative ends?

Despite her repeated loyalty, Grisilde suffers an expulsion, with Walter concocting another excuse to test her resiliency, one which requires that she return to a life of poverty and do so almost in the nude. In modern terms, she is the party loyalist cast out, victim of what Friedrich and Brzezinski, in *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, termed a political purge, which they see as “limited to those within the totalitarian movement, grasping in its often fatal grip only those who appear . . . to be quite loyal to the regime. The purge itself is a product of both the imperatives of power of the totalitarian leadership and the dictates of the official ideology, as interpreted by that leadership” (150-151). Recall Altemeyer's statement regarding authoritarian aggression, that “proper authority approves it or that it will help preserve such authority” (10). As these authors continue their analysis, they note that the ultimate goal of the “totalitarian terror,” of which the purge is a tool, is “social disintegration” to be followed immediately by “social reconstruction.” These aspects are important to understanding what Walter is doing to Grisilde and, through her, his people. Walter's obsession allows him to focus all of his people on loyalty, to test Grisilde for it, and to focus the people toward Grisilde in their sympathies. The longer Walter engages in his evil, the more he breaks down society, turning them against him and further toward Grisilde. And sure enough, as Friedrich and Brzezinski continue, “[t]he pulverization of the opposition . . . makes room for a coerced public enthusiasm for the official goals and introduces into the system a vigorous competition in loyalty to the regime.” Once Walter reveals his deception, the astonished people return their loyalty to him, an allegiance reinforced by their longstanding sympathy for Grisilde, whose own loyalty to Walter

stands as yet another reinforcement: she was doing the “right thing” all along, as the populace should have been. From now on, the people will never doubt their leader—they have effectively been brainwashed, bought off. Walter's campaign, then, is an effort to assert his freedom and superiority. We reflect back on his monologue from Part 1—responding to the group leader—and see that Walter was never happy about being forced into marriage, of losing his freedom to some “yoke of sweet bliss,” even though he defined his terms for his own marriage. He tyrannizes his wife and people after the people had, for good reason, usurped Walter's freedom and part of his authority. This test has been a way for him to beat them down and have them willingly submit to his will with further conviction, and in so doing *affirming* that manner of his testing: absolute freedom on his end.

By this point we have an interesting—if loathsome—character, a villain on the level of Shakespeare’s Richard III. Walter dismisses Grisilde from his life with a blunt and careless speech in front of everybody (792-812), makes her a servant in front of everyone (953), and humiliates Grisilde by presenting her to a younger and more beautiful “wife.” Yet an abrupt ending and an equally abrupt change in Walter demolish our understanding of the man. After all his questionable shenanigans, Walter finally explains his reasons to Grisilde and everyone else: “for t^e assaye in thee thy wommanheede” (1069-1078). A Medieval audience might enjoy this, but to a modern reader it stretches credibility. Certainly, his stated motivation is admirable, but Walter's twelve-year testing does not seem the type that truly improves the testee’s character in some way but is merely maliciousness born of paranoia. It is also akin to torture and imprisonment. All of this would be comical if it were not for the fact that what motivates his paranoia is how well his wife reflects on him: not just some stunning trophy wife whose youth and beauty—and expensive clothes—reveal to the world how successful and virile the husband

thinks he is, but a *moral* trophy, whose world famous virtue is intended to convince society of the husband's likewise moral excellence. Worse still, Walter comes out of this as heroic, despite the Clerk's disdain, and Walter and Grisilde have a happy reunion.

We leave this story understandably distressed. A villainous thug torments his wife (and his people), subverts the public will, and inexplicably stops his aggression to live happily ever after with his angelic wife and beautiful children. No retribution, only reward. It would be like Stalin receiving a humanitarian award, or Hitler suing for peace and getting the Nobel for his efforts. Our reaction is one of disdain for the denouement.

The trouble exists within Walter's concluding actions. One might argue that if Walter is indeed childlike in his attitude, then the story is about his change into adulthood. If he is the warrior and hunter, then he learns to be at peace. Certainly there is “change” upon the family reunion. But it is abrupt, not gradual—forced by the story and not convincing. Finnegan points out that

if Walter was unable to know his wife's “purpose . . . and . . . wille”, or recognize her “stedfastnese” before the testing or after apparently disposing of her children, then there is no particular reason he should be able to discern those qualities, to have that information, now. The end of the project lacks a shaped closure, just as its beginning had no ostensible cause: the *ad hoc* testing concludes simply because it stops. (318)

At every test Walter has thought to “tempte” Grisilde, “To the outtreste preeve of hir corage,/Fully to han experience and lore/If that she were as stidefast as bifoore” (787-789). Yet what is there to suggest he will not continue these tests beyond the story's conclusion? We see

much of Walter's curiosity, but at no point are his thoughts shown to change; nor does he realize what a villain he is, wonder why it is that he has had to “assaye” and “preve” his wife, appreciate Grisilde, and try to be more like her. He is as constant as Grisilde is, as one-dimensional, and as much a cypher. He begins the story fully established as a hunter and continues hunting in a more advanced and specific capacity. If anything, his “change” would merely be a reversion to his pre-marriage, revolutionary state of mind now that he has successfully co-opted the populace. His ways are set, and he should continue hunting from story's end. But the audience is expected to accept otherwise without question.

In *Stalinism and Nazism*, Nicholas Werth briefly discusses the concept of Soviet “dekulakization,” which he notes was a “resurgence, against a pacified society, of infinitely larger-scale illegal, violent, and terrorist practices than those experiences some years earlier” (76). Just as Grisilde “patiently” suffered the loss of a child to be followed by the loss of another and then some humiliation, so too did the “pacified” Soviet suffer through brutality and then recurring, increased brutality. Once one assault is allowed, others inevitably and *unceasingly* follow—at least until the perpetrator dies, and perhaps not even then (often, a new oppressor takes his place). Here, then, is one of the reasons the Clerk's tale troubles modern readers: a Stalin or a Hitler does not decide one day that he has “tested” his victim enough; he keeps going until somebody dies. There is no reward or happy reunion; there is only despair, ruin, and death.

Even if we eliminate the totalitarian analysis, we still find troubling problems with the narrative. We know, from the Clerk's description, that Walter is a playboy with no experience ruling. Once he becomes married, Walter is never again said to be the playboy, and is instead associated with wise rule. The body of the story, then, is about Walter learning to rule, and rule well. And what, then, does he learn? To distrust, investigate, and torment his people until he is

certain of their loyalty. And once he has learned this lesson, he is rewarded. Much can be said about the text, through analysis, interpretation, and conjecture, but if we just go by what actually happens—events, their results, the Clerk's statements—we have a troubling character representing a much more troubling ideal.

Part Two: Grisilde, Marchess of Saluzzo

Contrasting Walter's constant paranoia, Grisilde thinks on only three occasions in the entire tale: once early in her marriage, when the sergeant comes for her infant daughter and sparks a fearful reaction, and lines 281 and 950, thoughts of merest curiosity before her marriage and after her "divorce." Furthermore, line 923 notes that she presents "no remembrance" of her former life and rather easily forgets her two children as if they had never existed (606-9; 708-10).

Additionally, throughout the story she is defined in terms of labor, either in the physical labor of helping Janicula or preparing Walter's castle for the second wedding, or in the biological labor of producing Walter's offspring. She becomes little more than a machine that can procreate. Upon Walter's later trials, she has no reaction. As Robert Finnegan concludes, "Grisilde, deliberately fashioning herself an extension of her husband's will . . . makes of herself an accomplice to homicide" (303). She becomes like those Nazi officers who excused their actions in various concentration camps as "just following orders." There is no value to her children, no value to her life; she and others exist merely for Walter's whims, be they virtuous or vile. Because she does not contradict, she allows suffering to happen—encourages it, even.

Grisilde chillingly expresses this upon the son's impending "doom," saying "I have nought had no part of children tweyne/But first siknesse, and after, wo and peyne (650-1)." Grisilde downplays her kids as little more than a physical inconvenience, a burden. Finnegan, discussing the use and meaning of "assent"—that Grisilde "can „agree to“ something without „agreeing with“ it”—concludes that Grisilde "moves from a situation of *assenting* in the abstract to whatever Walter wishes in their marriage, to the condition of *consenting* in the particular instances of the murder of her children" (his italics, 304). This is important, as Grisilde does not just "agree to"

follow Walter's wishes—she says she will not disagree in *thought*, either.

