



**HAL**  
open science

## Skirting damnation, or : the speech and speechlessness of Griselda in Chaucer's "The clerk's tale"

Maria K Greenwood

► **To cite this version:**

Maria K Greenwood. Skirting damnation, or : the speech and speechlessness of Griselda in Chaucer's "The clerk's tale". Colette Stévanovitch; Henry Daniels. L'affect et le jugement : mélanges offerts à Michel Morel à l'occasion de son départ à la retraite, 1 (6), Association des médiévistes anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur, pp.233-256, 2005, GRENDEL, 2-901198-39-2. hal-04674777

**HAL Id: hal-04674777**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04674777v1>**

Submitted on 21 Aug 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Maria Katarzyna Greenwood  
Université de Paris VII

## Skirting Damnation, or:

### The speech and speechlessness of Griselda

#### in Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale"

"The Clerk's Tale", Chaucer's dramatic re-telling of the age-old story of patient Griselda, is nothing if not disconcerting, but when compared to its source texts, Petrarch's Latin translation<sup>1</sup> of Boccaccio's Italian<sup>2</sup> and an anonymous French translation of Petrarch,<sup>3</sup> it is seen to follow them surprisingly closely.<sup>4</sup> One is led to ask how and

---

<sup>1</sup> "Francis Petrarch: from *A Legend of Wifely Obedience and Faith*", in Robert P. Miller (ed.), *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, 140-152.

<sup>2</sup> Boccaccio concludes *The Decameron* with this tale. See N. S. Thompson, "The Three Griseldas", in *Chaucer, Boccaccio and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of the Decameron and The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 279-392.

<sup>3</sup> Marion Wynne-Davies (ed.), *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Tales of the Clerk and the Wife of Bath*, London & New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> For recapitulations of critical views on "The Clerk's Tale", see Peggy Knapp, "Griselda and the Patient Clerk", *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, New York & London: Routledge, 1990, 129-140; Lesley Johnson, "Reincarnations of Griselda: Contexts for "The Clerk's Tale", in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (eds.), *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and all her Sect*, London & New York: Routledge, 1994, 195-220. Also Charlotte Morse, "Critical Approaches to 'The Clerk's Tale'", in C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (eds.), *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990, 72-83, as well as "The Exemplary Griselda", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 7 (1985), 51-86; Anne Middleton, "The Clerk and his Tale: Some Literary Contexts", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 2 (1980), 121-150.

why Chaucer chooses to enhance this disconcerting effect by deviating so slightly but so tellingly from the Italians and particularly from Petrarch,<sup>5</sup> expanding the story and developing in particular the role of Griselda. For while Chaucer brings the story back from Petrarch's refined international Latin to the English vernacular and thus "popularises" it again, coming closer in some ways to the realism of Boccaccio,<sup>6</sup> he "ennobles" the figure of Griselda herself further than Petrarch, and makes of her a being exceptional not only by her acts but also by her words, her extraordinary eloquence. Although critics of recent decades for the most part insist on Griselda's silences rather than on her speeches, focussing (especially from a feminist perspective) on what Griselda *does not say* ie. no complaints or remonstrances, rather than on what she *does say* ie. promising wholehearted acceptance of the strictest conditions of obedience,<sup>7</sup> in Chaucer's version Griselda's speech as well as her speechlessness are clearly the very focus of the tale. This invites interpretations so complex that critics tend to read Griselda either as pure allegory, in the positive or negative sense, as "a figure of the divinity",<sup>8</sup> or as "a cardboard figure",<sup>9</sup> or alternatively, in a more literal, realistic reading, as a woman so exceptional that, had she really lived, she would either have been canonized as a saint or investigated as bordering on the

<sup>5</sup> See David Wallace, "'When She Translated Was', A Chaucerian Critique of the Petrarchan Academy", in Lee Patterson (ed.), *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1990, 156-215.

<sup>6</sup> N. S. Thompson, "The Three Griseldas", p. 287.

<sup>7</sup> See Elizabeth Tuttle Hansen, "The Powers of Silence: The Case of the Clerk's Griselda", in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992, 188-207. See also Paul Strohm's discussion of "eternal" oaths versus "time-bound" contracts, in Paul Strohm, "Time and the Social Implications of Narrative Form", in *Social Chaucer*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 110-143.

<sup>8</sup> See Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer. Feminist Readings*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, pp. 159-61.

<sup>9</sup> Kathryn L. McKinley, "The Clerk's Tale: Hagiography and the Problem of Lay Sanctity", *Chaucer Review*, 33 (1998), 90-111.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

insane. For my part, however, I will try to synthesise these two extremes and show how Griselda herself can be read as a real person for whom the poet makes a bid not just for admiration or pity but for an identification which leads to the probing of the furthest recesses of moral conscience.

For my analysis I will refer, as in previous articles,<sup>10</sup> to the principles of bakhtinian dialogism and to the sort of imaginative dramatisation of the narrative that these principles invite, allow and justify, i.e. reading the tale as the deliberately staged "dialogic" production of a teller, the Clerk, with an audience of fellow pilgrims, and of a Narrator (the fictional Chaucer) with an audience of us, his readers, and focussing on the central character as on an actor / actress on-stage, whose inner life the respective audiences are invited to enter and share. From a more purely textual point of view, my starting point will be a comparison of Petrarch's and Chaucer's texts, which I will examine with reference to their literary ancestor, Dante, and his four ways of interpreting: the *literal*, the *allegorical*, the *moral* and the *spiritual*. Dante admitted adapting the methods of biblical exegesis to purely poetic and literary texts but, perhaps surprisingly, finally stated that the most important of all interpretations must be acknowledged as that closest to the letter of the text, i.e. the literal interpretation.<sup>11</sup> I will attempt therefore, in line with some recent studies (particularly by

---

<sup>10</sup> See author's previous articles, in particular "Chaucer's Clerk in the *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*", *Bulletin des Anglicistes Médiévistes* : actes du congrès S.A.E.S. à l'Université de Perpignan 1993, 45 (1994), 847-869; and "What He Heard and What He Saw: past tenses and characterization in *The General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales*", in Colette Stévanovitch (ed.), *L'Articulation langue-littérature dans les textes médiévaux anglais II*, Publications de l'AMAES, Collection GRENDEL n° 3, Nancy, 1999, 143-162.

