

Analysis of the clerk's tale: the impact of walter's and griselda's marriage

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



The " Clerk's Tale" of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales can be seen as a mirror of society, where social classes have very noticeable tensions between them. This essay shall analyze the " Clerk's Tale" by putting it in a socio-political context and focusing on the interactions between Griselda and Walter, who belong to different social classes.

Introduction and Method of Analysis

The " Clerk's Tale" is one of the stories that form the " marriage group of tales" of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. While the stories in that group were told by people (the pilgrims) with such different personalities, it is certain that marriage is one important topic that Chaucer chose to explore. It is also important to note that the marriage group of tales is also one of the most well known groups from Chaucer's magnum opus, if not the most criticized. In addition, marriage is still a serious subject to talk about, just as in the time of Chaucer; this makes the Clerk's Tale still relevant today.

Chaucer's character the Clerk is a student of philosophy in Oxford. He is considered as one of the ideal pilgrims because of his diligence and humility. In the prologue, his meekness is already observed, as commented by the Host. This meekness of the clerk transcended even to the story that he tells: Griselda too is meek and reserved in comparison to Walter. It is satisfying to know that the clerk, as a learned man, is in disagreement with the established and mainly discriminating power structure that was present in his time; he shows this when he commented that it is " evil" for Walter to test Griselda without basis.

Since the “ Clerk’s Tale” is still relevant in today’s world, there are elements and issues that it raises that still manifest themselves in today’s society: things like morality, power relations between ruler and subject and between the sexes, the issues on marriage and child rearing, freedom of speech, etc. As observed, all these themes are almost universal to the human experience, if not completely. Furthermore, these issues transcend through ages, as they are still concerns of the postmodern world.

Of all these, the theme of power relations is the most preeminently observed in the “ Clerk’s Tale.” The tale itself is a mirror of the social strata in the Middle Ages: the elite royalty and nobility, the small stratum of merchants, and the large section of the laity. Actually, the unique quality of the “ Clerk’s Tale” is its juxtaposed presentation of the nobility and the peasantry who are “ doing well together.” To effectively point out the “ crossing of the worlds” to the audience or readers, the opposites were smacked right beside each other, bypassing (i. e. not minding) the other classes “ in between” them - hence a peasant girl and a nobleman.

With the knowledge that power relations are still an issue today and that the “ Clerk’s Tale” consciously talks about power relations, it is necessary to frame the tale in a socio-political viewpoint. Thus, this essay shall analyze the “ Clerk’s Tale” by looking at how characters from a specific social class interact with other characters from another class.

A little note—the story itself, without the prologue and the envoy, might make a reader think that it is essentially anti-feminist. Actually, without the

intention of being prescriptive, the story without the prologue and the envoy is obviously anti-feminist. However, the prologue and the envoy should be taken for consideration, because Chaucer does not seem to agree with the anti-feminist tale.

On Griselda

Griselda is obviously the “weaker” character in comparison to Walter, considering that she is from the lowest social class and a female—thus, she is doubly “weak” by the standards of the power structure of the Middle Ages: she is the character most prone to abuse. Anyhow, she is the lead character in her fairytale; she is the one who “needed” to be saved—but by what kind of salvation? Is the restoration of her wealth and stature enough to save her? Unfortunately, this does not do so. It is always not enough for material wealth to repay a damage done to a person's soul and dignity.

Actually, in studying the character of Griselda, we are also locating the political experience of the Medieval peasantry. Most probably, her peasant life is a bittersweet experience. On one hand, the peasantry was generally discriminated with impunity; and discrimination against them is a form itself of denying the equality of humans. On the other hand, Griselda's poverty almost certainly developed her virtues.

But first, let us look at her state before she meets Walter. She first appears in the second section of the tale, which setting (a poor village) contrasts that of the fine life of Walter shown in the first section; her life was the opposite of the carefree ways of the nobleman. Moreover, the village is said to be not

far away from the “ honorable palace” of the marquis, which is also a manifestation of the juxtaposition of the poor and the rich.

Nevertheless, from the beginning, as clichéd as it might seem, Griselda is presented as a “ perfect” woman, although she is poor—she is virtuous, beautiful, loving, and chaste. Even Walter did not deny those qualities. However, it is unfair to say that the laity has the same characteristics as hers—so, by this count, Griselda cannot represent the poor in terms of personality. However, we cannot discount the fact that she still comes from that social class.

Likewise, when Walter asked for her hand in marriage, the tale still proclaims Griselda's humility. When he asked her if she could promise him to do whatever he tells her to do, she obliged, saying “ And here I swear, that never willingly/In word or thought I will you disobey....” (Chaucer, Gutenberg.net)

Moving on, the conflict itself was started by another person; and for whom was the problem made? The created conflict is directed towards Griselda, of course. It is unfortunate that another person has to create a problem for his fellow, without any practical reason. However, the most obvious thing here is that the one who created problems for Griselda is her own husband, the Marquis Saluzzo. This single fact can easily draw an anti-feminist reaction to the tale. Furthermore, the “ weaker” person is the one tested by the more powerful person, whereas by the virtues and actions the tale has told about them, Griselda is the more commendable of the two.

However, despite the made-up trials, she remained loyal to her husband; she did not even protest against the supposed murder of her children; she remained true to her promise. Rosemary Canfield Riesman of Salem Press also says in her feminist analysis of *The Canterbury Tales*, "Afterward[s], she continues to express her love for the man she believes is the murderer of her children." (Canfield Riesman, Salempress. com)

After all, did Griselda "live happily ever after"? Fortunately, for her, yes. It is her virtuousness that saved her and not her restored wealth and social status, which are just temporary and earthly things for the virtuous. And notice her reaction when she finally sees her children near the end of the story—for Griselda, it is enough to see her family complete, her children alive and well after all her trials.

