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Lust and Lineage: The Complex Politics of Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*

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Abstract: Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* is one of the more perplexing stories within *The Canterbury Tales*, filled with a myriad of paradoxes: from the difficulties posed by Griselda's unwavering submission, to the unclear moralistic ending and contradictory epilogue, to the opaque ambitions behind Walter's actions, to the cacophony of criticism inspired by the work, leading the tale to be one of the least understood yet most widely read tale, both in our modern day and medieval times. Yet it is precisely because, not in spite, of these paradoxes that the tale is so intriguing, marking it as one of Chaucer's more masterfully written. By examining two interlocking aspects, the political allegory underpinning the tale and the play with stereotypical traits and roles for each gender, *The Clerk's Tale's* concealed contradiction of an impotent ruler augmented and ultimately subverted by his feminine consort immediately and immovably appears, creating a confounding yet arresting narrative about the interrelation between ruler and subject, husband and wife, king and queen. In focusing on Griselda's virtue and strength, and how it often comes as the foil to Walter's vice and weakness, Chaucer seems to center the tale around issues of female sovereignty as the panacea to erratic male fragility. Within the Clerk's Tale, the place and power of the feminine in politics is vividly considered by the ascension of the lowly peasant to glorified marquise. Griselda shines as protagonist and moral core as Chaucer allegorically examines the lacuna between ruler and wife, and how power is negotiated between the royal couple. It can hardly be argued then, that *The Clerk's Tale* lacks sophistication and skill in its writing. For within the tale, looking at the political spectrum of this densely packed allegory, Chaucer weaves an intricate web where he advocates for a variety of disparate and revolutionary ideas. The tale, when read as a criticism of ruling power, is unbelievably powerful, as each and every line interplays with the theme of female sovereignty and the question of the right to rule through the interactions of Walter, Griselda and the people of Saluzzo.

Keywords: Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, Clerk's Tale, Griselda, Body Politic, Agamben, Kantorowicz, Governance, Lordship, Queenship.

Lust and Lineage: The Complex Politics of Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale*

Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* is one of the more perplexing stories in *The Canterbury Tales*, filled with paradox and resulting in a cacophony of fiery criticism. James Sledd in his 1952 review of literature on the tale quite sharply points to the question at hand,

why alleged cruelty and criminal stupidity are represented either without proper abhorrence, or even with the praise that should be reserved for virtue; we are asked, it is said, to tolerate an intolerable tyrant, and to admire a dolt. (77)

The difficulties posed by Griselda's unwavering submission, the opaque ambitions behind Walter's actions, the unclear moralistic ending and contradictory epilogue form the very paradoxes that force the reader to investigate their own reading of Griselda's suffering. By examining one facet in particular, the political allegory underpinning the tale, *The Clerk's Tale's* contradictions immediately and immovably appear, creating a confounding yet arresting narrative about the interrelation between ruler and subject, husband and wife, king and queen. For under this light, it can be seen that Chaucer breaks with the traditional patriarchal view of Griselda, interpolating her as a mediatory figure who transfigures the politically dangerous lust of Walter into societally acceptable action through the trials of her deeply limited and marginalized body.

Much has been written on *The Clerk's Tale*, with good reason, as it is one of the most enduring texts of the entire *Canterbury Tales*. While modern readers might gravitate towards the iconoclastic Wife of Bath or the bawdy Miller, the most popular tale in the fifteenth century was almost certainly the Clerk's, judging by the sheer number of surviving versions of the tale in translation within England, France and Italy. As the tale "appears to many to be bound up with its ambiguities and contradictions, the insolubility of its many problems" (Hansen, "Powers of Silence" 188), it has gained a reputation as "*The Canterbury Tales'* supreme test of its reader's interpretative powers" (Middleton, "The Clerk and His Tale" 121). This has allowed the tale to take on multiple different interpretations that often reflect more

about the reader than the illusive “clerk” who “pleys” at this most ambiguous of texts. And in such a dense field of criticism as Chaucerian scholarship, there is a plethora of mutually exclusive readings of the text that all attempt to make sense of the brutal violence and capricious nature inherent within the Griselda myth. Robert Emmett Finnegan, for example, takes umbrage with the conception of Walter as God, writing that “to be tested by God is one thing: God, being God, does what He likes. To be so used by Walter is quite another” (320). Put more positively, J. Allan Mitchell writes, “The narrative is fascinating because it is polyvalent in its moral exemplarity, not pointless; because it runs a surplus of meaning rather than a deficit” (3). We are drawn into the tale because it contains myriad meanings that often run against one another, demanding readers to establish their own critical position in order to create any coherence of the tale’s meaning. The tale itself seems structured to force the reader into forming a critical opinion, as Chaucer has divided the tale into six parts and included an epilogue in the form of the Envoi at the end. This is relatively unique within the *Canterbury Tales*, as only the Knight, the Squire, and the Canon’s Yeoman divide their tale into parts, though Sir Thopas and the Monk have analogous sort of divisions. Yet even within this small subset of tales, none of these have as many sections as The Clerk does. This multiple partitioning suggests to the reader moments to break from reading and reflect, which undoubtedly would lead to the formation of thoughts and opinions. When the structure of the tale is combined with the horror of Walter’s domestic violence and the baffling silence of Griselda that prompts most readers to react so viscerally, it is thus little wonder why the tale is seen as such a rhetorical test of the readers skills.

Furthermore, many critics and readers find the text appalling. As James Sledd puts it, “Some readers have been moved to compassion and wonders, others to contempt and disbelief; and for some generations now, the contemptuous and the skeptical have outnumbered the compassionate admirers” (73). Although Sledd wrote this in 1952, his general disgust with the tale is certainly not outdated, as it remains the most common reaction with good reason. Walter’s constant torment of his wife is monstrous to read and brutal to imagine, and it is clearly intended to provoke an emotive response in the reader. Similarly,

Sledd's theological reading of the tale is the most dominant model historically. As exemplum, Sledd writes that, "Griselda is the mortal wife of an other-world lover, and only when this fact is understood can the problems of her story be resolved" (76). By conceiving of the story as a theological allegory to explain why suffering happens to good people, Griselda can be imagined not as battered wife, but penitent nun and can assuage the reader's disgust. As Dolores Frese writes, "The language never allows us to be completely severed from the richly suggested sense of serenity experienced by the vowed religious whose will is no longer her own, and whose glory lies in obedience to the commands of her superior" (134). However, this theological reading creates an issue in its depiction of the divine, as Robert Stepsis states, "any reading of the poem that has Griselda as a figure of the Virgin, Job, and Abraham or as an allegorical representative of patience or obedience logically necessitates that Walter be the figure of God" (129). This formulation is troubling, as it dictates a much more vengeful or capricious image of divinity than is commonly espoused by the Abrahamic faiths that dominate Western culture. While there are certainly moments of pure destruction and retribution within holy texts and traditions, most sects of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam believe in a God of forgiveness and love, traits I would hesitate to assign to Walter. While there are understandable theological implications that can be drawn from *The Clerk's Tale*, such an anagogical reading posits a very unpleasant image of spirituality.

Alternatively, others have read the text as a distinct commentary on gender relations, and this view has become more prominent as feminism became more critically and culturally salient. George Lyman Kittredge is, of course, an early factor in his coinage of "The Marriage Group" within *The Canterbury Tales*, and his positioning of the Clerk's Tale as a direct response to the Wife of Bath has been taken up and furthered by many feminist critics, such as Elaine Tuttle Hansen in *Chaucer & the Fictions of Gender*. Feminist critics are primarily responsible for bring out the nuances of gender within Chaucerian scholarship more generally and the problems apparent in the more simplistic readings of Griselda as saint. For Hansen, the Griselda myth forcefully exposes the problems of gender and the interesting capabilities allowed to women through their acceptance of gendered limitations, or as she

writes, “the fact that [Griselda] attains certain kinds of power by embracing powerlessness; the fact that she is strong, in other words, because she is so perfectly weak” (190). This sentiment of gaining power through powerlessness as being the central dilemma and insight of the text seems to be in closest proximity to my own personal sense of the tale, although I view the text in a more blatantly political light than Hansen. Similarly, Carolyn Dinshaw in *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* posits the tale as a more forceful and radical break with patriarchal power than the Wife of Bath’s, theorizing that the Clerk not only has the woman speak, but also has her point out that the patriarchal model occludes feminine desire, feminine experience. The Clerk also breaks up the bonding between men that structures that patriarchal hermeneutic (and its goal), identifying himself *against* Petrarch (137). These conceptions of the Clerk’s Tale, while all different, all take the position of finding some redemptive power within Griselda’s position.