<sup>11</sup> In his *Convivio*, Dante explains and gives examples for each one of the four, but in his *Letter to Can Grande*, reduces them to two, the literal and the allegorical. See "Dante Alighieri: from the *Convivio* and the *Letter to Can Grande*", Robert P. Miller (ed.), *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, 77-71.

women scholars),<sup>12</sup> to align the metaphorical interpretations on the literal, and to attempt to discover what such a literal interpretation of "The Clerk's Tale" could possibly and plausibly be.

It will be useful at the outset to see how throughout the narrative Griselda's speech and speechlessness can be seen to work on the four levels of interpretation. On the *literal level*, what she says and does not say both constitutes and explains her behaviour while leaving readers / listeners free to respond (or not to respond) emotionally and morally. Readers / listeners can accept the tale as literally true or resist it as a fabrication which never did or could actually happen; they can side with Griselda or shy away from her according to their own individual sympathies, while focussing on her, as in all stories of ordeals, as the central figure under trial. By developing the tale on the explicit literal level, Chaucer presents readers / listeners with a more difficult and complex version of a tale which perhaps they already knew, while his Clerk-narrator explicitly solicits and gets a variety of reactions from his "on-stage" pilgrim audience (the Host, the Merchant).<sup>13</sup> Chaucer thus complicates the story that he found in his sources and so hands on to followers themes of unending debate.<sup>14</sup>

Griselda's speech and speechlessness allow for the *allegorical interpretation* in that they attest her patience in every conceivable circumstance. If Griselda is taken to *be* patience, all her actions, speeches and silences must logically be consistent with the very

---

<sup>12</sup> See Kristine Gilmartin, "Array in *The Clerk's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 13 (1979), 234-246; Valerie Edern, "Sacred and Secular in *The Clerk's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 26 (1991), 369-76; Dolores Warwick Frece, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics Reconsidered", *Chaucer Review*, 8 (1973-4), 133-146.

<sup>13</sup> Gilmartin writes "Chaucer... was stimulated to explore the problem of Walter and Griselda's marriage more seriously and realistically than his sources...", "Array in *The Clerk's Tale*", p. 244.

<sup>14</sup> Lesley Johnson gives a succinct account of the latter fortunes of the Griselda story down to the late twentieth century. See "Reincarnations of Griselda", pp. 197-98.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

concept of the virtue. Here the reader / listener is prompted to make the correct allegorical interpretation by the Clerk-narrator's frequently expressed admiration for Griselda's manifest virtue. Chaucer increases the number of the Clerk-narrator's calls to admiration of and pity for Griselda, and has him appear to be (at least throughout the story proper) relaying reverently<sup>15</sup> the tale as told to him by Petrarch as well as the allegorical interpretation that Petrarch put upon it.

The *moral interpretation* seems to follow the approved allegorical interpretation closely in setting up Griselda as a moral model and focussing on her moments of speech and speechlessness as demonstrations of Free Will. Griselda has to prove that she not only conforms to the ideal of wifely patience then current, but above all that she is doing so of her own choice and not under compulsion. Here readers / listeners are not just prompted, but exhorted by the Clerk-narrator to admire Griselda's conscientious self-control. In the end, however, Chaucer has his Clerk-narrator pronounce this moral model to be impossible or 'unbearable' (the exact meaning of the textual 'inportable' has drawn critical debate), an ideal beyond the power of women in general and of wives in particular to attain. The moral interpretation ends by being set on its head and sarcastically preached *against* in the parodic *Envoy* (with the Clerk-narrator openly provoking the Wife of Bath). Thus the moral lessons that Petrarch draws from his version are pushed to such extremes that they are effectively subverted by the Clerk-narrator who ends with a sort of parody of Petrarch.

Finally, Griselda's speech and speechlessness are pointed out throughout the tale as essential to the *spiritual* or *anagogical* interpretation. The Clerk-narrator, again apparently reverently following Petrarch, builds up this most mystical interpretation by his allusions to biblical analogies for Griselda's patience (she is as patient as Job, as Christ himself, as every Christian should be in his relation

---

<sup>15</sup> Paul Strohm notes how the Clerk is "elaborately deferential to authority", *Social Chaucer*, p. 159.

to God).<sup>16</sup> But because the Clerk's moral interpretation is finally destabilised by parody and by the down-to-earth controversy thus introduced, "Where can one find a real-life Griselda?", the spiritual interpretation loses coherence and becomes well-nigh impossible to make, or rather *to conclude*. For Griselda can be thought to be an impossible model not only in real-life but also in spiritual terms, since in Chaucer's handling her patience is brought to such a pitch of rational self-control and rejection of the instincts, that it begins to overstep the bounds not just of the credible but of the morally approvable and the spiritually viable. On a truly spiritual level the reader / listener of Chaucer's version is led to wonder if Griselda's patience under trial is truly virtuous i.e. leading her soul to ever greater perfection or, on the contrary, veering inexorably towards the corruption of the spirit and towards, in Christian terms, sin and damnation.