Moreover, her growing detachment from all things except her husband creates a dour wonder in us: if she does not enjoy her children or life, then what is the point of living? We thus begin to become increasingly distanced from Grisilde even as Walter offends us.

According to a few name origin sites, chief among them Wiki.name.com, “Grisilde” comes from the ancient German *gris hild* for “gray” or “dark battle,” and seems to have been invented for the tale. But what does gray battle mean? Grisilde's battle? Walter's battle with life or himself? An alternate meaning comes from *gries hild*, meaning “stone battle.” Does this signify a castle holding off all attacks? The strength and immovability of a stone? Though the origin and meaning of the name are ultimately uncertain, it leaves us with an impression of overcast days, sad visages, and tragic ends. The meaning becomes appropriate once Grisilde agrees to Walter's demands: to suffer pain, never complain, and always agree:

And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'

Neither by word ne frownyng conenance?

Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance. (355-357)

Grisilde agrees, of course, and does so “quakyng for drede.”

In many ways, she is like the battered girl who gets involved with a series of abusive boyfriends. Her isolation from friends and family is typical in initial studies of spousal abuse; as Edward W. Gondolf points out, such women “have few substantial social contacts outside the family to offer them moral or financial support. In other words, the women are trapped in the abusive relationship with no place to turn.” We look at Grisilde and see that there is no mention of friends or family at the Marquis's palace; she does not see her father for nearly thirteen years and does not host any friends at the palace. Once she marries Walter, Grisilde truly leaves her

past and her Self behind. How frightening it must be for her to lose her friends and the only family she has ever known and then to again lose new family as part of the Marquis's ruse; outside of Walter, there is no one who Grisilde can relate to, and ultimately, she cannot truly relate to him due to his duplicity. She would be tragic if the story were to go so far as to develop into a Greek-style tragedy. As it is, she becomes more like the masculine side of the relationship equation; Gondolf notes that abusive men “are more emotionally than physically isolated” and furthermore that “[m]en in general have fewer bonds with friends, relatives, and neighbors than women” (131). Walter succeeds in bending Grisilde to his will, but at what cost? She is an extension of her husband, yes; she is another man, even, but these are not good ends to achieve, certainly not through the means given.

To appreciate the dour, real-world implications of the Grisilde narrative, we need only look at the case of Hedda Nussbaum as reported in Ann Jones's *Next Time, She'll Be Dead*. Joel Steinberg, a successful lawyer, became involved with Hedda, a Random House editor, and immediately set about bending her to his will. He pushed her to pursue her career on his terms, and reminded her that her successes came from him. He found someone he could initially praise to gain her interest and then steadily remade her into a drastically altered image of what he thought she should be; every aspect of this remodeling—the sex, the career, the persona—was meant for his pleasure or to be a positive reflection upon him. Just as Walter became Grisilde's world, Joel became Hedda's, something reflected in her diary entries, where she increasingly obsessed over Joel's commands and desires, endeavoring to do exactly as he said and be more and more like him, trying to anticipate his every thought and need. Even as he praised her, he wore her down with supposedly constructive but negative criticism while isolating her from friends, family, and associates. (Consider that Grisilde briefly reconnects with Janicula late in

the story, and there is no sense that she has any friends in the village or in Walter's palace; she unquestioningly accepts Walter's lies about the populace hating her children and the marriage.) Not long after Hedda reached a state of negative self worth, she began suffering Joel's beatings. These assaults would increase in intensity and frequency after occasional lulls of nonviolence, until reaching torture level (long, forced ice-baths after beatings, for example). At one point, Hedda tried getting away, hiding at a friend's home, but Joel hunted her down and returned her to their apartment. And while Hedda became more devoted to her abuser—even as she sometimes tried and failed to get away—Joel himself became further depraved in his sexual needs and drug use. In the end, Joel became something of a demonic god to Hedda, issuing commandments for her betterment—which she dutifully wrote down, studied, memorized, and acted on—while regularly assaulting her with physical and psychological “disciplines.” Only when Joel used his violence on their adopted daughter, resulting in the girl's coma and death, did Joel's oppressively masculine reign of terror end (Jones 182-194).

One reason Hedda and Joel's relationship went on for so long is a pattern Lenore E. A. Walker identified in 1979 and titled the Walker Cycle Theory of Violence. This cycle has three recurring parts: “(1) tension building, (2) the acute battering incident, and (3) loving contrition” (126). In the first stage, the woman tries to placate the man during his increasing irritation, either by doing things he normally finds pleasing or at least avoiding doing anything that would exacerbate his insults and angry outbursts. Ultimately, the woman is unable to control the man by these means and his irrationality increases, as does her fear, until he assaults her. Physical assaults can vary in intensity and, over time, can even be specifically predicted by the victim. During the third stage aftermath, the abuser is remorseful and kind, tries to convince himself and his victim that he will never take such action again, and even engages in a kind of repetition of

their courtship days (126). These positive results create a seemingly happy scenario which encourages the abused stay longer with abusers (134). It is no stretch to see Walter's attacks on Grisilde in this pattern, where his initial paranoia is stage one, his faux-murder of their children and abandonment of Grisilde is stage two, and the aftermath—especially once the family is reunited—is stage three.

However, the effects and intentions of this scenario are much darker upon further analysis. As mentioned earlier, we never truly get an insight into Grisilde's mind; Walter's stated paranoia, though, coupled with “The Clerk's Tale's” similarity to the above Cycle, allow us the option of looking at literature on the abused, where we not only find Grisilde's story being repeated but are given insight into both men's and women's minds during these cycles.

We can thus deduce Grisilde's state of mind from marriage to “divorce.” When she meets the Marquis and agrees to his marriage demands, she is “queyking.” Thus she begins her marriage in fear and continues under fear's dark cloud (she is “gray battle” after all). Her ruthless adherence to her husband's ill will is part duty, then, but also—if spousal abuse research has any veracity—an action of mistaken self-preservation. Walker speaks of how abused women become fearful of confiding with anyone because their psychotic husbands will accuse the confidant—male, female, animal, robot, stuffed toy—of desiring sex with the wife (16-17). Additionally, Elaine Hilberman's study, as cited in *Next Time, She'll be Dead*, shows that abused women “were a study in paralyzing terror that was reminiscent of the rape trauma syndrome, except the stress was unending and the threat of assault ever present . . . [their lives] were characterized by overwhelming passivity and inability to act They saw themselves as incompetent, unworthy, and unlovable and were ridden with guilt and shame” (Jones 179). In this context, consider Grisilde's statement at 359-360:

[. . .] undigne and unworthy

Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede

Or 664-665:

For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,

Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese

Or 815-819:

[. . .] bitwixen youre magnificence

And my poverte no wight kan ne may

Maken comparison; it is no nay.

I ne heeld me nevere digne in no manere

To be youre wyf, no, ne youre chamberere.

The result of this psychological aspect is that battered women are “debilitated” or “too weary to fight back;” they often eat poorly and suffer sleep deprivation when their abusers engage in rambling, often drunken diatribes on any number of subjects into the late hours (Walker, in Horton 17).

The abused woman ultimately loses her mind, persona, and personality, but she does so believing that adhering to her husband is the safest thing to do. To a certain extent, this is true. Pagelow and Johnson note that there is more psychological than physical abuse (3). Walter never lays a hand on Grisilde, certainly, so he is not exactly like a wife beater, yet he does, at every stage, threaten her through his reminders (466-497; 642-644; 806-812). As James Ptacek shows, men like Walter deny wrongness or responsibility for abuse and emphasize their sexual needs, a woman's faithfulness (but not their own), and woman submitting to man (248-254). Overall, these men create contradictory scenarios unified by a need to silence, punish, and

dominate their partners, and at each stage the men succeed. The women shut up, “learned,” and knew who was boss—much to the benefit of the abusers, who would continue their ways (255).

