

The Fallibility of Interpretation and the Worth of Intent in “The Clerk’s Tale”

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David Lucia’s essay on interpretation and intent in Geoffrey Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale from the late fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales* is a deeply intelligent grappling with a tale that seems to offer its own brutally simple and dangerous interpretation: a wife who enables her murderous husband is like a good Christian who trusts God. In Lucia’s reading, the emotionally harrowing tale is about the act of interpretation itself, and the interplay with the story of varying interpretations of it by its teller, the Clerk; his reading of Petrarch’s story; the tale’s envoy; the Host’s reaction; and the Merchant’s response. It is Chaucer’s implicit challenge to your own interpretative hard work.

—Dr. Melissa Furrow

Within the corpus of *The Canterbury Tales*, “The Clerk’s Tale” presents a uniquely challenging narrative for the purpose of determining what meaning it holds. The Clerk himself delivers the tale with a degree of separation by insisting that his tale is in actuality the work of Petrarch, who preceded him. Throughout the tale, the Clerk repeatedly inserts personal asides and embellishments. Though this guides the reader toward a particular reading of the tale, it also obfuscates the meaning behind the Clerk’s words. Scholar that he is, the Clerk uses language carefully and knows well what difficulties his tale presents to his audience. The Clerk manipulates potential interpretations of the tale through the use of exemplum

and pathos, particularly in the rendering of Griselda as the long-suffering and perfectly obedient wife. Even upon directly stating the supposed moral of the tale, the Clerk detracts from his statement by once more invoking Petrarch who, despite the Clerk's repeated interjections into the story, remains absent from the bulk of the tale. Any potential meaning of the tale is further complicated by the final segment, in which the Clerk expounds upon his words in the conspicuous Envoy de Chaucer, followed - in certain manuscripts - by an exclamation from the Host which entirely ignores the Clerk's closing entreaty. By constantly obscuring the importance of some events within the tale and attempting to direct the reader toward particular interpretations for other events, the Clerk intentionally crafts a tale to perplex his audience while Chaucer as the author devises one with meanings far beyond the Clerk's intentions.

Beginning with the prologue to the tale itself, the Clerk establishes his desire to not hold any culpability for the story which follows. He immediately disavows himself from any personal responsibility by stating that this is "a tale which that [he] / Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk" (Chaucer IV 26-27). Even before beginning the actual tale, the Clerk has already begun to complicate what he claims to be the ultimate meaning of it: he claims that it is the work of Petrarch, and yet the moralization he provides at the end comes from himself. The assertion that "therefore Petrak writeth / This storie" (IV 1147-48) necessarily relies upon the Clerk's own interpretation of Petrarch's

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narrative, as the audience receives only the Clerk's words. The meaning which the Clerk took from Petrarch arises from his own interpretation of the tale, and in this way so too must the Clerk's audience derive some meaning through their own interpretations. The inherent difficulty of interpretation within and surrounding "The Clerk's Tale" becomes one of its central themes through Chaucer's simultaneous use of both evasive and pointed language as the ultimate author of the work. As Laura Ashe argues:

Above all, it seems to me that [the Clerk] must be regarded as a reader, for the simple reason that he tells such an ambiguous and difficult tale, and then airily explains it for us: first, following his own clerkly model, as an allegory of the soul, only then to offer further, progressively more flippant, readings. [...] The only thing I am certain it asserts is the vitality of reading. Implicitly, he is saying, a tale may not stand alone. A tale is opaque and incomplete without its being actively deciphered; that is to say, it must be given meaning by the participation of its interpreter. In this sense, then, the morality of a tale is a measure of the morality of its reader[.] (936)

"The Clerk's Tale" is not the first narrative in *The Canterbury Tales* which asks the audience whether the moral espoused by the narrator should be taken uncritically or not, but it is the story which most strongly questions if the moral is even the most important part of

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the tale. Both the Clerk and Chaucer are far more concerned with how the tale is perceived than with the closing moralization. Walter repeatedly deceives Griselda to test her devotion to him (Chaucer IV 463-517; 624-721; 760-812; 953-1050), while throughout many of these tests the Clerk interjects to portray Walter as an unethical monster (IV 460-62; 621-23; 722-35; 785) and Griselda as the woman of unending patience (IV 498-500; 537-53; 598-609; 708-721; 919-38; 949-50; 1043-50). Walter designs each of his tests to see if Griselda will remain true to her promise to him, but each of the tests relies upon Griselda's failure to perceive Walter's deception. Even as the Clerk bolsters his argument that the tale is meant to teach that "every wight, in his degree, / Sholde be constant in adversitee" (IV 1145-46), he repeatedly uses the language of interpretation to suggest the way that he and the characters within the tale perceive their circumstances. Chaucer as the author cannot be entirely removed from holding responsibility for this double layer of meaning within the tale. Shawn Normandin argues that Chaucer has a "poetic interest in enigma" which drives the presentation of "The Clerk's Tale" and coincides in purpose with the Clerk's own "vocational interest in controlling interpretation" (192). These reasons together inspire the Clerk to tell "a tale whose difficulties demand a clerk's gloss, an authoritative commentary that he delays, creating puzzlement" (Normandin 192). The Clerk's gloss is unsatisfactory as a simple explanation for the tale, however. If the tale could be accepted as nothing more than what the Clerk says at

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the end, it would lose the entire purpose behind why the Clerk pushes the audience toward a specific interpretation. The tale contains “a surplus of meaning rather than a deficit” (Mitchell 3) and demands a cautious prudence from the reader not unlike that which the Clerk ascribes to Griselda. As a theme, the question of how one should interpret a narrative permeates through the entirety of “The Clerk’s Tale.”