In Petrarch's version it is relatively easy to read Griselda as a flat character, the typically artificial figure of allegory which simply illustrates the idea of virtue by taking on the lineaments of a humble wife. While Petrarch's Grisildis<sup>17</sup> is thus a figure of the human, she remains resolutely Other and is seen from the outside in a gendered and socially coded way.<sup>18</sup> Although invited to admire her virtue and pity her sufferings up to a point, we are not inexorably pulled into her inner life nor invited to consider it as a place of moral effort, struggle and conflict. In a word, readers / listeners are allowed *not* to identify with Petrarch's Grisildis. A noteworthy detail, which Chaucer omits

<sup>16</sup> Further textual echoes align Griselda with other biblical figures not specifically mentioned by name, such as Rachel, Rebecca, the Virgin Mary or, in the wholly allegorical reading, God Himself. See Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 190; and Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer. Feminist Readings*, pp. 158-9.

<sup>17</sup> Both Petrarch and Chaucer use both forms of the name, Grisildis and Griselda, but the first is more frequent in Petrarch while the second is preferred by Chaucer.

<sup>18</sup> On Petrarch's 'class bias' see David Wallace, "'When She Translated Was'", p. 158; and Kathryn L. McKinley, *The Clerk's Tale: Hagiography and the Problem of Lay Sanctity*, p. 99.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

and which characterizes Petrarch's Grisildis as somebody fundamentally alien to readers / listeners, is the moment when she, the older wife, kneels "after the manner of servants"<sup>19</sup> before her husband's new, younger bride. Since readers / listeners know at this point that Grisildis is unwittingly making a mistake of social etiquette by kneeling to her own daughter, the patient Griselda is made, not perhaps wholly consciously on the author's part, to look slightly silly on a social level, the peasant woman that she basically is making a *faux-pas* before the assembled company, so that the implied readers of Petrarch's knowingly aristocratic version of the tale are invited to join in the secret snickering.<sup>20</sup> By this little incident, Petrarch's Grisildis is distanced from readers / listeners, since her virtuous obedience to her husband's will is contaminated with the unavoidable subserviance of the trained inferior. It is this incident which, by its touch of realism, paradoxically both supports and undermines Petrarch's avowed allegorical interpretation of the original story and permits the dichotomous reactions that eventually puzzled the author.<sup>21</sup>

Since Chaucer's Griselda is presented as a more elevated character than Petrarch's, one who, despite her birth, has the perfect taste and intuition of a natural superior, such slips of decorum as kneeling to her own daughter are not for her. When she does kneel in Chaucer's version, she does so only twice and only to her husband.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Petrarch's own words; see Robert P. Miller (ed.), *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> On the homogeneity of Petrarch's implied elitist audience see Caroline Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, p. 149.

<sup>21</sup> Failing to go deeply into Griselda's psychology, Petrarch is then surprised at the contrasted reactions of readers of his Latin version: one reader burst into tears over Griselda, while another read without the flicker of an eyelid because, as he later explained, he did not believe the story was true. See Robert P. Miller (ed.), *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, p. 139.

<sup>22</sup> When she first meets the marquis and when she returns to him on his bidding. See Larry D. Benson, general editor, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 1990, ll. 292 and 951. All further text references are to this edition.



For Chaucer's Griselda's speech and speechlessness are always consciously dignified. Even when she has actually been struck dumb by the threatening henchman come to take her child, she finally answers his demands 'mekely', never losing face and even making her firm (and astounding) acceptance of her husband's commands serve as a lesson in duty to the henchman himself. As for her responses to Walter's cruel words of testing,<sup>23</sup> Chaucer's Griselda addresses him as an equal and negotiates so well that she invariably gains the moral upper hand, giving him good advice about virtue both by example and precept, as well as wresting concessions from him (for instance the right to keep her shift when she is sent away). In her speeches to her husband Griselda indeed triumphs,<sup>24</sup> since her apparent torturer-interrogator-judge gets from her exactly what he secretly desires to hear, and has to leave her hurriedly so as to gloat and weep in private.<sup>25</sup> Yet while it is not in Chaucer, as in Petrarch, any slight inaptitude to fulfil her social role that interferes with the allegorical reading of her personage, what really stops Chaucer's Griselda being read as pure allegory is her fainting when she at last realises that her

---

<sup>23</sup> Paul Strohm sums up many critical views when he suggests that "doubts about Walter" prevent Griselda's being seen as an "ideal Christian figure". See Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, pp. 160-61.

<sup>24</sup> The word "triumph" is used by critics who concentrate on the battle of wits opposing the husband and wife, but who have little to say about the mother's relation to her children. See for instance, Ian Bishop, *The Narrative Art of the Canterbury Tales: A Critical Study of the Major Poems*, London and Melbourne: Dent, 1987, p. 34; also Alfred L. Kellogg, *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972, p. 311; and Barbara Nolan, "Chaucer's Tales of Transcendence: Rhyme Royal and Christian Prayer in *The Canterbury Tales*", in C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (eds.), *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990, 21-37.

<sup>25</sup> The element of psychological game-playing in the verbal jousts of Walter and Griselda has been well discerned by Elizabeth Tuttle Hansen, "The Powers of Silence / The Case of the Clerk's Griselda", in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, Berkeley Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992, 188-207.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

children have been spared from death. This fainting fit, original to Chaucer, is crucial and has given rise to some notable critical controversy particularly as to how far the fainting foregrounds Griselda's body. It is precisely this point which I wish to explore.