An important element of the clerk’s “pley” to keep in mind is that the “myth” of Griselda was relatively well known throughout medieval Europe. The tale first appeared in textual form in Boccaccio’s hundredth (and thus ultimate) story in *the Decameron*, then in subsequent translations into Latin by Petrarch, French by Philippe de Mezieres and Christine de Pizan, and English by Chaucer himself. Most critics, such as Anne Middleton and Hansen, seem to agree with the claims laid out by Severs in *The Clerk’s Tale and its Literary Contexts* that Chaucer primarily used Petrarch’s Latin translation of Boccaccio and either Mezieres’s or another anonymous French source, such as the Parisian *Le Menagier de Paris*, in composing his tale. A further note of agreement between most scholars is that Chaucer’s version is a unique conglomeration from these myths and not an editorialized translation, as Petrarch’s version of Boccaccio’s tale appears to be, which only furthers the protean nature of the text’s meaning. For example, Chaucer’s choice to move the clearest moral of the text to the end of the tale as an envoi, as opposed to more obvious or clear initial comments one finds in *the Decameron*, *Le Menagier*, or Petrarch’s translation signals a clear intent to allow the reader to divine his own reading whilst in the process of reading the text, a notably clerk-esque move.

The Clerk's Tale opens with a description of the setting and immediately proceeds to contextualize the ensuing plot, thereby establishing the basis for this political allegory to unfold. Chaucer's choice of the location of Saluzzo is critical, and while the choice may merely reflect his reprisal of Boccaccio's initial location of the Griselda story, the political implications remain transparent. Saluzzo is a march, which signified that the county bordered an alien country, in this case the Holy Roman Empire, and that the fear of invasion would have been very realistic. Furthermore, the march's location would have been tenuous within Italy, as the Italy of Chaucer's lifetime was a very tumultuous place lacking any true unity, as John Lerner writes, "Political divisions loomed large... external conflicts had grown and difference in the character of towns had intensified" (7). The sense of Italy that Chaucer would have gotten from his visits in 1372 and 1378 would have been of barely unified or similar city-states with often sharp divides in language and culture. While not atypical in this history of Italy, as unification does not occur until the nineteenth century, it is still important for the modern reader to remember that Saluzzo, despite its mythic status in the tale, was for all intents a minor city-state unto itself, surrounded on all sides by larger, more powerful political entities such as Milan which could easily have consumed it. The fear of Walter's subjects about his heir-lessness and what it portends for their future then is not mere anxiety, but founded in the historical reality of contemporary Italian politics. Furthermore, Saluzzo is described within the tale as "A lusty playn, habundant of vitaille," (*Canterbury Tales*, l. 59), and containing "many another delitable sighte" (l. 62), all of which present the march as highly desirable, and thus ripe for subjugation from a larger entity. Importantly, Saluzzo is also presented as being founded "in tyme of fadres olde" (l. 61), suggesting that the Marquis Walter is part of a long continuum of rulers who have protected their highly desired march from outside incursion, which immediately alerts the reader that the preservation of the state, represented in corporeal form by its ruler Walter, is central to an understanding of the tale.

Before Walter's name is even given, Chaucer strongly connects the marquis to concerns about lineage, which becomes the central obsession behind Walter's apparent madness. Chaucer presents Walter

as a member of a long, unbroken chain of marquises, as three times (at ll. 61, 65, and 71-72) the reader is reminded of Walter's noble lineage and what great leaders his predecessors were before Walter ever appears. In this way, Chaucer diverges from Petrarch and Boccaccio, both of whom open immediately with Walter. Petrarch in particular locates Walter as the originator of the line of marquises in Saluzzo, and the first and greatest amongst them. Chaucer's choice to move Walter from the originating political force in Saluzzo to being "the genileste yborn of Lumbardy" (72) presents Walter not as a sole and discreet leader, but as a cross-section of the overarching Marquis of Saluzzo, a part within a longer line as opposed to its originator. Put another way, instead of being the origin of the noble house and office, as is Petrarch's Walter, Chaucer's Clerk positions his Walter as a link in the lineage of Marquis of Saluzzo. Thus, Walter is presented foremost as a *universitas* as described by Ernst Kantorowicz in *The King's Two Bodies*, where the marquis is a self-regenerating perpetuity or corporation of which Walter is merely a cross-section. This *universitas* of Walter primarily revolves around his body politic, the full subsidy of his political roles and responsibilities which go beyond his natural whims, or as Kantorowicz puts it:

That is to say, one constructed a corporate person, a king of *persona mystica*, which was a collective only and exclusively with regard to Time, since the plurality of its members was made up only and exclusively by succession; and thus one arrived at a one-man corporation and fictitious person of which the long file of predecessors and the long file of future or potential successors represented, together with the present incumbent, that 'plurality of person' which normally would be made up by a multitude of individuals living simultaneously. (Kantorowicz 312)

This understanding of Walter is critical, as Walter's actions may partially revolve around his existence as both corporate marquis and mortal man and the tension that arises between these two roles. The corporate character of Walter means that Walter's desires are supposed to ideally go beyond his mortal concerns, and instead work to protect his lineage and the successiveness of his Body Politic. Walter is thus to be seen as a multitude in some ways, a man formed by the confluence of medieval

political thought as more than just his singular and discrete life. However, his failure to live up to the expectations placed on him by the weight of this corporate personhood remains one of the Tale's most salient concerns. In one of Chaucer's classic moments of narrative interruption, the Clerk initiates his negative depiction of Walter when he says,

I blame him thus, that he considered noght
in time coming what he mighte betide,
But on his lust present was all his thought,
As for to hauke and hunte on every side. (ll. 78-82)

This critique is quite the break from certain Griselda translations, most notably Petrarch's, for while other accounts view Walter as initially carefree, which can have some problematic implications, few directly "blame" Walter. While most versions preserve a sense of reading Walter as free of problems, not just problematically free of cares, the Clerk is fairly explicit: he blames Walter for his lack of consideration of his future. Furthermore, Chaucer's blaming of Walter occurs directly after Walter is named, before any other redeeming characteristics or traits can be seen, signaling to the reader Walter's antagonistic role in the tale. In particular, Walter's "lust" may further signify the second of the two contradictory impulses in the marquis, as Angela Florschuetz writes, "Walter presents his people and the Clerk with a difficulty: while he is a product of and represents the smooth transmission of political power between generations, he himself threatens that continuity by his reluctance to marry and continue his line" (10). While nameless, Walter is painted as an iteration of the *universitas* of the Marquis of Saluzzo, whose primary concern is the propagation of his own lineage. This is however in contention with the "lust" of the real Walter, his natural and mortal desire to focus on the pleasures of life. Yet lust is not just a desire to hunt and hawk, but also a desire that runs directly antagonistic to the will of God, as a central sin indicated by one of the Ten Commandments. Thus, Walter's inattentiveness to his divinely charged duty, to ensure the

smooth transition of power through the production of an heir, is thereby a violation of his own personal commandment, and thus is perhaps stylized as “lust” by the theologically oriented Clerk.

