

Chaucer's Clerk's Tale and the Monstrous Critics

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Over thirty years ago, James Sledd reversed the prevailing critical opinion about one of Chaucer's most perplexing tales in his essay, "The Clerk's Tale: The Monsters and the Critics." He refuted the arguments about the monstrous cruelty of Walter in testing his wife and of Griselda in surrendering her children by insisting that the tale must not be read as a realistic fiction. "Our difficulties will be lessened," Sledd writes, "if we remember that Chaucer does not invite us, but ultimately forbids us, to apply the rules of his fictional world outside his fiction" (169).

While Sledd's admonition has silenced most complaints about the monstrosity of the characters of this tale, some critics, misusing his approach, have actually created two even more terrifying monsters, the Clerk and Chaucer himself. Through a clever critical sleight of hand, they invoke the Clerk's spiritual interpretation of his tale to justify a literal understanding of the narrative. By insisting that the Clerk's Tale is simultaneously an allegory of mankind's obedience to God and an exemplum about marriage, these critics equate the husband with God, thus giving divine sanction to Walter's cruel testing of his wife. And by failing to distinguish between two distinct levels of narration, they radically restrict Griselda's significance, implicitly denying the model she presents for all Christians by emphasizing her as an ideal wife. These critics thus contend that both the Clerk and Chaucer himself endorse an ideal of marriage which gives the husband, as God's surrogate on earth, absolute and imperious authority over his wife.

Ironically, such literalism seems to be most pervasive in the critics who most vehemently assert the allegorical mode of Chaucer's poetry, for the best demonstration of this critical shell game is Bernard Huppé's interpretation of the Clerk's Tale in his *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales*. Although Huppé purportedly repudiates the realistic level of the narrative in favor of the allegorical, he ultimately concludes by privileging the letter and ignoring the spirit. Attributing the horror of the literal tale to the Clerk's deliberate strategy for "leading the reader on to a carefully prepared literary trap" (141), Hoppe insists that the tale must be read emblematically. "Obedience to a husband," he argues, "is shown to be an emblem of obedience to God; the trials visited on mankind have their purpose in God's inscrutable Providence; man must live by the only reality, the only grasp of truth he has, his Faith..."(144). However, in articulating the tale's moral, Huppé actually violates the Clerk's spiritual interpretation. He concentrates on the chaff and disregards the wheat by reducing the emblem to an exemplum, the analogy to an identity. Mistaking the sign for the signified, he discusses the meaning of the Clerk's Tale only in human

and social terms. "God's order should be reflected in the social order, the social order should be reflected in marriage--microcosm and macrocosm. Wifely obedience is the principle of rational conduct in which may be seen the larger principle of social obedience" (145). According to Huppé, Griselda is not an example for all individuals, both male and female, but only for wives; and Walter's capricious testing of her is not an inadequate analogy for God's inscrutable will but a literal manifestation of a divinely sanctioned social hierarchy. Huppé thus has it both ways: he invokes the allegorical level to deny the husband's cruelty and the literal level to affirm the wife's obedience. He concludes, then, that the horrifying realism of the tale, which he initially dismisses as the Clerk's clever strategy for educating "readers who see nothing but the surface of life, seek nothing but merely human answers, and are thus blind to the true meaning of this story of the 'Ivo that is in marriage' "(141), actually expresses this tale's essential sentence. Huppé thus transforms the psychological monsters against whom earlier critics had reacted into the agents of an even more perverse moral order. He is no longer troubled by Walter's testing of Griselda and her radical obedience, but rather regards the literal narrative as a demonstration of the correct relationship between husband and wife.

Huppé's sleight of hand becomes obvious in an essay which invokes his argument as support and makes the assumptions and implications of his interpretation explicit. In "The Clerk's Tale and Envoy, the Wife of Bath's Purgatory, and the Merchant's Tale," Michael Cherniss acknowledges the literalism of the reading he adopts from Huppé. Arguing that the Clerk imposes his spiritual interpretation on the tale only to "disarm" the hostile members of his audience, Cherniss contends that the narrative is actually a realistic exemplum about marriage rather than an allegorical emblem of mankind's relationship to God. Thus, according to Cherniss, the real moral of the story is its literal lesson. "The more perceptive of Chaucer's readers should recognize," he writes,

that marriage is an aspect of divine order and hierarchy and that, in consequence, Griselda remains an ideal of wifely obedience despite the appended moral. There is no justification for rejecting the tale as 'chaf'; it is presented as a 'true' story and the fruit of its doctrine depends upon acceptance of it as a whole (241).