In his discussion of Chaucer's use of the word 'sad' in relation to Griselda, Derek Brewer expresses a common reaction of those who struggle to interpret allegorically despite the limits that they themselves feel the author has set on this reading in his text.<sup>26</sup> He writes: "Any naturalistic reading, concerned merely with probability of event, or of motive in her husband Walter, or with his and Griselda's own character and motives as primary and generative of action, like a novel, turns the story upside down, and not only makes Walter an incredibly monstrous mixture, but Griselda herself a contemptible coward who will not protect her poor innocent children."<sup>27</sup> But although Brewer is here fighting for the allegorical reading and banishing the literal, he is in fact giving a perfectly valid literal interpretation that emerges logically from the text and which I think it is necessary to deal with. For of course readers / listeners do for the most part instinctively disapprove of Walter's cruelty to Griselda and Griselda's cruelty to her children and to herself, but if she is read as disembodied allegory these reactions neither matter nor hurt. I am convinced, however, that Chaucer's text itself, with the stress put on Griselda's *literal* speechlessness in the fainting fits, forces a realistic reading<sup>28</sup> and prolonged reflection on Griselda's psychology and profound motivation.

---

<sup>26</sup> Brewer points out that of the 31 times that the word 'sad' (meaning 'steadfast', rather than 'grieving') is used in Chaucer's works, almost one third of the uses occur in "The Clerk's Tale". See Derek Brewer, *Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> Derek Brewer, *Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller*, p. 65.

<sup>28</sup> Dolores Warwick Frece sees the allegorical interpretation as untenable at the moment when Griselda compares love old and new and "comes close to complaint", "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics Reconsidered", p. 141.

One can compare Chaucer's and Petrarch's respective versions of Griselda's reunion with her children, just after hearing that her husband's having them killed had been a pretence. Petrarch writes:

"Almost out of her wits for joy and beside herself with maternal love, on hearing these words, Grisildis rushed into her children's arms, shedding the most joyous tears. She wearied them with kisses and bedewed them with her loving tears. And straightway the ladies gathered about her with alacrity and affection; and when her vile apparel had been stripped off her, they clothed her in her accustomed garments and adorned her."<sup>29</sup>

And this is Chaucer's version:

"Whan she this herde, *aswowne* doun she falleth  
 For *piteous* joye, and after her *swownynge*  
 She bothe hire children to hire calleth,  
 And in hire armes, *pitously* wepynge,  
 Embraceth hem, and tendrely kissynge  
 Ful lyk a mooder, with here salte teeres  
 She bathed bothe hire visage and hire heeres." (ll. 1075-1085)  
 (my emphasis)

For Petrarch, Griselda's joy and relief are as uncomplicated as is her social reintegration in the role of the marquis's wife, but for Chaucer, Griselda's emotion is above all 'piteous', pitiful and pathetic, her repeated faints alarming. Her social re-integration is neither immediate nor unproblematic and the social confusion surrounding it is made to affect readers / listeners in that the swoons are so described that it is difficult to work out the number of times that Griselda loses and regains consciousness and how exactly her moments of speech and speechlessness alternate. The words "swooning" and "piteous" are repeated four times in the passage in various lexical forms and used together (the third time) in the Clerk-narrator's clear call to his audience to respond compassionately:

O what a *piteous* thyng it was to see  
 Hir *swownyng*, and hire humble voys to heere!" (ll. 1088-1090)  
 (my emphasis)

---

<sup>29</sup> Robert P. Miller (ed.), *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds*, p. 151.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

The fainting fits, and in particular the final one, add greatly to Griselda's characterization and allow a more direct and complex response to her than has yet been possible. For Chaucer's Griselda at this point can no longer be read as a wholly allegorical embodiment of virtue in the abstract, or a sort of purely figurative, unincorporated God / Christ-figure,<sup>30</sup> but becomes:

1) a woman with a body, submitting to the weakness of the flesh in physical and no longer in moral terms, who loses control over her mind simultaneously with that over her body. She becomes an ordinary person like everybody else, entirely limited by the physical.<sup>31</sup>

2) Her soul, her inner life, is revealed not as a serene place of almost routine obedience to a will that easily suppresses spontaneous feeling and instinct, but as a place of conflict, struggle and suffering. For once we see Griselda acting *against* her conscious will.

3) For the first time in the story, feeling and instinct take over from reason and will-power. Ironically enough, it is the feelings of joy and relief that Griselda cannot deal with, while she has always had the stamina to dominate and suppress revolt and resentment, sorrow or dread.

4) For the first time too, her private personal desires overcome her publicly stated claims. In her final swoon, when she clings to her children so intensely that the attendants fear she will do them bodily harm and tear them away from her, her instinctive clinging belies her previous words of not actually feeling any sense of possession towards her children or any normal sense of happiness in her attachment to them. Thus, she appears inconsistent and her words in contradiction with her acts.

---

<sup>30</sup> For the most convincing of 'purely allegorical readings' see Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer. Feminist Readings*, pp. 146-64; and Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons*, London: Macmillan, 1990, pp. 140-149.

<sup>31</sup> In one of the most persuasive 'literal readings', Lesley Johnson, "Reincarnations of Griselda", points out how Griselda's body is emphasized throughout *The Clerk's Tale*.

5) Her faint deprives her of her status as a normal social being, it is embarrassing, demeaning, she does in fact lose countenance.<sup>32</sup> It makes her appear ugly, vulnerable, weak, no longer the woman who by her exceptional courage and equilibrium has been scoring points in her husband's cruel spiritual striptease. Although Griselda has conveyed a sense of heroic pathos by standing up to her trials, now, by falling down in a swoon, the pathos and pity become tinged faintly with scorn, the scarcely admitted scorn of the healthy for the sick, for the invalid, for the physically inferior. Griselda now appears as a very ordinary woman, ordinary mother, and above all, ordinary mortal.

6) Most importantly, her faint strikes her dumb. She is rendered speechless on the most basic physiological level. She can no longer determinedly sacrifice everything to defending her moral stature and to proving her heroic power to keep her word and control all her acts and even thoughts. From being an exceptional emblem of virtue (conceived as a transcendent 'manliness'), Chaucer's Griselda becomes an emblem of ordinary human weakness and disconcerting 'typically female' failings.