It is worth expanding on this connection between Walter and lust, as lust remains one of the central elements to understanding the political meaning of the Tale. The word “Lust” or “list” occurs fourteen times in the tale, with the vast majority (ll. 80, 322, 352, 658, 660, 662, 711, 962, and 968) occurring in connection to Walter and his desires and wishes. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines “lust” as “to wish, desire, to take pleasure in,” with a specific note on how it is often a mix of personal and impersonal in usage, and thus is relatively close to our modern meaning (lust (n.)). “List” alternatively is defined as “Hearing as one of the five senses, the faculty of hearing” (list n.(1)) or a “Border, edge, rim; hem; band, stripe” (lĭst(e (n.(2))), which is perhaps a far-cry from lust. The primary usage of “lust” or “list” seems to be the first definition, though there is perhaps a semantic slippage between the vocality inherent in Walter’s “lusting,” as he often “lusts” actions into occurring. An example of Walter proclaiming his lust, and those around him listening to his lust is when he asks Griselda to oversee the plans for his second marriage by saying, “After my lust, and therefore wolde I fayn/ That thyn were al swich manere governaunce” (ll. 962-963) or when he tells Griselda the conditions of their marriage by saying, “be ye redy with good herte/To al my lust,” (ll. 351-352). When not used by Walter directly, “lust” is often used by the other characters to indicate their submission to Walter’s capricious actions, such as by the sergeant when he “kills” Walter and Griselda’s daughter and says, “But men moote nede unto hire lust obeye/ And so wol I; ther is namoore to seye” (ll. 531-532) or when Janicula acquiesces to Walter’s request for Griselda to become his bride by saying “right as yow list governeth this matere” (322). The connection here is perhaps one of the most direct admissions of the confluence between Walter’s “lust” and his “governance,” as the two seem to be purposefully linguistically linked by Chaucer in a way that is unique to this telling of the Griselda myth. By interchanging “lust,” most commonly associated with unseemly sight, and “list,” tied to hearing, with the vocal demands of Walter’s governance, the focus shifts from Walter to those affected by Walter’s voice or sight.

In this way, Chaucer connects the capricious actions of Walter with the term “lust,” creating an interesting blurring between what Walter wishes as a man and what wishes are connected to Walter’s unlimited powers as the Marquis of Saluzzo. It is worth noting that according to medieval legal historian Henri de Bracton, “*quod principi placet legis habet vigorem*” (vol. 2, p. 305, l. 18) rendered by Kantorowicz as “What pleases the Prince has the power of Law.” (151), which ultimately means that the sovereign ruler is the originating power of legalistic power, and thus his desires constitute law itself. In terms of *The Clerk’s Tale*, this would suggest that Walter has limitless powers as the unchallenged and peerless sovereign to implement his desires as law within Saluzzo, or as Kantorowicz writes,

the very fact that ‘What the Prince wills is Law’ is derived from Law, is therefore legal, because it is based on the *lex regia* by which the people conferred on the Prince, among other rights, exactly this power to make Law at his pleasure.” (Kantorowicz, 151)

Kantorowicz further points out that Bracton’s use of *placet* is mediated by earlier lines that insist upon a kingship founded on constitutionality and driven by council decisions. This is important as the constitutionalism of the King is a uniquely English phenomenon at this point, and thus Chaucer’s highlighting of the problems of Walter’s “lust” and his lack of clear advisors, and thus his elevation of Griselda to an advisor like position in this fashion may be a result of his attempts to Anglicize the Griselda myth. Still, the power of the Prince to enact Law through “lust” is only checked by these advisory figures and roles, as otherwise, a prince like Walter would truly have powers of biblical proportions. As when God said let there be light, there was light, when the prince declares a law to be, the law now exists. Thus the god-like power inherent in Bractonian and Kantorowiczian kingship is only checked by advisory figures. Yet within the Clerk’s tale, outside of Griselda, Walter lacks any named or apparent advisors. The only figure who can be seen as fulfilling the needed role of advisor according to Bractonian logic would have to be Griselda.

Chaucer, however, complicates this bit of medieval political thought by interlacing “lust,” which implies negative and unchristian desires that go against the natural Christian idea of Law into this schema. Bracton is fairly clear on this point when he writes,

“Ipse autem rex non debet esse sub homine sed sub deo et sub lege, quia lex facit regem. [The king must not be under man but under God and under the law, because law makes the king] (Bracton, vol 2, pg 33, l. 008-010).

Medieval jurisprudence posits the existence of a natural law, equity, which exists above and beyond that of the mortal law of kings, and through which the king must mold himself. If the king fails to do so, Bracton is similarly clear: *“Non est enim rex ubi dominatur voluntas et non lex.* [for there is no *rex* where will rules rather than *lex*.]” (Bracton, vol 2, pg 33, l. 011). Striking here is Bracton’s usage of “*voluntas*” as running counter to “*lex*.” Bracton’s implication appears to be that a king who rules solely by will as opposed to law is not truly a king. Yet Chaucer takes this a step further, by using the cardinal sin of “lust” to describe Walter’s actions. Instead of the more commonly used phrase of “pleases,” which has an established usage within Bracton’s use of “*placet*,” Chaucer consistently uses “lust” or “list” in conjunction with Walter’s actions.

Alternatively, Griselda only uses “plese,” though only in the terms of pleasing Walter, such as at ll. 968-969, “To doon youre lust, but I desire also, /Yow for to serve and plese in my degree.” Here, and earlier at l. 717 (“The same lust was hire plesance also”) we see the paradox of pleasure and lust in the tale lay bare. For if Griselda “pleses” Walter, and Walter’s pleasure is law, this would logically necessitate a limited sort of agency to Griselda’s “pleasing,” as it seems to create law by proxy. While Griselda’s “pleasure” is inexorably tied up within Walter’s lust, and thus she cannot be said to have any independent power, she does still gain some ability to manipulate events through “hire plesance.” Walter’s legal ability to create law at his pleasure is here complicated by the pleasure he derives from Griselda, which Griselda mutually participates in, which seems to constitute her as the originating force. For if Walter’s pleasure arises out of Griselda, it does not originate within himself, and questions the locality of Walter’s

sovereignty, as Walter seems unable to “lust” much else into being without reference to Griselda. Chaucer is in a sense challenging the idea of the absolute sovereignty of the Crown through his multifaceted examination of Walter’s “lust.”

As an exemplum of the unique performative legalism of Walter’s “lust” look to the specific language of Walter’s proposal to Griselda:

Grisilde," he seyde, "ye shal wel understonde

It liketh to youre fader and to me

That I yow wedde, and eek it may so stonde,

As I suppose, ye wol that it so be.

But thise demandes axe I first," quod he,

"That, sith it shal be doon in hastif wyse,

Wol ye assente, or elles yow avyse?

I seye this: be ye redy with good herte

To al my lust, and that I frely may,

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 frownyng contenance?

Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance. (ll. 344 – 357)

Chaucer specifically chooses to focus on the condition that Griselda not “grucche” (354) or “sey” (355) anything against Walter’s “lust,” and thus is not allowed to vocalize any sort of emotions that may arise that are contrary to his expectations. Put another way, any resistance she can muster is essentially non-verbal, as “grucche” concerns primarily non-cooperative speech. This ties back into the alternative definition of “list” as hearing or listening, as Griselda’s primary function is to listen but not to speak. Further, Walter states specifically what Griselda “wol that it so be” (347) in order to question her desire to acquiesce “to al my lust” (352) in their marriage, signifying a clear divide between desires as “wol” and desires as “lust” in terms of the proposal, perhaps foreshadowing the divide between “lust” and “plese” that occurs later in the tale. Further, Walter terms their union an “alliance” (357) at the end of his request, a particularly politicized term that is unique to Chaucer’s telling of the Griselda myth. While the *Middle English Dictionary* defines alliance as “A bond of marriage, as between ruling houses or noble families,” (definition 2, allīa(u)n̄ce (n.)) its primary definition is “An alliance or treaty of friendship between parties, esp. between rulers” (definition 1, allīa(u)n̄ce (n.)). Neither Boccaccio or Petrarch term the marriage an alliance in the tale, suggesting a unique addition by Chaucer from the Italian tradition. Further, other appearances of “alliances” within the *Canterbury Tales* appears to be in terms of a political bonding of two parties from disparate societies, for example in the Pardoner’s Tale, “Stilboun, that was a wys embassadour,/ Was sent to Corynthe in ful greet honour/ Fro Lacidomye to make hire alliaunce” (ll. 603-5) or in the Monk’s Tale, “With hire they maden alliance by bond” (l.2233). In particular, this latter citation brings Griselda and Walter’s marriage into dialogue with Cenobia, the mighty valiant warrior queen of Persia, who “no wight passed hire in hardynesse/ Ne in lynage, ne in oother gentillesse” (ll. 2250-51). While Griselda is perhaps not as forceful and active a queen as Cenobia, the linguistic alliance by Chaucer between the two may be suggestive of Griselda possessing an analogous avenue towards sovereignty.