At line 560, Grisilde blames herself for her daughter’s impending death, thereby associating death with women while her lines recall the biblical curse Yahweh gives Eve. Grisilde here represents two things: as a character she acts out Eve’s curse, and within the story she parrots the Church doctrine of a woman’s fate. Consider her talk of unworthiness:

[. . .] Lord, undigne and unworthy
 Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede,
 But as ye wole yourself, right so wol I.
 And here I swere that nevere willingly,
 In werk ne thocht, I nyl yow disobeye,
 For to be deed, though me were looth to deye. (359-364)

Grisilde here is finally exposed as not an exemplar of amazing virtue—though medieval audiences would no doubt think so—but is rather the end result of Bible-based misogynistic doctrine. She suffers through Walter’s trials not because of her amazing patience, but because she has been systematically conditioned to act and believe that she is nothing.

As discussed in Horton and Williamson's *Abuse and Religion*, the church has often not helped abused women in a progressive way but rather has hindered women's safety by rigidly adhering to an outmoded masculine interpretation of the world and woman's place in it. In Mitzi N. Eilts's study, Jewish and Christian traditions still suggest that marriage is where women belong and abusive marriages are their fault (212). Walker's study points out that most initial studies of spousal abuse suggested that women were to blame and that “if a woman develops a

better character, she will be less likely to be abused by her husband.” A wife's waywardness and misbehavior must logically be punished; likewise, if there is abuse, it must be because the woman has been acting up. Walker further notes that even more contemporary thought adheres to this viewpoint. However, since this view essentially excuses a man's actions (and ignores the fact that men are essentially in control of whether abuse will happen) it also refrains from requiring consequences for abuse, and thus encourages abuse to occur (13-14). Alsdurf and Alsdurf find that pastors still have the idea that women should suffer because God will either give them strength to endure the torture or will stop the abuse (167); meanwhile, in the real world, abuse continues. Pagelow and Johnson cite a grim result of this pastoral attitude: an abused woman elects to stay with her tyrannical minister husband because she believes that leaving him could destroy his theological career (4). Far better for him that she stay and suffer. The idea, of course, is to be Christ-like. But Jesus and early Christian martyrs suffered and then died from their suffering; no strength or Godly cessation arrived. More to the point, such martyrs were not to blame for their own deaths—the abusers were. So why do abused women suffer blame? No answer.

When such a person is that beaten down, she can take anything, but only because she has ceased to exist. Grisilde admits as much on line 657, regarding how she had given up her “wyl” and “libertee” upon accepting his “clothes.” “Grisilde thus teeters on the edge of vowing extinction of herself as a person,” says Finnegan. “Such extinction implies abrogation of conscience, of the authority to make moral decisions” (306). This is the mind of a child, then, someone entirely irresponsible. Rather than being elevated, Grisilde is kept at or devolved to a certain mental age of perhaps five or younger. All she is expected is to *do*. Serve. Follow orders. Alsdurf and Alsdurf cite a passage from Colossians as an insight toward traditional

marriage attitudes; it in, Paul implores wives to adapt themselves to their husbands—in other words, to change for their husbands, to lose their identity—while husbands should love and sympathize with their women, avoiding any bitterness or resentment (223). Walter partially fails this Pauline command, but Grisilde succeeds. Her triumph, however, places her under the modern label of a Stepford Wife: mindless, tireless, glad to serve, keeping the house spotless, and condemning autonomy as being selfish.

In Ira Levin's novella *The Stepford Wives*, the husbands of the Stepford Men's Association systematically kill the titular characters and replace them with dutiful, sexy robotic likenesses. Though the story is ambiguous as to whether heroine Joanna Eberhart is merely suffering from paranoid anxiety as she struggles to adjust to her new, more traditional life in Stepford, CT, there are enough details to suggest that the replacements are real. The first cinematic adaptation is more specific, with Joanna's doppelganger strangling her at the end, the replacements each having substantially larger breasts, and all openly speaking of their pre-robot lives as being selfish and not satisfying their husbands' needs. Both book and film celebrate 60's feminism by mocking what men seemingly want: a dutiful, sexy, mindless ubermother who tirelessly cleans the house and prepares food (much like Grisilde by “The Clerk's Tale's” conclusion), is readily available for awesome sex, and is concerned solely with her husband's needs (Grisilde again).

The concept of the Stepford Wife entered the lexicon of a post-feminist America as something undesirable; whether or not the book's Joanna Eberhart actually dies, the understood notion is that such a servile life is akin to death for a formerly autonomous, artistically inclined woman. What is the point of living if a woman (or anyone) cannot express herself? What is the point of *being* if she must merely *be* her husband? When we consider that First Wave Feminism linked itself with the Abolitionist Movement, the concept of the Stepford Wife naturally connects

with slavery, and consequently, the notion that anyone would willingly embrace such a mindset would be abhorrent to modern sensibilities. More chilling, and generally lost when people reference the Stepford concept, is the mindset that brings the wives about: the intolerance of difference, the creation of slaves, and the ruthless destruction of the individual—all perpetrated by men upon women. Thus, if we first consider that Grisilde is like a Stepford Wife—programmed by a patriarchal, Christian society and willing to serve her husband in any way desired—then consider how her actions mimic the abused woman paradigm, we see that Grisilde is a woman who *wants* to be abused, *wants* to be nothing, just as Hilberman would report (Jones 180). Regarding Grisilde's initial and “extraordinarily demanding” vow, J. Allan Mitchell contends that “unconditional assent to her cruel husband represents the terms she largely invents for herself. Of course, in principle female submission meets the formal demands of Christian marriage, and she probably could not have hoped to bargain for better terms and conditions—but did she need to bargain for worse?” (13). Considering all the investigation into and evidence of spousal abuse during the 20th Century, how can a modern reader regard Grisilde admirably?

Through lines 701-721, Walter examines Grisilde daily for some change in her that may reflect his latest cruelty, but she shows no outer sign. In her marriage she ceases to exist, for the narrator never describes any activities she may engage in. The only activity in this marriage is from Walter's end, assaulting his wife several times while she does nothing; in fact, more twisted, she is “moore penyble” in love with him. This of course reveals one aspect of the Christian ethic, to shower more and more love on an oppressor in the belief that such love will change them. However, the association of love with abuse simply elevates abuse to nobility. Her mindless acceptance and unquestioning loyalty only encourage the Walters of the world to continue: they know that the Grisildes will be around to be duped, oppressed, and brutalized

without retaliation. A more respectable, thinking woman could stay within her vow and yet inquire if there is no other way to get around her children's doom—like perhaps faking their deaths as Walter does. How would he have responded? Grudging respect for her genius? Stammer on the spot after being caught lying? But he knows she has previously cowered to his demands to never think and knows that she is aware that she should not question.

Consequently, he can get away with it. Finnegan notes the strong word of “yvele” used to describe Walter’s action toward Grisilde, and concludes that, “So by extension must be Grisilde’s response to the tempting” (315). Our respect for Grisilde's suffering dissipates because her willing, unquestioning acceptance of the “murder” of her children is as vile as anything Walter does. Admiring her is foolish. The happy ending then becomes all the more reprehensible: two immoral people find themselves being rewarded for their corruption. It also reinforces a fantasy that an abused woman should stay with her husband for some misguided assurance of family values.

Grisilde displays many classic symptoms of the abused wife. Despite all the threats and assaults, she stays with her abuser to the end. Our distress at reading this tale is typical; it is a distress repeated today by those who look upon abused wives and wonder, “Why didn't she leave?” But as Ann Jones shows, the problem is not so simple. Looking back through time, we realize that a Grisilde would have been incapable of even considering leaving her abuser. Remember who she is married to. In addition, leaving can sometimes exacerbate the situation to deadly levels (144). Moreover, assaults that continue to happen after the woman has left result in incredulous responses from the average person, even those who should otherwise be informed: one woman, after leaving her husband, was raped, beaten, and threatened with death by her

husband in front of their children; interviewers wondered how she could have gotten raped or why a woman could possibly be motivated to ultimately kill her attacker (132-134). Our typical reaction to Grisilde's dilemma is one which Jones identifies as psychologically contradictory: we blame the victim. In previous centuries, readers rejoiced at Grisilde's fortitude; today, with women becoming more autonomous, there is only disgust at her perceived weakness.