This more in-depth characterization produced by the fainting fits which asserts Griselda as a believable human being and not "a cardboard figure",<sup>33</sup> underlines the controversial theme of appearances versus reality which has been running through the entire tale. How fundamental is Griselda's virtue, how truly ethical? If she is a human being and not just an allegorical figure, where does her extraordinary strength to bear her trials really, psychologically speaking, come from? After the fainting fits we can no longer wonder, as did Walter earlier, whether her love for her children was genuine, but are forced to conclude, again with Walter, that this genuine love was sacrificed to an even greater love for her husband. It also seems clear that the latter love was directed at impressing and pleasing her husband with

---

<sup>32</sup> *Riverside Chaucer*, I. 1108.

<sup>33</sup> See Kathryn L. McKinley, "*The Clerk's Tale*: Hagiography and the Problem of Lay Sanctity", p. 100.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

what appeared virtuous to *him*, but not necessarily to *her*. When considered in the light of Griselda's own conscience, did she really see her pursuit of patience as spiritually viable or only spectacular, and while she could assume the moral right to assure her husband that she was ready to die for him if he desired it,<sup>34</sup> could she really assume the moral right to allow him to kill her children without serious qualms or doubts in the depths of her conscience?

Her fainting fits prove that Griselda has had to be on all other occasions in a sense deceptive about her feelings both to others and to herself. It is not exactly that she told a lie when she stated that her children brought her only pain and renounced her natural claims on them (she said this only after her children had been taken away from her and her words were addressed to her husband and not to her children), but she formulated a truth so painful that her words needed a chillingly heart-wrenching strength of character to produce.

"I have noht had no part of children tweyne  
But first siknesse, and after, wo and peyne." (ll. 645-651)

From the point of view of her rational mind, Griselda was speaking the whole truth as she consciously, and terribly saw it, but after the fainting fit, it is clear that this willed rational truth thus stated contradicted the factual, *experienced* truth of her irrational love for her children, generally assumed to be ethical and therefore not in need of entire suppression in a mother. Yet since Griselda had promised never to judge her husband in any way and saw patient obedience as her first duty, she chose to suppress her instinctive love or at least to eradicate it from her mind if not her heart. Once they enter her inner life in imagination,<sup>35</sup> readers / listeners are led to explore and even share this

---

<sup>34</sup> *Riverside Chaucer*, l. 364, ll. 664-6.

<sup>35</sup> Peggy Knapp in her paper at the New Chaucer Society's Twelfth Biennial Congress in July, 2000, London, "Correctness, Aesthetic Pleasure and Chaucerian Texts" made a plea for the renewed appreciation of imagination and imaginative reading as against the pursuit of an inflexibly historicist approach. She has permitted this reference with the proviso that her published article has not yet appeared in definitive form.

anguish of Griselda's *pretending* not to be feeling pain at the loss of her children, and they realize that she has determinedly been *hiding* her true feelings for her children not just from her husband, but also from us, the readers / listeners and, most importantly, from herself. All her powers of resistance to the mental torture imposed on her have been aligned to suppress the fact that Walter has really, as she thinks, committed a crime, and that, even worse for the caring mother that she is revealed to be, she has effectively been an accomplice to the murder. By literally giving up her will to her husband, Griselda has apparently given up her separate independent conscience and, very nearly, her eternal soul. But any spiritual prompting to stating, putting into words and actually allowing herself feelings of guilt and remorse have been displaced on to her stated fears about burial. Although to an observer she can be thought to have put her husband in the place of God, Griselda cannot see the way of formulating this sin of idolatry to herself. Her speeches conform so closely to the current ideas of a wife's duty and to her own self-image as someone that keeps her word, that she exerts all her moral strength to remaining wilfully and deliberately blind to her offense before the Lord God that she continues to pray to. However, in order to maintain this apparently peaceful conscience, she has to keep up the battle with her own deeper instincts none the less. Thus Chaucer's Griselda offers readers not a conveniently impossible spiritual model (which precludes sharing Griselda's inner conflict), but a harrowingly possible model of protracted and painful suppression of one's vital emotional life and own moral conscience for what is accepted by the mind and spirit as a 'higher' ideological principle.

The fainting fits passage is worth examining further on a linguistic level, for just as Griselda reveals much by her literal speechlessness, her bouts of speaking in short, deeply deliberate speeches whenever she regains consciousness are particularly significant in that through them she has to negotiate between the two contradictory loves that have been racking her soul. After the opening swoon, Griselda's first words to her husband are not only a

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

manifestation of outstanding patience but also in keeping with quite ordinary reactions of relief at finding her children alive — she gives thanks. But unlike the ordinary mother, it is to her husband and not to God that she addresses these thanks for his goodness in sparing them, and she puts her mortal husband first before even mentioning a higher power. Addressing Walter, Griselda says:

‘Grammercy, lord, *God thanke it yow,*’ quod she  
 ‘That ye han saved me my children deere!’ (ll. 1086-1089)  
 (my emphasis)

Her husband comes first, and God only second, called upon in this instance to thank and bless Walter and reward him for his mercy. Next, addressing her children, she expresses her relief at their safe-keeping in more normal terms, by the grace of God (who this time comes first) and by the tenderness of their "benygne fader" (who this time comes second). True to her oath, or her pose, or her pretence, of never having actually revolted against what she had thought to be the children's murder, Griselda now says to them:

‘O tendre, o deere, o yonge children myne!  
 Youre woful mooder *wende steadfastly*  
 That cruel houndes or som foul vermyne  
 Hadde eaten yow, but God of his mercy  
 And your benygne fader tenderly  
 Hath doon yow kep.’ (ll.1093-1098) (my emphasis)

Griselda speaks throughout the incident as if the father had that moment rescued his children from some terrible plight like being lost in the woods and a prey to wild animals, while in fact she has had to accept living with and deliberately occluding what she must have understood in her conscience to be a murder committed by this father.