Walter’s contradictory impulses between “lust” and lineage most vividly come to the forefront in his pseudo-murder of his son and heir. In his role as Marquis of Saluzzo, this murder is abhorrent,

somewhere between suicide and regicide, as Walter's killing of his heir is tantamount to annihilating his *universitas* as Marquis, thereby killing his corporate iterative self. As Kantorowicz writes, "The *universitas* thrives on succession; it is defined by the successiveness of its members; and owing to its successive self-regeneration the *universitas* does not die and is perpetual" (Kantorowicz, 308), signifying that for one iteration to act against this self-propagation is contradictory to its entire existence as an *universitas*. And while Walter never murders his son, the faux-murder does become "the sclaundre of his diffame" (l. 730), effectively marking him as a murderer in his people's eyes. However, in terms of Walter's "lust," this fake murder accomplishes its goal of testing Griselda's fortitude. In this sense, Walter manages to rectify both impulses, by effectively "murdering" Griselda's child in a cruel test of her faith while simultaneously protecting his heir.

However, Walter is not the only figure in the political milieu of Saluzzo, as his people are integral to this highly allegorical tale. Notably, it is not Walter, but his people who first broach the topic of Walter's need to get married, which is an inversion of the tropes present in similar romances of Chaucer's era, as Angela Florschuetz points out:

Like many Middle English romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Chaucer's Clerk's Tale begins with a crisis of heirlessness and a meditation on the reasons why the lack of a viable heir constitutes a political emergency. ...In these romances, the liege not only acknowledges his responsibility to provide the realm with an heir, but actively seeks out or initiates solutions to the crisis. (Florschuetz 34)

By shifting the speech about the need to continue his legacy from Walter to a nameless spokesperson of the people, this trope is inverted and thereby subverted. Chaucer moves the motivation for dynastic continuity from Walter and places the burden of the propagation of future marquises upon his subjects, giving the people a powerful voice in this political forum. For when the spokesperson of the people says,

And we wol, lord, if yhat ye wol assente,

chese yow a wife, in short time at the leeste,

Born of the gentileste and of the meeste

of all this lond, so that it oghte seme

honour to God and yow, as we kan deme. (ll. 129-133)

The spokesman of the People is asking not only to choose which woman will continue Walter's dynasty but to elevate a woman of the people's choosing to the rank of marquise, into which Walter's wife would marry. In short, the people are asking for the ability to elevate someone "of all this lond" to Walter's side, which could in theory elevate one of the minor noble houses to substantial power and prestige, or as John Carmi Parsons writes on this topic, "The king who chose a wife within his own realm exalted her kin and upset the balance among the nobles, while the queen might use her family for political leverage" (Parsons, "Family, Sex and Power" 4). Elevating a woman to marquise who was chosen by the people to represent the people would drastically affect the political landscape of Saluzzo. Thus while this offer is purportedly made to honor both God and the marquis, if Walter acquiesced, he would be surrendering one of most important diplomatic and political decisions of his life to the people, creating an almost elected queenship. This pseudo-democratic offer would inherently weaken the command over his vassals and subjects that Walter's position inherently relies upon, by establishing a precedent of the people choosing the Marquise. Walter allowing such a potential destabilizing factor to hang over his people to prompt this speech is certainly one of his most significant and glaring issues.

Worth noting is that the office of lordship had begun to coalesce into an effective and true government during the period immediately preceding and contemporary to Chaucer's lifetime. Thomas Bisson, in "Medieval Lordship" describes the shift from early medieval conceptions of lordship that were heavily steeped in the Roman patrifamilial tradition and based in a "theology of inequality" (746), through the rapid outgrowth of lower-level lords in the twelfth century who jockeyed and fought for near slave-like control over their fiefdoms. The outgrowth of such violent baronies and knights aspiring to

noble lordship resulted in a very tense situation and a radical reimagining and restructuring of traditional models of lordship, or as Bisson puts it, “in a competition between expanding lordships, the result was to remodel a historically public power into an affective solidarity of lord-bishop and townspeople” (751). The lord-bishop, hoping to build a wall in Elne, had to go through various administrative and judicial proceedings, creating a plethora of legalistic writing and functionary work that would have been alien only a century or two prior. The expansion of various lordly figures in the medieval landscape with competing claims to lands and vassals demanded the rise of judiciary and administrative bureaus that more clearly model our ideas of government.

Elaborately depicted in Paul Strohm’s *Social Chaucer*, the England of Chaucer’s life appears to be very much a medieval society on the brink of modernity, half embracing commercialized interests while still attempting to preserve the veneer of traditional lordship models of power. Strohm rather forcefully argues that Chaucer would “be regarded as one of the mesnals genitls in the 1390 statue” (21) or gentleperson in the king’s household that is not formally retained, suggesting a pseudo-contractual bond between king and courtier that is akin to but distinctly different from traditional vassalage. Positioned among the gentility but not inherently noble, Chaucer lived in a period of decreasing lordly authority as a burgeoning caste of statesmen and bureaucrats began to emerge while the mercantile class vied for increased power and gentility. There is simply no manner in which a man shrewd enough to maintain a career through royal dispensation during the turbulent and often riotous reign of Richard II would not fully comprehend the nuance and danger of the people’s offer to Walter.

One of the most significant political events of Chaucer’s life was the Peasant’s Revolt. While most clearly referenced in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, Chaucer was undoubtedly aware of the complaints of Wat Tyler and John Bell about the improper taxation of non-lordly subjects and the discontent over the rise in additional forms of lordship, and thus perhaps indirectly referenced their rhetoric within the Clerk’s Tale through the usage of the phrase “commune profit” (ll. 431, 1194). Wat Tyler’s Rebellion against improper taxation was a massive shift in the peasant-vassal relationship, as it deeply terrified

landowners as to the power of the peasantry, yet ultimately the rebellion failed to accomplish immediate changes in society. Speaking of the revolt, Bisson notes that, “the cause had been hopeless because virtually no one could conceive of a nonlordly order of power” (Bisson 756). As lordship had been the definitive model of rulership for centuries, there was no real power the rebels could access. In a way, Chaucer’s spokesman of the people is advocating for a sort of median position between the rebel’s desire to overthrow the system entirely and Walter’s lust for absolute monarchy through the model of an elected or popularly chosen queenship.

Of course, Walter summarily ignores this offer, yet ironically, he chooses to elevate one of the lowest members of society, which oddly may better serve the people than their own choice would have. Presumably, the people would make good on their promise of picking from the “gentileste,” and select a wife of noble birth, which Griselda clearly is not, having come from “Amonges thise povre folk” (l. 204) and her father “was holden povrest of hem alle” (l. 205). This inversion of expectations continues Chaucer’s overturn of the Romantic elements within narrative, as Florechuetz has pointed out, by having the people advocate for the aristocracy while the marquis elevates and honors one of his lowest subjects through marriage. Typically, in a High Medieval Romance, the desire to continue one’s line comes from within the knightly figure or at least within his aristocratic grouping; Walter’s motivation for marriage comes from a direct request from his subjects. Florechuetz positions Walter’s resistance as Walter’s desire to remain the sole, undisputed embodiment of power in Saluzzo, as she writes, “Walter must reproduce his line in order to prove his continuity with it, yet by doing so, he passes on the task of embodying the line and its future in his son” (Florechuetz 12). Walter’s dominion over his *universitas* is preserved through his singularity, and the existence of an heir shifts that desire for propagation away from him and into his progeny. Walter’s rejection of the Romance trope of desiring an heir then may be seen as not only aberrant, but abhorrent to social order and thus must be mollified if Saluzzo is to be preserved.