The Clerk is disgusted with the abuser and stunned by the victim, but he does not blame her:

What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse
 To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse,
 And he continuyng evere in sturdinesse? (698-700)

Nor does he see her as an enabler, though she can be seen as such. The Clerk focuses on the evil which men are capable of and examines it with a fable. Consequently, he concludes with the sermon that women should stand up to their husbands. The Clerk shows that Grisilde and women are equal to or superior to men, which is impressive and wonderful but does not solve the problem of abuse. Moreover, he concludes his fable with an idealistic statement that people were much better in Grisilde's time (a belief which contradicts his demonization of Walter and criticisms of Walter's fickle populace), and that therefore modern citizens could not possibly mimic Grisilde's fortitude. We wonder just what the Clerk is trying to do by saying Grisilde is great for suffering but that we cannot measure up and should not anyway. Does that actually *nullify* religious belief? Unfortunately, since the story is a fable, the sermon becomes simplistic and unrealistic. We look through the literature on spousal abuse and see that talking back or fighting back goes only so far. Moreover, when we consider that Grisilde is rewarded for her patience and that her man magically stops his abuse, and then we compare this paradigm with

what we know happens in reality . . . well, we applaud the story for addressing an important issue, but its inept conclusion dismays us.

Part Three: The Oxenford Clerk and His Tale

The story's conclusion stymies us with unresolved questions and conflicts. Because of perceived ethical and story problems, critics such as J. Allan Mitchell wonder “whether Chaucer hasn’t finally impeached the Clerk’s morality” (1). More to the point, he notes that the Clerk “speaks as if he could stabilize the narrative by transcending its worrisome literality, [sic] refocusing it by way of the spiritual exhortation” at the end. Instead, he creates more doubts. For one, “why should the Clerk have to correct his text or readers at this point if the tale were obviously pertinent to „every wight“?” (2). Boccaccio at least has his narrator, Dioneo, bracket the tale with admonitions that Gualtieri did evil and “it was a great pity that the fellow should have profited” and instead deserved to have a cheating wife (784, 795); incidentally, “Dioneo” means “He who is of God” and suggests that he is God's voice or proxy. Boccaccio’s version, then, is an illustration that there is no justice in the world, possibly not even from God, because men like Gualtieri are born into privilege, never have to want, and can get away with anything without any form of retribution—divine or otherwise. A story like this would usually have a comeuppance, a punishment to fit the crime. But here, Grisilde suffers punishment for no apparent crime. What is the Clerk trying to do? Why has he given us these two characters, a man and woman who are of dubious if not unlikable morals? To instruct women? To lecture on marriage, something which he knows nothing about, an amateur to the Wife of Bath's professional? Does the tale reflect who he is, and if so, is he a villain or a good man? What is truly on the Clerk's mind?

Rich Lawson notes that the Clerk is generally regarded as a likable character, favorably portrayed (6), although Anne Laskaya points out that critics accept the Clerk as an ideal form in

the Clerk's own tale, but that elsewhere such men are ridiculous, corrupt, or loathsome (111). So is the character indeed favorable? Consider the details of his portrayal in the “General Prologue.” He and his horse are gaunt, his clothes are tattered, and the Clerk “hadde he but litel gold in cofre” (298); he survives on handouts from friends, Chaucer tells us, and barely so. Furthermore, he is very studious, preferring books to frivolities like harps, fiddles, or fine clothes (296). He has been studying logic for several years (286); on the rare occasions that he speaks, the Clerk imparts knowledge with a poet's precision, insight, and color. Most importantly, “Sownynge in moral vertu was his speche/And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche” (307-308). He is greatly concerned with what is right and wrong, what is logical, and is interested in engaging others to discover the answers to troubling questions. He is a serious man, perhaps in need of a little fun in his life, but he is not irresponsible, vain, pompous, or inconsiderate. Knowledge, truth, and morality are his concerns, and his story logically must have some moral to impart. But what? And how do readers deduce his purpose?

His attitude toward the Marquis is not glowing. He says decent things about Walter at the beginning, but as the tale continues, he becomes more and more disdainful of the man, noting at the start that Walter “Wel ny alle othere cures leet he slyde” (82), later declaring that “. . . yvele it sit/To assaye a wyf what that it is no nede/And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede” (460-462), and near the end speaking of Walter's “cruel herte” (722) and “wikke usage” (785). Meanwhile, the Clerk regularly praises Grisilde, even as he is troubled by the story's development. He asks his female fellow-travelers,

If thise assayes myghte nat suffise?

What koude a sturdy housbonde moore devyse

To preeve hir wyfhod and hir stedefastnesse,

And he continuynge evere in sturdinesse? (697-700)

His tone is concerned and challenging, perhaps like a logic instructor's, in essence asking us, "do you think this is acceptable, how much testing is enough, are the leader's actions justified, and why or why not?" He is a very committed young man and very concerned with discovering what is right and wrestling with troubling things in order to make those discoveries.

Being a clerk, he peppers his story with allusions and we look to those for guidance. We find references to Job and hints at Jesus and Eve, the tale itself carrying an element of Abram. These quick allusions connect his story to biblical teaching, add layers to the narrative, and are appropriate to the character. We can therefore consider those stories while attempting to have a greater understanding of this one, which seems to be the Clerk's intent.

Initially, our attention goes to a possible Abram parallel because Grisilde must sacrifice her daughter and son in a situation similar to Abram's sacrifice of Isaac: showing unquestioning obedience to a higher authority no matter the command and (in the Yahwist version) not losing the child(ren) in the sacrifice. Abram receives the command to give up his son, but the son is spared at the last moment via an alternate sacrifice. Grisilde must give up two children. Neither receive a last minute alternative; rather, they gain a semi-reprieve by going into exile to be returned later. There is no return for Isaac, who mysteriously disappears from the sacrifice narrative.

The Grisilde story's structure most resembles "The Book of Job." The man loses all property, offspring, and extended family before becoming a miserable, diseased outcast; likewise Grisilde loses a daughter, a son, and social status before the family reunion. However, Job's friends argue with him regarding the cosmic injustice of his predicament, suggesting some unacknowledged sin on Job's part, while he initially maintains righteous faith in God before

seeking divine justice for his suffering; no such dynamic exists in the Clerk's tale. The closest parallel is Grisilde repeatedly telling Walter how great he is then chiding his harshness in the end. But this is a very simplified equivalent of Job's obstinate faith and climactic self-righteousness.

Ostensibly, the references place Grisilde as Job and Walter as Satan. But is Walter Satan or just the dark side of man? And who are the other characters? Consider the dynamic between Janicula and Walter. Walter takes Grisilde from Janicula and torments the girl. If Walter is Satan, Janicula must be God, and the story brings Job into a Medieval setting. Janicula's weakness is understandable; he cannot get involved any more than God could. This interpretation seems sound; however, if Walter equals Man's dark side, then we see a view of the world where God does not get involved because the world has been corrupted by Man/Walter. If Walter equals Satan, then he is condemnable, but Grisilde is too because she does not see his evil and supports it. But what of Walter's henchman? He removes Grisilde's children, per Walter's instruction, identical to Satan removing Job's family and prosperity per God's allowance. In this interpretation, Walter equates God, not Satan. Grisilde's trial emphasizes God or Walter's corruption and questions her own devotion. If Walter equals God, then God is evil and Grisilde is hopeless, as are we all. But how can God be married to Grisilde, unless Walter is Christ and she the Church? Or perhaps she is Christ and Walter is the Church? That is something to consider for later—but for now, how can we possibly respect such a God for his actions and paranoia (at least God was not involved in the Job affair until the end).