— and in that stounde  
 Al sodeynly she *swapte adoun* to grounde. (ll 1098-1099)  
 (my emphasis)

We are forced to recognise that for the twelve years of their absence, Griselda, tortured by worry about her children, has displaced this worry about the fact of their death to worry about the means of their burial. Thus the fear and resentment that she could / should have felt against their killer father had been displaced to fear and



resentment of the wild animals that might have devoured their dead bodies. Her decision to refuse herself any right to revolt against what she was made to understand was a sentence of death meant that Griselda has had to control her inner thoughts as well as her outward appearance with unflinching determination.

It is very much in the nature of Chaucerian irony that he uses two words whose meaning carries loaded connotations to describe Griselda's long nourished, secret worries, she "wende steadfastly" ie. never stopped supposing that her children had been killed and that their corpses may have been ravaged all the time that she was showing loyalty to her husband by giving him the impression of cheerfulness. Furthermore the irony of "wende steadfastly" is all the more bitter when set beside the stress put on the virtue of constancy or *steadfastness* throughout the tale of Griselda. Here she is telling the children the deep and hidden truth, namely that she has thought about them constantly, deliberately, *steadfastly*, for the last twelve years and effectively mourned their death while giving the outward impression of perfect love and obedience to their apparently unnatural, monstrous father, whom she nevertheless continues to endow with her entire and perfect love.

When Griselda is undergoing her first trial of losing her daughter, the word "wende" is used, in a rare moment of deliberate internal focalisation,<sup>36</sup> to describe her fearful awareness that the henchman intends to kill the child:

---

<sup>36</sup> Chaucer follows Petrarch in the greater part of his uses of internal focalisation for Griselda but leads us away rather than into a confident understanding of her psyche. Moments which refer directly to her inner life can be listed as: 1) her youthful curiosity to see the marquis's bride "She thoughte" (l. 281); 2) her fearful thoughts for her daughter "wende" (l. 344); 3) her grief at hearing that she is to be supplanted "hir herte ... ful wo" (l. 753) (although the "I deem" dilutes the effect of internal focalisation and distances Griselda); 4) her lack of "swollen thought" (l. 950) when she is summoned back by her husband; 5) her lack of embarrassment at her poor clothes "nought ... abayst" (l. 1011); 6) her inability to hear Walter's words when he reveals the truth "herde nat" (l. 1059); 7) her embarrassment when rising from her trance "abaysed" (l. 1108).

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

Allas! Hire daughter that she loved so,  
 She *wende* he wolde han slawen it right tho. (ll. 543-44)  
 (my emphasis)

Significantly this incursion into Griselda's thoughts is effected at a moment when she is struck speechless with the force of her feelings, but is forced nonetheless to control her purely bodily reactions, she "neither weep ne syked" (l. 545). The next stanza begins with the indication that her involuntary and voluntary speechlessness has lasted for an appreciable length of time:

But *atte laste* to speken she bigan,  
 And *mekely* she to the sergeant preyed,  
 So as he was a worthy gentil man,  
 That she moste kisse hire child er that it deyde. (ll. 547-550)  
 (my emphasis)

Griselda recovers her outward poise so successfully in this scene that any twinges of doubt about the rightness of her suppressing her fears for her child's welfare are hidden. She acts as if it were God himself who in an Abraham and Isaac scenario had commanded her child to be put to death, so that she speaks with quiet authority to the henchman, kisses the child piously, commends its soul to God and, assimilating the infant to Christ, tells her daughter that she must die for her mother's sake:

"Thy soule, lytel child, I hym betake,  
 For this night shaltow *dyen for my sake*." (ll. 559-560) (my emphasis)

Like "wende steadfastly", "dyen for my sake", an insertion original to Chaucer, is heavy with connotations which go far beyond the text itself. For the words "dyen for my sake" are verbatim quotation from the language of Christian penance when penitents are urged, in their own examination of conscience, to reflect that Christ died for their sins. Later, when Walter at last reveals that his testing had been pretence, he swears "by God, that for us deyde" (l. 1062) that he is telling the truth about his good intentions, thus recalling by his words the central dogma of Christianity, the belief in Christ's sacrifice of his own life for Man's salvation.

The ambiguity of this heavily loaded "dye for my sake" can become on reflection awesomely clear. In their first, acceptable and virtuous meaning, the words express Griselda's apparent regret that her own lowly status has obliged their father to eliminate his children and that through *her* fault they must die; in their second, occluded and fundamentally vicious meaning, the words convey that Griselda is actually saying that *she herself* has decided that her daughter must die in order to allow her to pass the patience test in triumph. The twenty-first century reader / listener<sup>37</sup> can here think of Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in which the woman does not deny her maternal instinct, but, "tempted by goodness", goes along with her maternal instinct *against* her rational will, and so-called better judgement, to save another woman's child. And the modern reader can think also of those rare individuals, in both World Wars, who risked their own lives irrationally but instinctively to save the lives of children not their own, persecuted according to Nazi or other racist rationalizations.