Walter's motivation for choosing Griselda is perplexing, only hinted at vaguely by his lines, "I truste in Goddes bountee, and therefore/ My mariage and min estat and reste/ I him bitake; he may doon as him leste." (ll. 159-161) which suggest that the choice of Griselda was divinely inspired, with perhaps a slight jab at the people's perceived arrogance in asking to choose Walter's bride when it is ultimately God's decision. This explanation of Walter's motive does allow Chaucer to insert Griselda as a sort of intermediary character between ruler and subject. Griselda, as a woman born of Saluzzo and having lived most of her life humbly, is inherently better connected and aware of the people's plight than a woman of nobility would be. And as the wife of the ruler, she does have some ability to influence policy and intersperse mercy into justice.

Chaucer's portrayal of Griselda is nothing short of glowing, as Griselda emerges as a strikingly good character from her initial description encapsulating several heavenly virtues to the final lines of the tale. She is designed as chaste ("No likerous lust was thurgh hir herte yronne" l. 214), temperate ("Wel ofter of the well than of the tonne/ She drank" ll. 215-216), and diligent ("She knew wel labour but noon ydel ese." l. 217). This virtuousness of Griselda, which is only further proved within the tale, stands at clear and obvious opposition to Walter, who is not described in such a particularly glowing light. Furthermore, Hansen observes that ll. 214 – 216 are a unique addition to the Griselda myth by Chaucer, and while Hansen suggests that this addition is meant to present Griselda as a direct mockery of the Wife of Bath by the Clerk (197 – 198), it has the additional effect of strengthening the inherent goodness and morality of Griselda. The reader is supposed to find Griselda morally appealing, and the extended discussion of the nobility of her spirit is thereby expanded from Chaucer's sources.

Interestingly, this depiction of Walter as morally fallible but Griselda as morally righteous is an inversion of the typical gender normative stereotypes, for as Louis L. Huneycutt notes, "Theoretical writings on gender-attributed qualities such as capriciousness, physical weakness, lust, instability, lack of intelligence, irrationality, and a tendency toward duplicity to the female sex" (Huneycutt, "Female Succession " 189). Walter, not Griselda, is depicted as capricious and irrational in his constant testing of

Griselda, and he is clearly duplicitous in his ability to fake the murder of his children for roughly a dozen years. Walter is strongly connected to “lust,” and it is Walter’s actions that constantly threaten the stability of Saluzzo, from his reluctance to get married to his “murdering” of his heir. Meanwhile Griselda is depicted as steadfast and stable, chaste and forgiving, and while her utter submission may be construed as irrational, her devotion is hard to malign. In fact, the central premise of anagogical readings of *the Clerk’s Tale* relies upon how one reads Griselda’s submission, usually as Job-like in nature. The central line from the Tale that is often used to support this view is the Clerk’s direct comparison of Griselda to Job in the last stanza of Part V,

Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse,

As clerkes, whan hem list, konne wel endite,

Namely of men, but as in soothfastnesse,

Though clerkes preise wommen but a lite,

Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite

As womman kan, ne kan been half so trewe

As wommen been, but it be falle of newe. (ll. 932 – 938)

Most interpret this stanza as the Clerk pushing against the “lite preise” of women by the scholarly community through implying Griselda’s moral superiority over Job, and is thus read as an indication of Griselda’s preternatural sanctity. “Humblesse” is the key concept here, as humility has always been a key virtue tied to obedience in a spiritual sense. And yet, this stanza states quite plainly that woman are inherently capable of deeper humility than any man can aspire to, which only furthers Griselda’s position as not just the best of woman, but also better than all men. Combined with this projection of archetypal feminine flaws onto Walter, the subsequent praising of Griselda above the literal representation of legalistic power within the realm seems to indicate Griselda’s superiority over her liege, an uncomfortable

reality in this tale. As Griselda appears to possess many of the qualities typically assigned to masculine virtuousness, which seems to firmly establish Griselda as the moral core and figure most clearly desired to be emulated.

Furthermore, it is only Griselda who we actually see governing, not Walter. In the two stanzas following her marriage to Walter, The Clerk writes of Griselda that:

...when the cas required it,
The commune profit koulde she redresse.
That nas discord, rancor, ne hevinesse
in al that land that she ne kould apese,
and wisely bring hem alle in reste and ease (Chaucer, ll. 430-434)

In this light, we see Griselda in a fully political function, of arbitrating justice and deciding what is best for the land in order to bring peace and prosperity, or as Lynn Staley Johnson writes, “as an administrator of justice, she always observes the common profit by acting charitably” (Johnson 20). Griselda redresses the “commune profit” and soothes discord, rancor, and sorrow into rest and ease, and in this way Griselda clearly administrates justice. This idea of “commune profit” articulated by the Clerk is particularly revealing, as it seems to articulate the idea that Griselda is able to improve the state of Saluzzo through a sort of “economic” management. Giorgio Agamben in *The Kingdom & The Glory* extensively uses the Ancient Greek term *oikonomia* to refer to this kind of administrative governmental power wielded by Griselda, in order to differentiate it from the overarching political power typically wielded by sovereign rulers like Walter. For Agamben, *oikonomia* is inherently theological, as its initial usage was by Church fathers to help resolve the Trinitarian problem of a tripartite singular divinity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Agamben though does not leave the term solely to the realm of theology, as he brings the term into connection with politics through his connection of the term through administrative management. In fact, one of the central theses of *The Kingdom & The Glory* revolves around the inability of a truly sovereign power to utilize *oikonomia* without an intricate filtering through rituals and proxies. In my

conception, Griselda's function here, and through-out the tale, is in the vein of utilizing *oikonomia*, or "managing the household," as a proxy for Walter.

Of course, the household or "*oikia*" does not simply mean one's domestic sphere, but the multiplicity of "economic" relationships a person has. Aristotle lists several types of these "economic" relationships in his work, *Politics*; "despotic" relations between ruler and subject, "paternal" relationships between parent and children, and "gamic" relationships between husband and wife. While these relationships are all diverse and distinct, Agamben links them all by an underlying trend towards administration, or as he writes, "it is a matter of an activity that is not bound to a system of rules, and does not constitute a science in the proper sense." (1). This non-epistemic quality of *oikonomia* is what differentiates it from traditional politics, as *oikonomia* revolves around the ability to order and organize, which is the function Griselda most clearly demonstrates and encapsulates in this tale. Griselda's ability to preserve, protect, and prevent the dissolution of her marriage to Walter is the seam on which the entire tale remains woven, thus imbuing her "economic" role as the critical thread that joins this uneven tale into a coherent narrative. *The Clerk's Tale* cannot function as either an anagogic explanation for suffering and the virtue of patience or as an allegory about passive resistance to an intolerable tyrant without the psychic scarring of Griselda. John McCall perhaps puts it most effectively when he writes that, "in obedience to Walter, Griselde has by stages annihilated her own will, even to death, and by submission she has triumphed" (267).

By "death" McCall is recalling the "smok" scene, where Griselda is banished from Walter's house, stripped of her clothing and processed out of the castle and back to her father's home. For McCall, this moment is symbolic of a drive towards death, as Griselda herself claims that, "Til I be deed my lyf ther wol I lede," (l. 835) living in her father's house. The danger of this scene cannot be overstated; if Griselda impinges upon Walter's lust here, as in any of her tests, the results could be fatal. In Roland Barthes's study of *Sarrasine*, *S/Z*, he connects the death of Sarrasine, the passionate artist central to the tale, with his inability to read the clothing cues of La Zambilina, the castrato, as the fatal farrago that leads to his

misplaced affections. On this, Barthes writes that, “this farrago forms the everyday ‘reality’ in relation to which the subject adapts himself, lives. One defect in this encyclopedia, one hole in this cultural fabric, and death can result” (185). Griselda, unlike Sarrasine, has proven to be adept at parsing and comprehending this cultural matrix of cues given to her by Walter and his people, and manages to turn this symbolic death into a climactic scene of triumph.