The problem with the Job story is that God “replacing” the lost family with new versions merely devalues life to the status of objects to be possessed, like Grisilde herself as well as so many victims of spousal abuse. “The Clerk's Tale” circumvents this problem somewhat, for

Grisilde does receive her actual lost family, not some replacement. Still—this is someone we should admire? More pertinent, Grisilde's pseudo-Job path misunderstands the original tale's purpose (if we are to accept the connection) the result of what Nahum Glazer notes as a tendency among biblical scholars over the centuries to Christianize or “Judize” Job, focusing on “patient, *saintly* Job [to] absorb the shock of the drama of the impatient, *rebellious* hero,” interpreting one via the other (11). Jean Danielou, like many others, confirms that the Job of the Hebrew bible is indeed defiant, angry, and critical—in essence, a rebel—though many in the Christian tradition see Job as “patient.” Why? As he says, “The Jew of Alexandria who translated the Book of Job [into Hellenic Greek] introduced basic modifications,” including softening the language, altering and neutering the pagan/animist descriptions, making God a bit more distant, and creating a worldview that is more black and white (that the unjust do get punished, and the afterlife is the ultimate reward); he goes on to show that these modifications infect the New Testament, such as in the Epistle of James (107). This is probably the biggest reason Grisilde's suffering does not jibe with the Job story: what began as a symbolic rumination on the fall and restoration of Israel becomes, through misinterpretations of censored texts, an accidental justification of torture.

With this dissatisfying allusion in mind, we turn then to another: that of Christ.

The statement “But hye God somtyme senden kan/His grace into a litel oxes stalle” (206-207) connects Grisilde to Christ; just as Jesus suffered via false accusation, Grisilde suffers for no crime. But who does Walter therefore represent? Rome? God? Certainly he has a connection to Rome later in the story. Perhaps he is both the Sanhedrin and Rome, with the Sergeant being Pilate's Roman presence. As Judith Bronfman shows, critics such as John McCall have wrestled with this possibility, considering Grisilde as Christ/God and Walter simply as spiritually wayward Man; she notes, however, that though such an interpretation is generally

accepted, “the rigidity and neatness of [McCall's] argument seem somewhat forced” (28). Moreover, if Grisilde is indeed Christ, she is therefore superhuman: of *course* she can suffer. Also, she never doubts nor gets angry (making her better than Christ) yet she also does not possess Christ's intellect. Her speeches to Walter are progressively expansive versions of “You're so great and I'm worthless.” Could the reader ever expect Grisilde to philosophize on Jesus's level? He knew that Rome, fellow Rabbis, and even life itself were corrupt, and he willingly went through torture as an example to others in exposing the corruption. However, Grisilde is oblivious to any wrongs, and not only is her trial meaningless, she is less than alive—even a snail will react with pain if salted or fried. Her unfeeling, glad reactions make her an easily replaceable robot, an inversion of Jesus: the man who stood alone and elevated life by defeating death becomes the woman who conforms and denigrates life by not questioning death.

Of course, the lines “Thy soule, litel child, I hym bitake,/For this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake” (559-560) suggest that the daughter and son, by “dying,” are the Christ figures, not her. Additionally, the word *for* in Chaucer's time carries with it a few distinct meanings, two of which are crucial here: “You die in my place” and “you die because of me.” In other words, “You take my place because of my mistake.” Grisilde would therefore be equal parts Eve and humanity: Eve because Eve suffered for her transgression; humanity because the sacrifice dies in her place or because of her, just as Jesus took humanity's place and took on their sins.

Connecting Grisilde to each of these references creates problems because she does not demand justice as Job eventually did—though she should—and she has no reason to be punished like Eve. How has she transgressed? The Clerk notes that she follows Christian teaching—is her transgression abstract, the unquestioning submission itself? Maybe. We can be certain only of a tenuous allusion to Eve's curse, and Bronfman (39) shows that other interpretations can be

made but that Job and Jesus are the most significant.

Confusing the matter is the biblical implication of lines 871-872: “Naked out of my fadres hous . . . /I cam, and naked moot I turne again.” This Job reference, somewhat vague in Boccaccio’s version and stronger in Petrarch’s (Farrell and Goodwin 124), suggests Life itself, with a spirit coming out of Heaven (“my fadres hous”) and into this world naked upon birth, and returning to Heaven in much the same fashion upon death. *Janicula* is therefore God and not Walter, who is merely Man, visiting pointless cruelties upon fellows in this world. (This interpretation almost fits; Boccaccio’s original has the father’s name spelled *Giannicole*, which is related to Giovanni, meaning “God is gracious” or “God’s grace.”) If Walter is just Mankind or Life, then he is somewhat contemptible while Grisilde is a fool. The allegory then develops as follows: Mankind leaves God’s House in Heaven, comes into Life, and suffers some inexplicable sadness, even during happiness, before returning to God’s House via death, where we are then reunited with all those that we have lost. A slight modification would make Grisilde an angel and Walter as Man; such an interpretation would certainly explain God’s apparent powerlessness in the face of Walter.

Still, even within this parable-like interpretation, the story possesses problems, primarily because of the Clerk’s additions, but also because of how Walter is defined. If coming from and returning to Janicula’s house equals a circle of life, and the reunion with family equates a reunion in Heaven, then what of Walter? Yes, in the *story* he and Grisilde are still “in the world,” but on an allegorical level they are in Heaven. Why should Walter and Grisilde be rewarded equally? Her devotion and sacrifice are ultimately rendered meaningless. Or perhaps Grisilde’s life with Walter is Life in its entirety, suffering under a testing God, her return to Janicula is death, and her return to Walter is heaven, where she is reunited with her lost loved ones under God/Walter. But

that interpretation has a number of problems as well: who is Janicula; who is the Sergeant?

Yet even this analogy collapses since Grisilde leaves her “fadres hous” a second time to be with Walter and (conceivably) suffer more torment. Is this reincarnation? Unlikely, in Chaucer’s time. Additionally, by having Grisilde talk of her father’s house and thus make Janicula more obviously God, Grisilde’s devotion to Walter makes no sense from a theological perspective: Grisilde’s willing submission may be emblematic of the good Christian’s submission to God’s will, but Walter in this interpretation is not God. So if the purpose is to address the danger of submitting to non-Godly things—institutions, false gods—then why does Walter reign unpunished? Medieval Christians might have said Walter would suffer some time in Purgatory, but this belief is absent from the tale. Since it is a parable at heart, we are left with a self-contained story, and the characters’ future fates will be as stated in the text—happily ever after, essentially.

If Walter represents the soulless, faithless reality of leaders in this world, and Janicula is God, then problems arise. Grisilde returns to Janicula/God and a state of poverty, of nothingness. This bodes ill for Heaven itself, for there is nothing to gain by following Grisilde’s example. Further, she is rewarded by a corrupt, Earthly leader, not God/Janicula, though readers can interpret the reward as ultimately stemming from God. But the text does not support a reading of “rewards for good, punishment for bad” regarding Walter.

The tale thus has so many contradictions that readers end up going in circles trying to understand the Clerk’s point. We are even more confounded upon considering these allusions than if we had ignored them; however, while they are inconsistent and contradictory, they do suggest some concrete interpretations. Let us consider that all the allusions are merely a case of the Clerk saying, “She’s like Christ in a way, like Job in a way,” much the way that Jesus’s

suffering is like Job's but not identical, his sacrifice like Isaac's but not identical. The allusions are therefore mere flavorings to add resonance. If we ignore them and concentrate on actual story and character development, we should get a clear picture of the Clerk's point, seeing Grisilde as nothing more than a girl in poverty, Janicula as her poor, old father, the Marquis as the land's leader, and his actions as strange at best.

After concluding his tale, the Clerk endeavors to explain its point, telling us that his story is not about marriage and that no woman should put up with such abuse (though the Clerk simultaneously idolizes Grisilde for suffering); he tells us that “For sith a womman was so pacient/Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte/Receyven al in gree that God us sent” (1149-51). But he is not as obvious as he seems. The key here is his later line, telling women to talk back. Why make that statement if the story is not about marriage? What is his point?

First of all, consider the major narrative difference between *The Canterbury Tales* and its predecessor, *The Decameron*. Boccaccio's collection uses a framing technique wherein seven women and three men escape to the countryside to avoid a plague-ridden city, each telling a story over the ensuing ten day vacation. Chaucer mimics the framing technique of multiple storytellers, but he changes locale and purpose: the stories will be told while journeying to and from the tomb of Thomas Becket, an archbishop who lost his life after coming into conflict with King Henry II's increasingly absolutist desires. The king was a man who, we can argue, overstepped his moral authority, and throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, we can see many themes being developed, one being the question of correct rule.