Chaucer himself introduces the problematic of maternal feelings clashing with egoistic calculating reason, of selflessness as against self-love, by having the Host introduce the name of Solomon very early on in "The Clerk's Prologue". This name, emblematic of wisdom though it be, is introduced casually in a sort of aside — when the Host calls upon the Clerk to speak:

But Solomon saith "every thing hath time" (l. 6)

and can be taken simply as the Host showing off his knowledge of famous Biblical figures for the sake of gaining the upper hand over the Clerk whom he thus puts "under his yard". The Host does not apparently mention the name as an allusion to the two points most widely known about this biblical figure, namely his wisdom and the proof he gave of it in the incident known as the Judgement of

---

<sup>37</sup> While avoiding anachronistic misconceptions, Wolfgang Iser encourages the modern reader to call upon his / her latter-day knowledge and experience when probing the meaning of any text, albeit medieval. See Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

Solomon (1Kings 3: 16-28), when the king decreed that of two women, each claiming to be the mother of one child, the one who preferred to give up her claim rather than see the child killed should be recognized as the true mother. But by making the Host mention the name of Solomon, Chaucer in fact adds it to the quotation the Host is making from Ecclesiastes (3: 1) where it is absent.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore the seemingly platitudinous quotation "everything have time" is enriched associatively by reminiscences of the literary context which, memorable and moving as poetry, insists on the repetitiveness of man's destiny in the world where "There is no new thing under the sun" (Ecc. 3 : 9). So what is merely thoughtless and pretentious name-dropping by the Host is then seized on and re-integrated into his tale by the clever Clerk who elaborates on the main theme introduced of "nothing new" by recounting in the story of Griselda a happening so novel (Griselda's patience) that it stretches credulity to the utmost, and at the same time picks up in the resonance of the name of Solomon (by allusion to his famous Judgement, as well as to his supposed biblical writings)<sup>39</sup> problems of painful experience of moral choice and wise judgement. Indeed, the whole of the Griselda story in Chaucer's Clerk's version could be understood as a gloss on the concluding verse of the relevant chapter of Ecclesiastes (3: 18) "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."

Thus in Chaucer's version, which is structured around the dialogue of Host and Clerk, and around the more learned speaker's picking up a name used lightly by one less educated, Griselda's moral stand becomes, rather than plainly ideal as it appeared to Petrarch, deeply controversial. Nor does Derek Brewer's subtle analysis lead us

---

<sup>38</sup> The text of Ecclesiastes does not mention the name of Solomon as such but purports to be written by the "son of David" in the first person. All Bible quotations are from the Authorized King James version.

<sup>39</sup> "Who can find a virtuous woman, for her price is far above rubies?" in *Proverbs* 31: 10-31.

far enough into the problematic proposed.<sup>40</sup> For the Judgement of Solomon is, as all who have read it cannot fail to admit, the one biblical story that elevates the most common and socially lowly maternal / parental instinct (the two women are prostitutes and no father is around to care who claims the child) to the very summit of divinely constituted natural truth and justice, placing it above the purely human rational rules for settling conflicts between equals and, since the most instinctively selfless claimant gets the child, setting *above* the skilful competition between the strong the altruistic impulse of protection and succour of the weak. So it is not two *virtues* that are finally opposed in the story of Griselda, but two types of *instinctive love*, the maternal / parental and entirely selfless love versus the sexual / marital love which combines basically egoistic sexual drives and desires for self-gratification with more generous impulses of gratification, but also of possession, of the Other. It is her self-seeking sexual / marital love that Griselda sublimely but shockingly chooses to abide by, through (in Brewer's words) "her steadfast commitment to principle."

And while the name of Solomon permits a sub-text reading, right from the start, of Griselda as the potentially condemnable, unnatural mother who is, in complicated ways, almost as monstrous as Walter, another line from "The Clerk's Prologue" compounds this deeply literal reading of Griselda as a real person. In his reply to the Host, as he agrees that it is indeed his turn to tell a story, the Clerk says:

Ye han of us now the governaunce,  
And therfor wol I do yow obeisaunce  
*As far as reson axeth, hardily.* (ll. 24 - 26) (my emphasis)

Reason here is of course not narrow or fanatical rationality, but the Reason of the Humanists which, eschewing extremes, prizes

---

<sup>40</sup> Derek Brewer writes, "in order to show the value of the virtue by its cost in suffering, the story of Griselda opposes the virtue of commitment, not with vice... too obvious... but with the love of a mother for her children. This confrontation between two virtues is what makes the exquisite pain of the story", *Chaucer: The Poet as Storyteller*, p. 42.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

moderation and sets clear moral limits to obedience and "commitment to principles" whenever these last overstep the bounds of the instinctive moral sense.<sup>41</sup> So the Clerk sets the tone for the sort of moral conundrum that his tale is going to present: the simple question (which while dinting Griselda's allegorical status develops her social and political effect)<sup>42</sup> of "How right was she to obey a vicious command albeit coming from the husband, that she, as a woman of great integrity, wholly and exclusively loves?"<sup>43</sup> Since Griselda's loyalty and goodness are finally vindicated by Walter's not having committed the murder, the question of her guilt remains academic, but it is real none the less. On the individual level it brings out the dangers of personal commitment to another person, to the cause that he / she represents, or to the ideology he embraces; on a social level, it brings out the dangers of deviating from instinctively approved goodness in favour of the intellectually approved goodness of knowing, testing, and winning arguments in a power-structured ideological framework.<sup>44</sup> When it comes to Griselda preferring, with apparent innocence, to demonstrate her patience rather than to make some attempt, however ineffectual, to save her children's lives, one cannot help feeling that her "virtue" is fundamentally wrong and that,

---

<sup>41</sup> See Alfred L. Kellogg, "The Evolution of the *Clerk's Tale*" in *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1972.

<sup>42</sup> On the political angle see Carol Falvo Hefferman, "Tyranny and *Commune Profit* in *The Canterbury Tales*", *Chaucer Review*, 17 (1983), 332-40; Michaela Paasche Grudin, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* as Political Paradox", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 11 (1989), 63-92; David Wallace, "'When She Translated Was'", p. 158.

<sup>43</sup> Sexual love at its deepest is also suggested by the name of Solomon, since he was considered to be the author not only of the weary wisdom of *Ecclesiastes* and of the more hopeful exhortation of *Proverbs*, but also of the paean to youthful love, *The Song of Songs* or *The Song of Solomon*.