On Walter

Walter is usually seen as a tyrant, which is rather unfortunate because as Canfield Riesman quotes Jill Mann, "There is no shred of support for Walter's behavior in the narrative; on the contrary, Chaucer carefully adds to it explicit condemnations of his obsessive desire to test Griselda." (Canfield Riesman, Salempress. com) Walter does not have to represent the general nobility in terms of personality; however, it is still important to consider that he is a member of the upper class, and he recognizes the power that he possesses, which is entailed to his social status. For example, he engages in leisurely hunting, which is a sport of the nobility of his time. Even the fact

that he always seeks immediate pleasures (as told in the first section of the tale) means that he has the free time to enjoy and not toil for a living.

The main question about Walter's character, however, is his "mysterious" motive for testing Griselda. Before he reveals the identity of their children (in the sixth section), he tells Griselda, "Be now no more aghast, nor evil paid, afraid, nor displeased/... /Now know I, deare wife, thy steadfastness."

(Chaucer, Gutenberg. net) However, his revealing of his motive does not explain the reason he had to test her steadfastness. Take note also that even Walter knew of Griselda's virtuousness even before he marries her; he observed this while he was hunting and sees her for the first time.

Furthermore, her virtues are one of the reasons why he married her.

Another interesting aspect of this tale is the irony that Walter shows. Just by looking at how Griselda and he were described in the early part of the story, two important inferences can be made—Griselda is ready to become a wife (mainly because of her industry and care for her father), while Walter is not ready to be a husband (because he did not care to marry and was only pressed to do so). Therefore, considering his attitude towards love and marriage, Walter should be the one tested whether he is steadfast in his love for Griselda, but that was not the situation: he was the one who tested his wife.

So why is he the one testing the other? The most probable answer is because he is the more powerful one in their relationship. He is the male and the one who is of noble birth. In addition, he took advantage of the fact that

Griselda had made a vow to follow all his orders. He has the freedom to make his wife do anything.

Another question is, if Walter's wife had been from the nobility, would he test her too? The answer here should not be prescriptive, because it is only almost a fifty-fifty chance that he will do it. Walter would have less ground to test a wife from nobility because she would have less reason to desire Walter's wealth. However, it is still quite possible to happen because of the nature of Walter's character. So, what does this say? Again, it suggests a prejudice against the laity because there is a seeming inclination that Walter will test someone from the lower class than someone from the upper class.

Moreover, let us go back to the subject about listening to the concerns of his people. Notice that as Walter turned to fulfill his personal motives, he also paid less or no attention to his people. The effect is that they were silenced. The surprising thing though, is that the people were the ones who first moved the plot of the story: they pressed Walter to get married for him to produce an heir. Also, they do not seem to loathe Griselda for her poor background at all, although Walter told Griselda they do. This is supported by the fact that they accompanied her home and wept for her when she had to leave Walter's palace (as told in the fifth section).

Despite all things said, Walter did have a happy ending for himself. The best gift he received, which also applies for Griselda, is the reconciliation of their family. But it is not true that he was the one who "saved" Griselda, because she was already saved by her own virtues. Thus, while Griselda may be

compared to a fairytale princess, Walter is not a Prince Charming, because he is the one who tempted the princess for personal reasons.

On Marriage and Society

The marriage of Walter and Griselda can be explained as an allegory of the relationship of the social classes. As frustrating as it may seem, the classes are usually at odds with one another, if not all the time. Moreover, the tension especially between the extreme ends of the social strata can be traced from even the early days of human history, and it was not different during the Middle Ages. And like in marriage, the upper and the lower classes still have unbreakable connections with each other, though there might seem to be clear differences between the two.

Let us look at the marriage as an allegory: Walter comes from the upper class while Griselda is from the lower class. At first, there is an attempt by Walter (upper class) to reconcile with the lower class (Griselda) by marrying her. Also, he heeded the people's call for him to marry, which suggests that he listens to the concerns of the laity. This can be best viewed as one of the good characteristics of Walter. However, this somehow diminished when he was already married and was already planning to test Griselda. From attending to the concerns of his people, he shifts his attention to personal matters, which manifested in his "need" to test his wife.

Nevertheless, the situation tells that there is a "need" to know whether the people are loyal to their lord, especially when putting it in the context of Medieval society. While the test means to gauge the people's loyalty,

another more important thing comes out of it: there is no complete trust of the lord in his people. At this point, a problem involving the two already appears. The most important thing that the testing tells is that, the one doing the action (the testing) is the more powerful one (the upper class). This is no different to the situation of Walter and Griselda. Walter has virtually all the power he needed to control his wife: he even made her promise to be always obedient to him. This is also almost true for the upper and lower classes. The upper class has more means to “pacify” the lower class: the former has (or can have) more political control over the other, has more material wealth, receives better education, etc. The lower class, however, mainly has one thing that may frighten the upper class: a collective action.

Conclusion

What makes the “Clerk’s Tale” interesting to study is that although it was written centuries ago, the upper class and the lower class are still “under the oath of marriage” today. The demarcation is still clear but the relationship is still intact.

Lastly, as it was said before, everything just boils down to morality. Who should hold the power to gauge the virtuousness of another person? Should Walter be the one testing Griselda? Should anyone subdue another? The position of this essay is that, no less virtuous person should judge a more virtuous fellow; and that social and political power never logically gives right to someone for him/her to abuse the less empowered—the unreasonable

trials of Griselda is an abuse of her humility. And in the end, the analysis of literature by looking at it in a socio-political context is still a questioning of human ethics. It all boils down to morality.

Works Cited

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