Like Huppé then, Cherniss dismisses the spiritual interpretation as a deceptive ploy in the Clerk's clever strategy to outwit the Wife of Bath. Discussing the envoy, Cherniss concludes that "the Clerk's final joke on women, and it does not seem to me especially misogynous, is that husbands can win either way": if they are married to patient wives like Griselda, "they may gain domestic tranquility;" or, if they are married to shrews like Alison, "they may gain spiritual exercise through suffering" (243). Although Cherniss denies it, we may legitimately ask whether the Clerk does not actually confirm the Wife's accusations about clerical anti-feminism by painting Griselda not as a lion but as a lamb. If women can only win admiration by being as subservient to their husbands as Walter's wife is, acquiescing even in what they believe is the execution of their own children, are clerks not, after all, just a monstrously misogynous as Alison claims?

In all fairness, however, I must admit that Chaucer seems to give critics like Huppé and Cherniss some warrant for this literal reading of the narrative, for he relates the Clerk's Tale to the debate about marriage in the "Envoy de Chaucer" (E.1177-1212). Here the Clerk contrasts Griselda's patience with the tyranny of the Wife of Bath and thus implies that the literal level of the tale does have some significance. Moreover, as Severs observes in comparing the Clerk's Tale with its sources, Chaucer has consistently emphasized the discrepancies in the previous versions of

tale, making both the realistic and the allegorical elements more pronounced. On the one hand, his explicit criticism of Walter forces the audience to regard the Marquis's behavior literally and to evaluate it both psychologically and morally. On the other, though, he increases the Biblical allusions which indicate Griselda's figural relationship with other exemplars of patience and obedience like Job and Mary. This divergence in Chaucer's characterization of Walter and Griselda accounts for the fervor of the critical debate about the mode and meaning of the Clerk's Tale. The conflicting readings of this narrative can be classified according to which of these contradictory aspects of Chaucer's version the critics privilege. Those focusing on the realistic mode of Walter's characterization and the concluding envoy regard the Clerk's Tale as a literal exemplum about marriage; those emphasizing the figural mode of Griselda's characterization and the Clerk's moral perceive the tale as some form of allegory. Finally, a number of critics, recognizing both modes, attribute the discrepancy to Chaucer's unconscious ambivalence about the tale.¹ As I will argue, though, Chaucer is neither unconscious nor ambivalent about the conflicting levels of the Clerk's Tale; rather, he deliberately incorporates these two divergent modes into the tale to demonstrate the importance of careful reading and to indicate the dual role which this narrative plays in the thematic structure of the Canterbury Tales. Through the two contradictory conclusions, the Clerk's moralitas and his envoy, Chaucer actually acknowledges his bifurcation of modes in the Clerk's Tale and lays a trap for his unwary readers.

In his moral the Clerk denies the literal interpretation of the tale more vigorously than do either of Chaucer's sources. While Petrarch and the French redactor both use language indicating that the tale is allegory as well as marital exemplum, the Clerk denies the second possibility entirely. Petrarch allows for a dual interpretation in his letter to Boccaccio: "This story it has seemed good to me to weave anew, in another tongue, not so much that it might stir the matrons of our times to imitate the patience of this wife--who seems to me scarcely imitable--as that it might stir all those who read it to imitate the woman's steadfastness, at least..." (French 310-11). The anonymous French redactor's translation of Petrarch's statement offers even greater latitude for a literal reading: "This story is recited concerning the patience of this woman, not only in order to encourage the women of today to follow this patience and constancy, which hardly seem to me possible and capable of being followed, but also so that the readers and hearers follow and consider at least the constancy of this woman...."² Chaucer, in contrast, reduces Petrarch's "not so much...as" ("non tam...quam") and the French translator's "not only... but also" ("non pas tant seulement...mais aussy"), both locutions entertaining the possibility of literal interpretation, to a single, emphatic "nat."

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...(E.1142.47).