For, even in acquiescing to Walter, Griselda seems to partially resist, as Griselda further describes herself as “A wydwe clene in body, herte, and al” (836). The choice to call herself a “wydwe” seems to imply not her own death, but Walter’s, and further emphasizes her goodness in body and soul. Yet, she still does not “grucche” against Walter here, thereby preserving her wedding vows, as the logic of her statement is further explicated as being driven by her desire to remain chaste as she claims that she still “am youre trewe wyf” (837). Her description of herself as “trewe wyf,” as opposed to the latter reference to Walter’s “newe wyf” (l. 841) as well as the present tense usage of “am” seems to indicate that despite willfully stepping down, Griselda is choosing to remain married to Walter spiritually, if not legally. By preserving her end of the marriage covenant, Griselda remains in command of the *oikonomia*, and can therefore maintain some agency even in acquiescing to her reduction in status.

Conceived in this way, while the supposed dissolution of her marriage signals a complete reversal of fortune and strips her of all political agency, Griselda continues to wield economic power. Further, McCall’s reading of the “smok” scene is not the only one, nor necessarily the most convincing. It is important to keep in mind, when considering the “smok,” that Chaucer is relatively unique amongst the tellers of the Griselda myth as the being the most concerned with Griselda’s clothing overall, so much so that the Clerk himself ironically comments on it, “Of hire array what sholde I make a tale?” (l. 383). Clothing has always been one of the clearest demarcations of societal power and ritualized behavior, denoting class, gender, and even ethnicity. Chaucer, though perhaps not a fashionista, was certainly aware of the political power of dress, as any reader of *the General Prologue* would attest, where he clearly describes the attire of his pilgrims as a way of explaining their status and wealth. Nicole D. Smith in fact

makes that point exceptionally well when she writes that, “a pilgrim’s ‘array’ not only compliments her social status and rank but also bespeaks a concern with the materiality and value of dress” (174). Clothing then, is a ripe text for analysis within *The Clerk’s Tale*, a focus Laura Hodges takes up expertly in her extended enquiry into Griselda’s two *smoks*. Writing of the second clothing transformation, when Griselda asks to be returned to her father in her old unadorned *smok*. Hodges notes that, “these old clothes, Griselda’s only worldly goods, epitomize her earlier status before she espoused Walter” (101). Further, Hodges recounts the vibrant resistance apparent in the pageantry of Griselda’s protracted disrobing of her courtly arraignments. Hodges astutely points out that Griselda is allowed to wear the *smok* she was wearing at the time, which would assumedly been of better quality than her old *smok*, and thus she is allowed to retain a physical reminder of her marriage to Walter in the form of her higher quality *smok*, or as Hodges puts it, “she retains this last remnant of high social status, and perhaps this fine smock signals that Walter’s rejection is neither total nor final” (105).

Similarly, Carolyn Dinshaw takes up the task of reading this penultimate *smok* in her theories about translation. In particular to the *Clerk’s Tale*, Dinshaw uses this sartorial concern of Chaucer’s to suggest a purposeful breaking with the textual tradition, represented by Petrarch, and nowhere is that connection more apparent than in Griselda’s speech before being disrobed and sent from Walter’s keep. Dinshaw draws keen attention to this moment, marking it as radical move against this exegetical hermeneutic tradition, noting of Griselda’s speech that “Griselda reads herself as allegorical image and thereby ‘authorises’ us to read her allegorically, but at the same time she gives us a sense of what it feels like to be made into a figure of speech” (147). This for Dinshaw is the crux of the power and unique applicability of Chaucer’s translation, as the way in which Chaucer renders Griselda is thus meant as critique of the traditional methodology of exegesis by drawing clear relief upon the feminine object that is translated, or as Dinshaw puts it, “we read Griselda, then, both literally and figuratively – that is, when we read her *translative*, we retain sharp awareness of what that method of reading excludes” (147). By necessity of seeing Griselda as both the pathetic woman, stripped before the court and made to leave in nothing but a

smok, and a martyr-like figure that cosmologically represents obedience to the divine will, the reader must be aware of the problems of this polyvalent *translative* moment. To feel pity for Griselda is unwarranted if her suffering is simply the will of God, yet to read her as an allegory precludes an understanding of the trauma of her tribulations as lived, relatable experience. Further, when Griselda speaks and states that

I woot, and wiste alway,

How that bitwixen youre magnificence

And my poverte no wight kan ne may

Maken comparison; (814-817)

She directly invites the Marquis and the reader by proxy to acknowledge the difference in their noble stature as the root cause of this dysfunction. In this way, Griselda “translates” herself and her sorrows along a distinctly class-based line and continues the logic of representing herself as part of, and exemplum of, the lowly of society. Griselda’s claim that she “nevere heeld me lady ne mistresse” (l. 823) is then not merely a pathetic self-depreciation, but a keen observance of her inability of her inherent “humblesse” to overcome her lack of “gentillesse.” Griselda is not noble of birth, but merely by situation, and thus denies being styled as lady or mistress, titles associated with the gentry. Griselda, both in dress and word, is identifying herself with the lowborn of society.

Beyond this play with attire and class, The Clerk continues the politicization of Griselda in the stanza following her marriage to Walter, and it is here where the depiction of Griselda’s pseudo-sovereignty is made most obviously:

Though that hir housbond absent were, anon,

If gentil men or othere of hir contree

Were wrothe, she wolde bringen hem aton.

So wise and ripe words hadde she,
And juggementz of so greet equitee,
That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,
Peple to save and every wrong t'amende (Chaucer, ll. 435-441)

In this scene, Griselda has a clear and undeniable political function. She is seen, in her husband's absence, bringing the gentry of her land together in reconciliation through her wisdom and great judgment. And through such excellence in governance, she is deemed to be angelic. In particular, her judgements are described as having "greet equitee" which implies both their success in being fairly administered, but also conveys an important legal connotation, as according to Bracton,

ÆQUITAS autem est rerum convenientia quæ in paribus causis paria desiderat iura et omnia bene coæquiparat. [Equity is the bringing together of things, that which desires like right in like cases and puts all like things on an equality.] (vol. 2 p. 25 14- 15)

In many ways, Equity falls in conjunction with the powers laid out by Agamben as part of the *oikonomia*. For Griselda then, equity, not justice or power, is a means of enacting her judgements precisely because it revolves around organization and collectivism. Equity simultaneously implies that Griselda administers law in terms of natural justice, which is a power of law that is even above that of the sovereign like Walter, who has already been proven to be ineffective due to his tension between lust and lineage. Only through Griselda's ordering of equity, both in their marriage and in this scene of Walter's absence, can Saluzzo remain functional.

The connection is thus clearly drawn between Griselda's piety, a reoccurring motif through *the Clerk's Tale*, and her "economic" function as governmental administrator. Read in this manner, her piety resembles the economic functionality Agamben sees in the construction of Christian monotheism in that both are intrinsically about the nature of relationships and order in the context of power, not power itself.

For Agamben, the entire purpose of early Christian adopters of *oikonomia* into Christianity is to avoid a fracturing of God into three separate divinities. The Trinitarian doctrine can only function, the logic follows, if its praxis is located not as an ontological reality, but an economic relationship. However, Agamben rather convincingly argues that this produces a split between God as being and God as force, or as he writes,

The caesura that had to be averted at all costs on the level of being reemerges, however, as a fracture between God and his action, between ontology and praxis. Indeed, distinguishing the substance or the divine nature from its economy amounts to instituting within God a separation between being and acting, substance and praxis. This is the secret dualism that the doctrine of *oikonomia* has introduced into Christianity, something like an original Gnostic germ, which does not concern the caesura between two divine figures, but rather that between God and his government of the world. (53)

In Agambenian logic this is the basis of the caesura between royal power and divine will. By resolving the ontological problem of the number of God, a “gnostic germ” is introduced that divides God’s will from God’s being, substance from praxis. God is thus singular but functionally separated from his direct action in the world, and thus must be reimagined through economic or administrative management, a praxis one step removed. In context of *the Clerk’s Tale*, Walter’s mortal “lust” can only exist as a point against the natural divinely inspired law if there is this intermediary force, Griselda, who translates divinity into polity. Only Walter and Griselda *together* can form a coherent and acceptable form of governance— like the theological *oikonomia* of Agamben, the rulership of the marquis-ship is bound in the dualistic nature (but underlying unity) of marquis and marquise. Otherwise, Walter’s will would truly be *potentia absolutia*, as Stepsis argues. For Agamben, and I think Chaucer’s Griselda, this is the power of *oikonomia*: by interlacing Griselda’s submission as a manner of modulating Walter’s “lust” into a more acceptable form, the march’s stability can be preserved. Just as God’s presence must be felt through the grace of the rituals and rites of the church, Walter’s lust is only made palpable through Griselda herself. The Clerk may be

elevating Griselda's economic role through her piety in order to better create a political counterbalance to Walter.