Let us now consider Grisilde's “fadres hous” line. If we take it as a statement of life—born naked, growing up, going into “the world,” waning, and dying—then Grisilde *lives two lives*. Not just the life of a poor person and the life of an aristocrat—no, the line suggests that

“The Clerk's Tale” is a fable and that we should see her initial exit from and return to Janicula's house as one complete life and her second exit from Janicula's house as *the beginning of a second complete life*. This is not a case of life on Earth followed by resurrection, though that interpretation is valid; rather, the two lives represent two paths humanity can take as it pursues correct rule, and Medieval theorists in Chaucer's time wrestled with theories of proper rule (Grudin 65).

So what are these two lives then?

In the first, roughly lines 344-931, Walter commands Grisilde to obey and never question and always reminds her of her adherence to this vow. He is domineering. He is paranoid, mistrustful. He promises to bring Janicula into the castle but does not. He removes and kills Grisilde's children. He colludes with distant powers for his own gain. He rejects his wife in favor of a younger model. This is a life concerned with bad rulers and poor subjects: the ruler is irrational, oppressive, vain, and defined by *taking*; the people are fearful, silent, and easily swayed. God (Janicula) is absent, and life—especially as lived by anyone other than Walter—has no meaning, leading Grudin to ponder, “given the need for unity and obedience, where does the authority of the ruler stop? How is an individual, especially an individual as good as Griselda, to assert her value?” (81). In such a life, the answer is never. Hence the Clerk's sniping during his narration of the “first life”: in the bad scenario, the people lockstep like Grisilde or waver, and the leader ignores them all. Grudin notes that Dante's controversial stance was to emphasize the community over the individual and the secular over the divine (68), but many argued against Dante's point, primarily because it devalued the human soul and also that such a state would be tyrannical (69). Chaucer emphasizes this with the lines “He gave her no answer, went his way, as if caring for nothing and yet brought the boy tenderly to Bologna.”

Chaucer could have used another term, but the text uses “it” for the boy and girl, showing a tendency toward treating all non-adult males as objects. In the first life, therefore, the people are nothing more than tools, objects for a leader's pleasure.

In the *second* life, lines 946-1138, Grisilde literally cleans house (we *see* her in action, whereas during the first life the Clerk mentions her actions only in passing); she chides Walter, and he never reminds her of her vow but merely politely asks her services; and he returns her children to her, brings Janicula into the castle for good, and tells Grisilde he sought to know “thy purpose . . . and al thy wille” (1078). This is a life of good rulers and self-actualizing subjects: the ruler listens to his people, is truly kind and considerate, and is defined by *giving*; the people are capable, confident, and informed. And this is the life that the story ends on and condones: the rulers must listen to and be considerate toward their people, giving and not greedy; the people must respect but also check their rulers. In a good system, the leader addresses concerns, and the people are informed and unafraid to voice their worries.

Even within this two-life interpretation, there is a problem regarding Chaucer's Envoy. It says,

This storie is seyde nat for that wyves sholde
 Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
 For it were inportable, though they wolde,
 But for that every wight, in his degree,
 Sholde be constant in adversitee
 As was Grisilde (1142-1147)

Chaucer is amazed at Grisilde's resiliency and finds Walter's transformation a great example of Christian values, but he wants to point out that what Walter did was villainous and the people

were lucky he changed. Additionally, the narrator associates women with the people via the use of the word *hir*; a word that, according to *The Canterbury Tales'* Glossary, functions as both a third person female singular pronoun and a third person plural possessive (512); thus, if women should “talk back” to men, then the people should therefore hold leaders accountable when the latter stray in their leadership.

However, his statement causes us to question God, not reaffirm our faith. He associates us with Grisilde and her patience, and he simultaneously associates God with Walter, a man the Clerk has repeatedly considered wrong, evil, overbearing, and cruel. Thus God himself must be considered wrong, evil, overbearing, and cruel. Additionally, since we have seen no motive and ultimately no point to Walter’s test, we deduce that God equally is without motive or purpose in all “tests” of us, making him as malicious as any devil. Note that the phrase “father's house” can also mean the church itself but not the Vatican. Within “The Clerk's Tale,” Rome conspires with Walter and does so during the corrupt first life; Rome and the Pope are therefore corrupt by association. In contrast, the simple church of the “fadres hous” is good—possibly because it is not a church but merely a place God resides.

This might seem to undermine “The Clerk's Tale,” but maybe he *wants* us to question our faith, or at least to question Christianity as it had come to be by his time.

Note that the Host commands the Clerk to be a storyteller and do so a certain way: avoid High Style and be jovial. The Clerk responds in language very similar to Grisilde's during her first life. During the tale's prologue, the Clerk tells the Host,

“ . . . I am under youre yerde;
 Ye han of us as now the governance,
 And therefore wol I do yow obeisance,

As fer as resoun axeth, hardily.” (22-25)

Later, Grisilde first tells Walter, “But as ye wole yourself, right so wol I./And heere I swere that nevere willingly,/In werk ne thought, I nyl yow disobeye” (361-363), repeats the oath in a later variant (“I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certayn,/But as yow list” (646-646)), and uses the spirit of her declaration within her final monologue of the first life (814-889). But the Clerk defies the Host, first by providing a none-too-joyous tale—despite its weepy ending—and second by narrating it in rhyme royal, a form of poetry which uses seven line stanzas in an *ababbcc* rhyme scheme, contains a grave tone, and focuses on spiritual matters (Nolan 23). Certainly the Clerk is noted for his gravity and intelligence, and such a sophisticated form of poetry would be appropriate for him; the Host, something of a buffoon, misses the Clerk's defiance and even the story's point, thus justifying the Clerk's attitude: the Host is not worth respecting, and on a larger canvas neither are Walter or the Church. In *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, Barbara Nolan points to Grisilde's habit of speaking in prayer and that Chaucer in the tale works on political and spiritual transcendence through these Grisilde prayers. Her responses reflect the concerns of the scenes—the purely political upon the marriage, for example—and always her voiced actions allow the Clerk to focus the audience toward Christ's example. Nolan references “The Man of Law's Tale” to prove her point, especially that Grisilde seems to speak to *Christ*, not to Walter. Her dour speech upon being cast out reflects Christian ideals of transcendent powerlessness (31). Since the Clerk's early statements reflect Grisilde's, and since Grisilde suffers and the Clerk defies, the Clerk therefore must see no reason to adhere to authority. It is abusive, fickle, and leaves the individual bereft.

But does he suggest defying God?

Recall what prompts the entire collection: the pilgrimage to Beckett's tomb. Whereas

Boccaccio's collection presents ten upper class storytellers seeking refuge from a plague, Chaucer's collection focuses on pilgrims journeying to the tomb of Thomas Becket, an act of devotion to see the tomb of a holy man noted for his devotion (and murder at the hands of the elite). Among them, the Clerk is a dedicated, eager, and earnest learner—starving for it, judging by his gaunt physique and skeletal horse—and a contrast to the many corrupt characters and old fools mocked in Chaucer's collection: the Reeve, the Friar, the Summoner, the Pardoner, the Prioress, Januarie (within “The Merchant's Tale”), and John and Absalon (both within “The Miller's Tale”). The only good leader, Theseus, reigned in a distant, pre-Christian past, what Petrarch termed a Golden Age. Additionally, *The Canterbury Tales* occurs in April, signifying spring, rebirth, renewal, and resurrection; likewise, the Clerk is young, signifying new blood and a new perspective to counter the established and corrupt church leaders. Therefore, the Clerk and Chaucer want us to question church elders and their connection to the aristocracy because people can take advantage of Grisilde-like suffering—especially church elders, who are in the best position to do so.