<sup>44</sup> See Kathryn L. Lynch, "Despoiling Griselda: Chaucer's Walter and the Problem of Knowledge in *The Canterbury Tales*", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 10 (1988), 41-70.

intelligent as she is, she must suspect, without admitting it, her conduct's perverse, non-virtuous nature. Patience and loyalty without pity appear shockingly abject, when we focus not on Griselda's relations with her husband but on her relations with her children.

Sharing Griselda's protracted inner suffering thus reveals that it is further compounded by a searing moral struggle against guilt kept deliberately just below conscious awareness. For Griselda has had to live with this suppressed knowledge that she had been party to a crime, and that she had actually put her own life above the lives of her children. It is not her physical life that she has saved at her children's expense, but her life as a social being, as a free agent whose sense of selfhood necessarily depends on the ability to keep her word. And in preferring her own word, her own self-image of virtue, to her children's lives, does she not, in fact, sacrifice her children neither to God nor to her husband, but to herself? Her triumph if she "wins" Walter's test will be worldly but not heavenly, so what only can keep her word to her earthly, not heavenly lord, is this confidence in her own strength of mind and powers of self-control. Her virtue thus comes very close to the most grievous sin of all, that of pride. Griselda must secretly suspect that in going so far against her own maternal instinct of defending her children from death by her over-riding desire to "win" in the tests "against" her husband and show herself not only his moral equal but even his superior,<sup>45</sup> she is actually skirting not sainthood but damnation.

In the end, we are led back to considerations of gender and the traditional role of the mother who, in the ancient myths, such as *Oedipus* or *Romulus and Remus*, tempers the father's or uncle's severity and lust for power with mercy for her offspring, and begs of the murderer sent to kill the heir to change the sentence to exposure only and not death. Finally a literal interpretation of Chaucer's "The Clerk's Tale" presents us with a Griselda whose very virtue, with its

---

<sup>45</sup> Caroline Dinshaw points out the "aggressiveness" of Griselda, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, p. 136.

*Speech and speechlessness of Griselda*

typically masculine preoccupation with the hierarchies of power, causes her an internal stunting of the psyche, by which her freedom to refuse suffering turns inward and is exercised only in her partially but not wholly successful occluding and suppressing of her own conscience. That she goes far against her profound feminine nature in her adherence to the masculine conceptions of virtue is certainly made clearer by Chaucer than it was in Petrarch, whose misogyny and "dualistic... habits of political thinking",<sup>46</sup> made him accept Griselda as an ideal all the more unquestioningly since this ideal was embodied in a female with whom he need never really identify. Chaucer, on the contrary, questions the attainment of the ideal and even the ideal itself, but (typically) invites us by identification to probe Griselda's psyche, both as a real woman and as a real human being, through her actions, her speeches and her speechlessness, her consciousness and her unconsciousness, and to recognise in her one of those who, while pursuing even to the furthest possible limits the paths of moral perfection, never surmount and never *should* surmount their life-long struggle with their own conscience. For finally what is most admirable or incomprehensible about Griselda is that of all the sufferings she has had to bear the most acute and the most determinedly denied must have been the gnawing suffering of secret self-reproach. As a spiritual being, Griselda paradoxically triumphs spiritually<sup>47</sup> only by *not* triumphing and by knowing in the profound recesses of her consciousness that she is a sinner who, despite all her virtue, can never attain as long as she lives the sense of justified salvation.

**Additional references**

- Bronfman, Judith. *Chaucer's Clerk's Tale: The Griselda Story Received, Rewritten, Illustrated*. New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1994.
- Burnley, David. *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979.

---

<sup>46</sup> David Wallace, "When She Translated Was", p. 158.

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Nolan, "Chaucer's Tales of Transcendence", p. 32.



- Carruthers, Mary J. "The Lady, the Swineherd, and Chaucer's Clerk", *Chaucer Review*, 17 (1982-3), 221.
- David, Alfred. *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry*. Bloomington, 1976.
- Engle, Lars. "Chaucer, Bakhtin, and Griselda", *Exemplaria*, 1 (1989), 429-59.
- Farrel, Thomas J. "The Style of the Clerk's Tale and the Function of its Glosses", *Studies in Philology*, 86 (1989), 286-307.
- Grennan, Joseph E. "Science and Sensibility in Chaucer's Clerk", *Chaucer Review*, 6 (1971-2), 81-93.
- Hardman, Philippa. "Chaucer's Tyrants of Lombardy", *Review of English Studies*, 31 (1980), 172-177.
- Kirk, Elizabeth D. "Nominalism and the Dynamics of *The Clerk's Tale: Homo Viator as Woman*", in C. David Benson & Elizabeth Robinson (eds.), *Chaucer's Religious Tales*. Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990, 111-120.
- Lerer, Seth. "Writing Like the Clerk; Laureate Poets and the Aureate World", in *Chaucer and his Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993, 22-56.
- Mann, Jill. "Satisfaction and Payment in Middle English Literature", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 5 (1983), 17- 48.
- Martin, Priscilla. *Chaucer's Women. Nuns, Wives and Amazons*. London: Macmillan, (1990) 1996.
- Salter, Elizabeth. *The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale*. London, 1962.
- Severs, J. Burke. *The Literary Relationships of Chaucer's Clerk's Tale*. Yale Studies in English, 96. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1942; repr. London: Anchor, 1972.
- Sisam, Kenneth (ed.). *Chaucer: The Clerk's Tale of Oxenford*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, (1923) 1967.
- Steinmetz, David C. "Late Medieval Nominalism and *The Clerk's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 12 (1977), 38-54.
- Utley, Francis L. "Five Genres in *The Clerk's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 6 (1972), 198-228.