And while Petrarch and the anonymous French author discourage a literal reading only on the grounds that it would be unrealistic, Chaucer disavows it as "inportable," a word implying that the wife's suffering would be psychologically unbearable and the husband's test of her ethically intolerable (MED 9:107). The typological mode of this narrative thus culminates in the Clerk's explicit identification of God as the ultimate authority who deserves unquestioned obedience. According to the Clerk's moral, the tale is a parable (Spearing 101-3). He does not draw an

allegorical equivalence between the husband and the deity, but rather an analogical comparison between the process of obedience in the literal narrative and his moralitas. The act of voluntary submission remains identical in the realistic tale and the parabolic interpretation, but the one rendering obedience changes from a wife to every individual and the authority to whom it is due, from a husband to God. In his moral, then, the Clerk denies that his tale is a marital exemplum.

After unequivocally negating the literal interpretation of the tale, however, the Clerk unexpectedly and inconsistently reinvoles the realistic mode in his envoy. The problem of determining Chaucer's purpose for having this pilgrim contradict his own parabolic interpretation is complicated by the Clerk's claim that he no longer speaks "of earnestful matere" (E.1175) and his exaggerated irony. Is the "game" of the envoy the Clerk's tone or his message, and does Chaucer share the same purpose as the pilgrim in using irony? After warning husbands in the first stanza of the envoy that Griselda is dead and they will not find their wives her equal in patience, the Clerk addresses the "noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence" (E.1183). That the Clerk means the opposite of what his words denote is immediately apparent. First, he transvalues Griselda; she becomes an example of vice, not virtue. He advises the wives not to submit to their husbands either with humility or patience, lest they imitate Griselda. Then he exhorts them to dominate their spouses: "But sharply taak on yow the governaille" (E.1191). The purpose and object of the Clerk's irony becomes clear as he echoes the Wife of Bath's strategy that the best defense is a good offense. In criticizing the tyranny of the Wife of Bath, though, the Clerk not only explicitly contrasts her with Griselda, but also implicitly compares her with Walter.³ Although her method for gaining control in marriage is different from his, because she lacks Walter's power and her husbands, Griselda's virtue, the arch-wife is as imperious as the willful Marquis. The Clerk's envoy thus expresses the moral of the realistic mode of the narrative; it warns against the "maistrye" of either partner in marriage. Although members of both sexes, male and female, should be obedient like Griselda in their relationship with God, neither marital partner, husband nor wife, should be tyrannical like Walter and Alison in his/her relationship to a spouse. This interpretation of Chaucer's views about marriage is confirmed by the Parson, who enunciates the orthodox Christian position.

Now comth how that a man sholde here hym with his wif, and namely in two things, that is to seyn, in suffraunce and reverence, as shewed Crist when he made first womman. For he ne made hiere nat of the heved of Adam, for she sholde not clayme to greet lordshipe....Also, certes, God ne made nat worn-man of the foot of Adam, for she ne sholde nat been holden to lowe: for she kan nat paciently suffre. But God made worn-man of the ryb of Adam, for womman sholde be felawe unto man. Man sholde here hym to his wyf in feith, in trouthe, and in love—(I.924-28).

While the wife should not be domineering like Alison, neither should the husband be imperious like Walter. He must not make unreasonable demands, but respect his spouse as a partner. As parable, then, the Clerk's Tale commends Griselda; as marital exemplum, it condemns Walter.

Readers who fail to distinguish between the parabolic and realistic modes of narration in this tale enmesh themselves in contradiction. For if the envoy means that a wife is to take Griselda's example literally, being so obedient as to acquiesce to what she believes is her husband's plan to execute their children, then the Clerk is not only an inconsistent critic but also a crazed moralist. Both Peraldus (S7v) and Aquinas (2-2.104.4-5) concede that although individuals must abnegate their wills to God's, they should comply only with the legitimate commands of their superiors; the violation of God's law under the guise of obedience to a fellow creature is reprehensible. If

the Clerk endorses such sinful obedience, then Chaucer's intention must be the opposite of his: the Clerk's unreasonable demand for wifely submission confirms the allegations of the Wife of Bath against such misogynists (D.688-91) and Chaucer's irony is thus directed against his tale-teller.⁴ If, however, the Clerk's envoy is the culmination of his criticism of Walter, Chaucer's irony, like the Clerk's, is only directed against imperious spouses like the Wife of Bath. When readers mistakenly confuse these two distinct levels of narration, the Clerk's Tale becomes an interpretative morass as they try to explain how the cruel Walter can be the allegorical equivalent of God or how the Clerk could admire a realistic Griselda's monstrous cooperation in the murder of her children.