We can therefore reinterpret the two lives. In the first marriage, Janicula is God, and he is absent from the church, government, and daily lives. Walter—via his connection to and association with Rome—is the Church, with Grisilde being Christ/humanity. She leaves her father's house (heaven) to go into the world of man and the Church, which is corrupt, illogical, abusive—evil. Rome conspires with Walter during this “life” or marriage, further associating the Vatican with villainy: he asks them to *forge a papal bull* as part of his spousal paranoia, and they do so without any hesitation, suggesting that all their other religious decrees and laws are equally suspect if not hollow (735-749). Grisilde returns to her father's house (Heaven) but comes back to the world of man in the second life. This time, she brings her father, and all is right in the

world. The story criticizes abusive power and a corrupt, Godless church that allows such. Grisilde's Christlike suffering wears down the corrupt leader, and God (Janicula) is restored to people's everyday lives. God comes into the ruling house—and, by extension, the land—once the ruler is taking rightful action, for the Clerk tells us that Janicula joined the Marquis's house sometime after Grisilde returned and was reunited with her children (1133). There is no mention of Rome in the second life; God comes into lives personally, not via some distant authority. Only when God is restored and part of the ruling process can life cease to be corrupt and bring happiness for all. So yes, Janicula's "hous" is good because it is where God resides; God can reside anywhere—we just need to bring him in as Walter eventually does.

Conclusion

The core elements of “The Clerk's Tale” predate Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, showing a longstanding interest from and concern by audiences who nevertheless find the story and characters troubling. What offends modern readers is a perceived anti-woman stance and an anti-other stance, one that is despotic and autocratic. Critics themselves have wrestled with the story's difficulties in terms of character, morality, style, allegory, and more, and in recent decades Griselda defenders have become rare. Many have sometimes strained themselves to deal with the tale but seem as confused or self-contradictory as the story. Some critics fail to get at the above-mentioned implications within the tale or stop short of acknowledging that it might not work, while others see Chaucer's story questioning moral thinking. Such critics see two levels in the tale, religious considerations and a woman's place in Medieval society, and that Griselda's habit of speaking in prayer allows Chaucer to develop ideas of political and spiritual transcendence. Moreover, some see Griselda's patience as ultimately powerful and triumphant, for her passivity defeats Walter's aggression, and she is the one with all the power. Not only is Griselda superior to Walter in this analysis, but by extension women are superior to men, and therefore the tale itself is one of exalting women, not encouraging and cementing autocracy and villainy.

Walter's name is very specific, and its meaning (“ruler of the army”) defines the character in terms of war, aggression, and dictatorship—villainous for Boccaccio and Chaucer but not Petrarch. For the Clerk, Walter is a capable ruler except that he is always hunting and never ruling (the ironic suggestion being that such people should be kept busy, but busy elsewhere). Everyone trembles in his presence. Their fear partially stems from the social structure in Walter's

Saluzzo, where the Marquis has total authority and is unconcerned with notions of consensus. He displays classic symptoms of what we now term authoritarianism; he requires submission from his people, acts toward them with aggression, and promotes conventional or “traditional” notions of community. His tyranny comes in phases, the bulk of which is focused on his wife.

Though he kills no one in the story, his actions remind the modern reader of such men as Hitler and Stalin who, while they ruled, also did not personally kill anyone but were equally and irrationally paranoid. As the Nazis gained, solidified, and increased power, they oppressed the populace in general and specifically those who would oppose them. Likewise, Stalin's rule started with excessiveness similar to Walter's playboy days, and morphed into a more focused obsession. Innate paranoia subsequently emerges, something that is a part of the social fabric of totalitarian societies; Nazis and Stalinists were founded on a conspiracy against that which came before, so conspiracy and its attendant paranoia were thus their inevitable worldview.

Grisilde holds a special place in Walter's world, for she is both of the people and, via marriage, of the aristocracy; as such, she must be watched, must be examined—and through her all of Walter's people are likewise watched and examined. His motivation for selecting her is entirely for power: he wants someone so lowly and servile that she will dare not question him nor goad him into doing what he does not want to do. He acts toward his people just as he does toward his wife. The only subterfuge he can imagine is one that still depends upon death and the threat of death. He has never had to see anyone or anything as more than a mere prize to be captured, a mark to be hit, an enemy to be defeated. Walter's obsession allows him to focus all of his people on loyalty, to test Grisilde for it, and to focus the people toward Grisilde in their sympathies. This test is a way for him to beat them down and have them willingly submit to his will with further conviction, and in so doing affirm that manner of his testing: absolute freedom

on his end. Walter experiences “change” upon the family reunion, but it is abrupt, not gradual; at no point are his thoughts shown to change, to realize what a creep he is, to wonder why it is that he has had to “assaye” and “preve” his wife, to appreciate Grisilde and try to be more like her. The body of the story, if taken as a single life, is about Walter learning to rule, and rule well. And what does he learn? To distrust, investigate, and torment his people until he is certain of their loyalty. Once he has learned this lesson, he is rewarded, a rather grim outcome for readers to accept.

Grisilde thinks rarely and is defined in terms of labor, a procreating machine. There is no value to her children, no value to her life; she and others exist merely for Walter's whims, be they virtuous or vile. Because she does not contradict, she allows suffering to happen—encourages it, even. Grisilde does not just “agree to” follow Walter’s wishes, however; she says she will not disagree in thought, either. Once part of Walter's domain, she's never shown in contact with friends or family; she is emotionally isolated. She is an extension of her husband, yes; she is another man, even, but these are not good ends to achieve, certainly not through the means given. She is like the battered girl who gets involved with a series of abusive boyfriend and follows Lenore Walker’s Cycle Theory of Violence, going from tension to battering to contrition and repeating. Grisilde begins her marriage in fear and continues under fear's dark cloud. Her ruthless adherence to her husband's ill will is part duty and part an action of mistaken self-preservation. Such an abused woman ultimately loses her mind, persona, and personality, but she does so believing that adhering to her husband is the safest thing to do.

In many ways, Grisilde acts out Eve’s curse, and within the story she parrots the Church doctrine of a woman’s fate. Jewish and Christian traditions still suggest that marriage is where women belong and abusive marriages are their fault. As far back as Colossians, Paul implores

wives to adapt themselves to their husbands, to lose their identity and become, in modern parlance, a Stepford Wife. But modern readers wonder what the point is of living if a woman (or anyone) cannot express herself? If we consider that Grisilde is like a Stepford Wife, programmed by a patriarchal, Christian society and willing to serve her husband in any way desired, then consider how her actions also mimic the abused woman paradigm, we see that Grisilde is a woman who *wants* to be abused, *wants* to be nothing. How can a modern reader look upon Grisilde admirably? The Christian ethic, to shower more and more love on an oppressor in the belief that such love will change them, elevates abuse to nobility and encourages the Walters of the world to continue without fear of retaliation. Today we wonder, “Why didn't she leave?” Our typical reaction to Grisilde's dilemma is one identified as psychologically contradictory: blame the victim. But the Clerk, disgusted with the abuser and stunned by the victim, focuses on the evil of which men are capable and concludes with the sermon that women should stand up to their husbands.

Though the characters within the main story may be questionable, Chaucer portrays the narrator, the Clerk, favorably: a dedicated, eager, and earnest learner greatly concerned with what is right and wrong, what is logical, and engaging others to discover the answers to troubling questions. His attitude toward Walter begins neutral and becomes more judgmental; he sees Grisilde as a troubling ideal at best. Being a Clerk, he peppers his tale with several allusions—Abram, Job, Jesus, Eve—but looking to those for guidance to better understand the tale leads us into a confusing, contradictory maze of trying to figure which character represents what. Consequently, we are uncertain of the Clerk's storytelling purpose. The Clerk's conclusion of telling women to talk back, however, is a crucial element. Why make that statement if his story is not merely about marriage? When we consider Grisilde's “fadres hous” line, though, we

realize what the story is really about. The statement suggests that Grisilde lives two lives within the tale, which is thus a fable; we should see her initial exit from and return to Janicula's house as one complete life, and her second exit from Janicula's house as the beginning of a second complete life. The first is a life concerned with bad rulers and poor subjects: the ruler is irrational, oppressive, vain, and defined by taking; the people are fearful, silent, and easily swayed. God is absent, and life has no meaning. The second life is a life of good rulers and self-actualizing subjects: the ruler listens to his people, is truly kind and considerate, and is defined by giving; the people are capable, confident, and informed.