Notably, The Clerk gives this political depiction of active governance only to Griselda, and not to Walter. There is no moment in the tale where Walter directly enacts his will into law. This elimination of Walter's absolute rule to a rule-by-proxy creates an interesting check on his power, as he reigns, but does not rule. However, this raises an important question of whether power wielded in the privacy of one's economic relationships can have a political dimension. For while the *oikonomia* allows divine equity to be transfigured into political law, aGriselda's role is intrinsically bound within the realm of the household. In Hannah Ardent's formulation of the *Vita Activa*, or the active life of humanity, she posits that the *polis*, or political life, can only exist if it is grounded in the domestic sphere, as "the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom in the *polis*" (29- 30). In this Ardentian formulation, Walter's "lust" can only exist as political freedom at the cost of his mastering of his household, of which Griselda is a functionary part. If Griselda "grucches" Walter, she upends this balance, and risks making the caesura between Walter's "lust" and his active control over society apparent, and thus destabilizes the political balance of the region. Thus, Griselda's submission and obedience allows for Walter's continued freedom, a necessary part of open political engagement.

In this light, Griselda's function as the lead administrator, notably only in her husband's absence or when "required," approaches a function analogous to the relationship between a prime minister and a monarch in a constitutional monarchy, or more contemporary to Chaucer, between rulers and their wives in medieval kingships and duchies. However, as Griselda is still his wife and undeniably subservient to Walter throughout the tale, Walter is not rendered impotent but instead is capable of ruling through Griselda. For it is only in Walter's absence that Griselda assumes true political power, in order to better facilitate proper governance. In this way, the void created by the absence of political power, represented by Walter, must be filled with the economic function of Griselda as marquise.

Griselda does not merely function as the dutiful servant and subject of Walter but in fact strengthens their combined power through her delicate management of the political order in his name. Griselda's economic power is made most abundantly clear in the stanza following her political depiction, where the Clerk writes:

Not longe time after that this Grisild,
was wedded, she a doghter hath ybore
Al had hir levere have born a knave child
Glad was the markis and the folk therefore,
for thogh a maide child come al bifore,
she may unto a knave childe attende
by liklihede, sin she nis nat bareine. (Chaucer, ll. 442-448)

Griselda, immediately after being depicted wielding political power through her husband, is shown to be propagating the lineage of the Marquis of Saluzzo and celebrated for it. The succession crisis is temporarily assuaged, allowing the People to rest easy, while Walter is no longer the sole member of the *universitas* of Marquis of Saluzzo. Of course, the first born child is female, and thus not an ideal heir, but Griselda has at least momentarily proved her ability to literally transform Walter's "lust" into something productive.

Interestingly, Griselda's political depiction is literally bookended by two distinctly feminine scenes, her marriage and the birth of her first child. Thus, it is through her femininity, not in spite of it, that Griselda functions as a political figure, allowing her to be both wholly submissive yet incredibly transgressive. Griselda's sovereignty can only exist because she is a wife to a sovereign, it is not an inborn quality of her station. And yet, Griselda effectively uses her femininity to manage and encapsulate

Walter's bestial whims. By resisting nonverbally and preserving her place as Walter's wife, Griselda seems able to bring some equity to the land, though only in Walter's absence.

It may be fruitful here to summarily discuss the nature and role of the medieval queen, or in this case, marquise. Pauline Stafford provides a definition of queenship, noting that,

All queens were or had been the wives of kings. The title given to English queens in the witness list of charters sometimes emphasizes it: *coniunx*/wife. Queenship is thus no more or less than the crown on the head of wife and mother, at most the formalization of their roles. (Stafford, "Queens and Queenship," 470)

While certainly accurate and literal, this rudimentary definition eschews the massive breadth of roles a queen could find herself slotted into. Theresa Earenflight highlights this issue, noting that, "Queen is a complex term. Some queens governed in their own right, most were queen consorts who bore royal children, but not all queens had children. Some had official authority, others did not. Some were foreign, some native" (para. 3). Queenship is thus inherently protean, a chameleon term which shifts to fit the context and situation the wife of the sovereign or female ruler found herself in. Thus, any approach to queenship must be inherently interdisciplinary to match the approaches to power a queen herself used, As Earenflight notes,

Studying queenship, however, involves more than political history. The field touches a wide range of approaches: social, religious and economic history, art history, literary studies, political theory, sociology, and anthropology and has benefited from a range of theories and methods. (para. 8)

To see this in practice, take a quick summation of just two studies into two different types of Queen consort, and we can easily see that queens faced very different problems depending on their perspective and environment. Speaking of the Plantagenetian queens during the War of the Roses, John Carmi Parsons writes that,

Even as the queen was ceremonially exalted, rituals prescribed a submissive role that secluded her from authority. The boudoir influence or improper behavior threatened by her sexuality were allayed by ritual imagery that inscribed chaste demeanor and fictive virginity while it celebrated her fertility. (Parsons, "Family, Sex and Power: The Rhythms of Medieval Queenship," 9).

In this description of consort queenship, we can see that the queen is ritually unsexed and made to appear submissive in an attempt to stave off feminine encroachment on masculine power, and that queen wives did not openly wield political power, but instead used a softer approach to power through domestic utility. However, William Layher writes of Scandinavian queens that, "the woman's power is defined (yet also limited) by the model of *consor regni*: it is only through intimate contract with the corporeality of the king that a queen's political power can be secured." (Layher, *Queenship and Voice* 178). In this conception, the queen does possess the power to rule, but only through the voice of the king. Thus for the people to "elect" their own marquise, they would effectively install their own advocate into the highest office in the land. As Earenfight puts it,

The power of this metadiscourse cannot be dismissed as merely gossip or incidental to the operations of monarchy. It functioned in wide concentric circles of power, agency, and influence that situate queens firmly within the imagined community of the realm.
(para. 4)

Ultimately, it is here that we arrive at the strange construction of Griselda's dual bodies and the nature and relation of queenship to kingship. For while Walter is seemingly the driving force and political center of the tale, it is mainly through his interactions with Griselda and Griselda's actions in his name that his power is shown. Griselda, not Walter, is the central character around which the entire tale is structured due mainly to her economic function as consort to the marquis and royal mother in which she resolves the central tension of the tale as voiced by the spokesperson of the people, the lack of an heir to the marquis. This economic body of a sovereign-consort is designed to compliment and empower the

sovereign's Body Politic through propagating the royal lineage, which maintains the mystic fiction of the sovereign's two bodies. Further, this body economic allows Griselda to extend and model the governance and submission inherent under Walter's reign while simultaneously allowing a vestigial but significant personal influence upon the order of things. Griselda is not just from the people; she models their significance through her constancy, and appears to suffer in their stead in a manner that is not unlike Christ's role as savior in Christianity.