Chaucer's bifurcation of modes in the Clerk's Tale not only enables him to criticize the interpretative inconsistency of his contemporaries who, like the monstrous critics I discussed earlier, regarded the narrative as both *historia* and *fabula*, *exemplum* and *allegory*,⁵ but also allows him to use this tale to serve a dual function in the Canterbury collection. As a literal *exemplum* warning against the cruel tyranny of one partner, the Clerk's Tale belongs to the marriage group. It transvalues the Wife of Bath's Prologue by invoking sympathy for the victimized spouse and reveals that the issue being debated is sovereignty. It is just as inappropriate for a husband like Walter to inflict unnecessary suffering on his spouse as it is for a wife like Alison to do so (Kaske 54). However, as parable, the Clerk's Tale must be divorced from the literal debate about marriage. As Spearing observes, interpreting Griselda as an example for real wives misconstrues Chaucer's analogous mode of portraying her as radically as if one were to insist that the parable of the vineyard endorses a wage policy for real workers (102). Rather, as a parable of obedience to God, the Clerk's Tale belongs to a thematic group of narratives told by the four professional men--the Man of Law, the Clerk, the Physician, and the pilgrim Chaucer--whose protagonists are associated with the cardinal virtues. In keeping with the other heroines of this group--Constance, Virginia, and Prudence, whose very names identify their prevailing virtues--Griselda embodies justice, one species of which, according to medieval moralists, is obedience.⁶ And like her counterparts, she also endures suffering despite her innocence. Through the variations in the plots and tones of these four tales, Chaucer not only characterizes the different perspectives of the four professional pilgrims, but also experiments with diverse aesthetic solutions to the ethical problem of evil. As a parable, then, the Clerk's Tale must be contrasted with the performances of the Man of Law, sympathetic to Constance and confident of God's plan; of the Physician, oblivious to the serious moral dilemma he portrays and offering no Christian consolation; and finally, that of the pilgrim Chaucer, whose scholastic treatise, though commendably moral, lacks the emotional and intellectual complexity of the poet's other accomplishments and thus presents his skill as a tale-teller with typical self-deprecating irony.

And now, following the example of Chaucer, let me conclude with a moral. In the Clerk's Tale Chaucer subtly warns us about the importance of careful reading and the dangers of confusing the letter and the spirit. Like the overall structure of the Canterbury Tales described by Donald Howard, the Clerk's Tale is labyrinthine, but the only monsters it ensnares are those critics who fail to recognize Chaucer's Daedeleian complexities.

1. See Kittredge for an example of a literal interpretation; McCall, for an allegorical one; and Salter for an argument about Chaucer's ambivalence.

2. "Ceste hystoire est recite de la pacience de celle femme, non pas taut seulement que les fermes qui son aujourd'huy je esmeuve a ensuir ycelle pacience et constance, que a paine me semble ensuivable et possible, mais aussy les lisans et oyans a ensuir et considerer au mains la constance d'icelle femme..." (Severs 289).

3. Richmond also develops a comparison between Walter and the Wife of Bath (336-40), although not in the same way I do.

4. Critics who regard the Clerk as the victim of Chaucer's irony include Kaske, Frese, and Ginsberg.

5. In his letter to Boccaccio, for example, Petrarch gives evidence of his own confusion about the genre and mode of the tale; for although he claims it is an allegorical fabula, he responds to the Veronese reader's criticism that Griselda is unrealistic by justifying the plausibility of her behavior through a comparison with actual historical persons. For discussions of the inconsistencies of Chaucer's contemporaries regarding the mode of the tale, see Cherniss (237-39) and Middleton, who provides a thorough analysis of the fourteenth-century interpretive context for the tale.

6. I develop this concept of the virtues group in an article under preparation entitled, "The Virtues Group: Chaucer's Experiments with the 'Thrifty Tale.' "

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