Some statements and ideas within the narrative may seem to cause readers to question God, but Chaucer wants us to question the Christianity of his time. The Clerk answers the Host in language very similar to Grisilde's during her first life, connecting the Host to Walter's authoritarian impulses and the Clerk himself to Grisilde's obedient first life. The Clerk then defies the somewhat buffoonish Host, seeing no reason to adhere to his (or anyone's) authority, for it is abusive, fickle, and deprives a person individuality. The Clerk is also a contrast to the many corrupt characters and old fools mocked in Chaucer's collection; this narrator wants us to question church elders and their connection to the aristocracy because people can take advantage of Grisilde-like suffering—especially church elders, who are in the best position to do so. Thus, reinterpreting the two life model, we see the first is godless and everything is corrupt. The second places god locally with no distant, corrupting church. Chaucer's version of the Grisilde story therefore criticizes abusive power and a corrupt, Godless church that allows such. Only when God is restored and part of the ruling process can life cease to be corrupt and bring happiness for all.

We begin to have a better appreciation for Chaucer's agenda, but one passage seemingly

confuses his approach, leaving us still uncertain of his and his Clerk's motivations. Chaucer, through his character, bashes the secular leadership while also attacking the church, if only distantly. His stance suggests he is thus on the commoners' side. However, the Clerk relates some surprisingly vicious lines from sober-minded Saluzzans, thus thwarting such a clean interpretation:

“O stormy peple! Unsad and evere untrewel!
 Ay undiscreet and chaungynge as a fane!
 Delitynge evere in rumbul that is newe,
 For lyk the moone ay wexe ye and wane!
 Ay ful of clappyng, deere ynogh a jane!
 Youre doom is fals, youre constane yvele preeveth;
 A ful greet fool is he that on yow leeveth.” (995-1001)

Grisilde's association with the people makes her a stand-in, and we have two views of how people and leaders are and should be: first and second life Grisilde, first and second life Walter, and first life populace. But if faithful, ideal Grisilde is of and distinct from the people, why does Chaucer not have the Clerk offer a rebuttal to the above? If the story is indeed against bad rule and church corruption, why is this statement here? It contradicts any idea that people should stand against corrupt rulers. More importantly, the diatribe also encourages despotism, for the people cannot be trusted—so much so that it is implied they are a threat to reason and rule and therefore deserve oppression.

That is not Chaucer's purpose, though; he means to criticize all levels of society: church, aristocracy, and commoners. Grudin notes how the people are inconsistent in their allegiance toward Walter, but Grisilde is not; once Grisilde proves her constancy, only then does Walter

stop, whereupon he “refers repeatedly to her 'stedfastnesse' . . . exactly the quality which Chaucer, in his *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, identified as lacking in King Richard II's state” (64-5). However, the Clerk's condemnation comes in the first life, so the Clerk disdains how the populace acts in that life only. Grisilde's steadfastness in the first life does not change Walter; in this two-life, two-rule model the Clerk does not promote such resiliency as a tool for creating change. A world like Walter's would co-opt and pervert religion, so that the one hope—Jesus, in this case—would no longer stand as a moral stop sign against abuses. Thus, no one would be inspired to do as Jesus did, and corruption would continue. The story suggests that the elite must make the change despite the ideal of a devout people who talk back; because in the second life, Walter is already a giving and caring leader and brings Grisilde and Janicula into his home freely. Grisilde's second life shows what people and leaders should do. Questions of Grisilde being an ideal thus miss the point: Old Grisilde is admirable but not an ideal; New Grisilde is admirable and ideal, as is New Walter. The story's criticism points out that people are ignorant and swayed by the unverifiable; they need to be educated, informed, critical, and skeptical. Being such makes them better and their leaders better. In a larger perspective, we see that Chaucer associates the Clerk with Grisilde via similar dialogue and upbraids his own king in *Lak of Stedfastnesse*; meanwhile Grisilde is steadfast against Walter, who is associated with foreign power. But Grisilde is not the one who should be steadfast; Walter is. Thus, Chaucer's king should likewise be as steadfast as Grisilde against foreign influence the way Walter should be.

We finish “The Clerk's Tale” nodding uncertainly at the narrator's suggestions while being equally unsure how to take the text. We are left with the characters, events, and results, and we find no easy answers—merely troubling questions. We see a story of meaningless, arbitrary abuse, yet the Envoy says the tale does not suggest wives be submissive, but that “every

wight, in his degree,/Sholde be constant in adversitee/As was Grisilde” (1145-1147). Without this tag, a thinking person would unlikely come away with the “be constant” message. Why should we be constant? Because vile or corrupt leaders will magically see the error of their ways? And what does he mean by be constant, and how is the notion of Grisilde's constancy any different than Grisilde's submission? The Clerk tells us we should not be like Griselda, that we should “talk back,” but he has also shown us Griselda being rewarded for silence and told us, without a shred of irony, that hers was a better time and she a stronger, better type of person. He defines women as inferior to St. Grisilda even as he tells them to be proactive. If the Clerk truly wanted women to fight domineering men—or the people to talk back to their leaders—his tale is a questionable one in which to say so since Grisilde is rewarded for her passive, willing torment, and Walter is not punished but esteemed. The concluding message should be “be *defiant* in adversity,” but suggesting constancy tips the two-lives interpretation back to the first life.

The problem with the tale ultimately is neither its perceived passive-aggressive misogyny nor any tacit approval of ruthless authoritarianism. The woman is set up as an ideal not just for women but for all humans and subjects; misogyny never entered into the discussion. The story's main point is anti-tyranny; all else is artifice, flourish, to add meaning and interpretation. But without a contemporary audience's awareness of the era's concerns, modern readers are left with the face value of the story's main details. The story does not develop at all in terms of character or plot; events simply happen and conclude, evading the logical end of its discourse in favor of a forced happy ending which compromises the rest of the story. Since the main point is thus incomplete and flawed, the other interpretations become confused and equally flawed, and the “two worlds, two lives” interpretation requires some wrangling to get to, and thus can be dismissed as fanciful at best. Chaucer would have been better served adapting the story as a

faerie tale.

By tale's end, our narrator finds much to admire about Grisilde and her ability to withstand continuous torment, even as modern readers reject the woman, her (in)actions, and the implications. What unsettles us about this tale? The fact that we see the evil, see that Grisilde does not stand up to it, wonder why she does not, and know that if we were in a similar situation *we would also put up with it*. Not because it is the Christian thing to do, and possibly not even because we are afraid to stand up for ourselves. More likely, we would suffer the torment merely because it is easier to accept the burden because we know what it is—harassment, abuse, whatever—and can deal with it, and hope that it may someday go away. Standing up to abuse, torture, or fear mongering may lead to worse for us or those we love. It is the very rare Jesus or Gandhi who confronts such evil, and even more rarely do such persons survive the consequences of defiance. As to the story's spousal abuse aspect? We would have the same fear-based reaction, and consequently our disgust at abused women is really disgust for ourselves. The Clerk realizes, however, that Grisilde's steadfastness, for women and people in general, is dangerous to emulate. History has repeatedly shown that slaves, women, and ostracized classes suffer indefinitely under corrupt, powerful leaders. Suffering is noble but encourages evil: it does not change violent, oppressive leaders; only violence does. The Clerk does not condemn her, though, because that would be blaming the victim. Rather, he seeks the positive in all things and sees something admirable in Grisilde's first life conviction; he condemns her being put in that situation. Grisilde's existence is an ideal that must be rejected even as it is admired, because it is dangerous for the individual and for the whole. We, as modern readers, have the knowledge of distant recent history to know why. Men like Ceaucescu, Hitler, Pinochet, Trujillo, and Stalin among others often seize and maintain great power, states such as Darfur, Rwanda, Sudan, and

Bosnia among others regularly descend into barbarity, and the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, and the Middle Passage occur nearly unchecked for years or decades at a time. However, the Clerk and Chaucer hope that a civilized example will create a civilized solution, and they argue that life will be better if all among us “talk back” to power before society devolves to violent ends.

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