In this way, Griselda serves as the antidote to the carnality inherent in Walter's "lust" and thereby redeems him from the "scalundre of infamy." The restitution of Griselda and Walter's happy marriage, and the return of Griselda's "dead" children, at the end of the tale is then not an unwarranted reunion, but instead a sign of Walter's acceptance of Griselda's role alongside him as the necessary sieve through which his power can be realized. Yet, Walter's tests collapse only once Griselda beseeches, or perhaps "grucches" him,

That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge

This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo;

For she is fostred in hire norissyng

Moore tendrely, and, to my supposyng,

She koude nat adversitee endure

As koude a povre fostred creature. (ll. 1038–43)

Striking in this formulation is Griselda's defense of the maiden taking her place as marquise. There is not any element of anger or jealousy apparent here; instead, Griselda voices concern for her fellow woman and the "tormentynge" Griselda believes Walter has planned. Griselda here also masterfully raises the concern about her own position through concern for another wife, as she notes that Walter has tormented her but only in the context of avoiding future abuses. As Griselda is not

complaining, but advising, it may be that she manages to alert Walter to his monstrosity without “grucching” and thus remaining still faithful to his marriage proposal. Further, Griselda suggests that her ability to please Walter’s “lust” comes from the poverty of her upbringing, not in spite of it. Griselda here suggests that her steadfastness, her primary virtue within the tale, is a result of the hard conditions of her background. The aristocratically raised future wife, Griselda reasons, could never withstand Walter’s tormenting lust “As koude a povre fostred creature.”

In this way, the marquis of Saluzzo is redeemed, as Walter finally admits his testing to be enough, eventually proclaiming Griselda to be “As wel as evere womman was, assayed./ In greet estaat and povreliche arrayed” (ll. 1053-54). In this final result of Walter’s “assaying” of Griselda, she is proclaimed as great in estate and poverty, suggesting that the impossibility of their pairing due to her low status, the purported reason for his testing, has been allayed through sheer force of virtue. Further, by equating her estate and poverty, Walter collapses the distinction between his wife and himself in terms of class, and thereby allows her to fully subsume her role as marquise. To complete this, Walter embraces Griselda, “And hire in armes took and gan hire kesse” (l. 1057), which is the first moment depicted of physical love between the married couple. While Griselda is repeatedly described as being in love with Walter, such as at l. 714, “She was to hym in love, and moore penyble,” Griselda is only ever described as kissing her children, before they are sent to their deaths (ll. 550, 553, 679) and when she has her children returned to her (l. 1083), there is never a moment where she kisses Walter. Further, Griselda “took of it no keep” (l. 1058), which signals that she has taken her passivity to its logical conclusion and rendered herself entirely unreactive out of wonderment. Griselda’s statue-like response to Walter’s sole display of affection only drives Walter towards proclaiming her to be his only wife, now and forever, and reveal their children’s survival.

Griselda’s response to this is primarily to swoon repeatedly and kiss, grasp, and embrace her children tightly in a truly emotional moment. While she does thank Walter for returning her children, the Clerk’s focus upon “which a pitous thyng it was to see” (l. 1086) forces the reader to dwell for

approximately twenty-seven lines (ll. 1079 – 1106) on the image of the hysterical Griselda, a relatively detailed note by the Clerk intended to elicit an emotional response in the reader. The Clerk eventually ends his piteous portrait to focus on the restitution of Griselda through Walter's comforting, noting in particular "Walter hire dooth so feithfully plesaunce" (l. 1111). Similar to the earlier kiss, Walter caters to his wife's desires faithfully in an interesting moment of role-reversal.

The Clerk concludes the tale by noting the enduring success of Walter and Griselda's pairing, as the daughter is richly married "unto a lord, oon of the worthleste/ of al Ytaille" (ll. 1131-32) and the son "succeedeth in his heritage/ in reste and pees, after his fader day" (ll.1135 – 1136). The children's good fortunes are not just a bright spot in an otherwise dreary tale, but signify the resolution of Walter's lineage problems. Walter, through the mediatory influence of Griselda upon his lust, has successfully assured that both his children, male and female, have gone on to worthy matches and continued to expand the political clout of Saluzzo within the region.

The Clerk then concludes his tale with a didactic digression upon what not to take away from this Tale and here seems to collapse into the traditional sense of the Griselda myth, only to seemingly reverse his message in a closing song. The Clerk's first note is to not take the text as advocating for the tormenting of wives literally, as it would be "inportable" (l. 1144); He eventually moves away from this more egalitarian image to a more theological sense of the tale, as for the Clerk, the ultimate meaning of his tale appears to be "that every wight, in his degree,/ sholde be constant in adversitee" (ll. 1144 – 1145). While one can take this as a metaphor for the seemingly capricious testing by God of us all at some point in our lives, as the Clerk seems to intend, the Envoi sung by the Clerk at the end seems to complicate this reading. The Envoi is a remarkable moment that has baffled critics for ages, as it advocates for women to "lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille" (l. 1184) and "folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence" (l. 1189), which seems to indicate that the tale is a lesson on women speaking up more within society, as "for commune profit sith it may availle" (l. 1194). Here the Clerk calls upon women to address the ills of society through speech, which seems to run exactly antithetical to his purported spiritual morale.

What then is the ultimate meaning of the Clerk's Tale? The singular unifying element between the proto-feminist Envoi and the theological moral appears to be in their concern over "governance" in whatever that may mean. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines "governaunce" as primarily meaning "Government or rule over a country" (1a), "Command of an armed force" (1b), or "Administrative control, administration, custody." The blending within this definition of administration, military power, and rulership is highly suggestive of the multiple valences of *oikonomia*. Within his explanation of his tale, The Clerk first mentions that God, "Er we were born, knew al oure freletee; /And for oure beste is al his governaunce" (ll. 1160 – 61) which suggests that God knows the best way to govern our lives, but later within the Envoi suggests that women, "sharply taak on yow the governaille." (ll. 1192). While "governaille" does not exactly match "governaunce," both terms seems suggestive of a focus upon governmental function. The *Middle English Dictionary* vexingly does not provide a definition of "governaille," only a citation of a 1427 record of Privy Council proceeding, "Pexecucion of þe Kinges..auctoritee as toward þat þat belongeth unto þe pollitique rule & governaille of his land" (3.233, "politik(e (adj.)). While obviously after the composition of *The Canterbury Tales*, the focus of the snippet on the administration of the king's land as an extension of the King's authority is perhaps analogous to Griselda's politicized function alongside Walter and the Envoi's ultimate meaning. While most translations of l. 1192 render the line as advocating for the "governance" of a woman's own personal life, what if it is meant more literally? If "governaille" is read literally as concerning the management of the *oikonomia*, it is possible to construe the Envoi as advocating for the expanded position of women within the newly developed government in functionary roles analogous to the counselor-like position occupied by Griselda within the Tale. While the Clerk appears to understate this reading by claiming that the Envoi is "a song to glade yow" (l. 1174) and a way to "stynte of earnestful matere" (l. 1175), this may be a moment of Chaucer attempting to avoid making too radical a political statement "in earnest," yet the focus of both the Clerk's purported moral and the Envoi on questions of governance naturally suggests to me a political reading.

For within the tale, looking solely at the political spectrum of this densely packed allegory, Chaucer weaves an intricate web in which he advocates for a variety of disparate and revolutionary ideas. The tale, when read as a criticism of ruling power, is unbelievably powerful, as each and every line interplays the theme of sovereignty and the right to rule through the interactions of Walter, Griselda and the people. While Walter appears bestial, incompetent, and perhaps even politically impotent, patient Griselda remains steadfast, chaste and, most important of all, powerful, and it is this delicate balance of power and powerlessness, obedience and violence, religion and politics that perhaps draws readers to this tale.

The Clerk's Tale posits two very simple issues: the problem of tolerating an intolerable tyrant and the correct manner of reforming a clearly unstable system of governance. However, the Clerk's brilliance comes in his ambivalence towards answering these issues clearly. The tyranny appears to be answered through feminized submission, which the Envoi itself appears to speak against, though this change through submission perhaps seems to also allow for reformative and redemptive avenues. Audre Lorde famously stated that "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (112), and it is in this spirit one must interrogate Griselda's story. Does patience and obedience bring about incremental process, or is open resistance preferred? Griselda clearly models the former, though the Envoi encourages the latter. If Walter's main tools are open resistance, then Griselda surely does not use the master's tools to dismantle the house; the question remains as to whether the economic tools of silence, obedience and patience wielded by Griselda are then mastered by her or master her.

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