One can easily see the difficulty of the tale’s “surplus of meaning” by examining the two most prominent aspects of both Walter and Griselda. The narrative of the tale - Griselda’s total submission to Walter and Walter’s constant testing of her faith and constancy - invites a reading of the tale as an allegory for Christian faith. In this reading, Walter represents the final power and word of God and Griselda represents the willing and complete submission of the human mind and soul. The actual details of the tale complicate interpreting the tale as nothing more than allegory, however. Griselda is a picture of perfect patience, but her complete submission to Walter causes her to allow monstrous things to happen to herself and her children. When a sergeant arrives to take away her daughter because “[t]his child [he is] comanded for to take” (Chaucer IV 533), Griselda hesitates for only a moment before kissing the child farewell, fully believing her final words to her daughter, “this nyght shalt thou dyen for my sake” (IV 560). When Griselda allows the sergeant to take her son away as well (IV 673-86), even the Clerk’s

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interjection upon Walter's behalf expresses surprise and suspicion:

This markys wondred, evere lenger the moore,
Upon hir pacience, and if that he
Ne hadde soothly knowen therbifoore
That parfitly hir children loved she,
He wolde have wend that of som subtilee,
And of malice, or for crueel corage,
That she hadde suffred this with sad visage.
(IV 687-93)

Walter only can believe that Griselda has not parted with her children gladly because he knows she loves them perfectly as an exemplary mother. Alongside the Clerk's invocation of the Biblical Job to reinforce the totality of Griselda's "humblese" (IV 932-38), Griselda's sacrificing of her children also echoes the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham's willingness to give up Isaac to God stands as one of the greatest examples of religious obedience, presenting the idea that "in giving ourselves to an other we sacrifice others" (Mitchell 21). In the case of Abraham that first "other" is God himself, while for Griselda, Walter assumes the same position.

One crucial aspect of "The Clerk's Tale" is that Walter cannot represent a perfect allegory for God. Ashe argues that Walter "cannot be a figure of God in himself - he is too changeable, too unstable, too meretricious" (942). While he "exhibits God's absolute power" (Mitchell 3), Walter cannot represent God in a tale which so directly references

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Biblical ideas and portrays him as a character so apart from the divine ideal. Griselda's complete submission to Walter becomes a "specific kind of blasphemy called idolatry" (Mitchell 15); religious doctrine states that "[o]bedience is not to be given to a superior if it contradicts the will of God" (Aquinas, quoted in Morgan 4). His complete power over Griselda remains the only God-like aspect of him and even as a tester of faith for Griselda, Walter fails to uphold a potential reading of himself as God. Walter designs his tests specifically to tempt Griselda to break her promise to him, and as the Clerk himself states,

For sith a womman was so pacient
Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte
Receyven al in gree that God us sent;
For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte.
But he ne tempteth no man that he boghte,
As seith Seint Jame, ...

.....
And suffreth us, as for our exercise,
With sharpe scourges of adversitee
Ful ofte to be bete in sondry wise;
Nat for to knowe oure wyl, for certes he,
Er we were born, knew al oure freletee.
(IV 1148-54; 1156-60)

Walter tests Griselda because he is unsure of her resoluteness and constancy, and each test she passes only causes him to wish to test her even more harshly. The Clerk ceaselessly reinforces his perceptions of Walter as the monstrous superior and failed God archetype, and

Griselda as the supine subordinate. His repeated clarifications of Griselda's exemplary patience and Walter's unceasing testing "reduce[] interpretation to redundancy" (Normandin 201). Walter remains unconvinced of Griselda's commitment, but her unwavering loyalty quickly satisfies the Clerk that she "has already proven her constancy" and "earned the habit of goodness" (Raby 241). The Clerk urges the audience toward this reading even upon Walter's first test, stating that Walter "hadde assayed hire ynogh bifore" (Chaucer IV 456). Robert Worth Frank Jr. suggests that the tale espouses both the worth of complete obedience to a higher power and the complex and problematic nature of the suffering such obedience can inflict (192). The Clerk's consistent portraits of Walter and Griselda exemplify these ideas, but the tale as a whole encompasses a far wider variety of ideas.

A critical part of reading "The Clerk's Tale" arises from how the audience receives the ending of the tale. The Clerk invokes Petrarch once more while revealing what he believes to be the moral of the tale, once again removing himself from the responsibility of the tale despite the way he repeatedly inserts his own voice into it. The judgements of Griselda as full of "rype and sad corage" (Chaucer IV 220) and a woman of perfect "obeisaunce and diligence" (IV 230) come from the Clerk, not Petrarch. In like ways, the insistence that "yvele it sit / To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede, / And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede" (IV 460-63) comes directly from the Clerk. The Clerk puts

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particular strength into his assertion of this moral guidance; he thinks he must “make[] [the events of the tale] imaginatively and morally intelligible in a way that often seems to have been doubted” (Morgan 15). The closing segment of the tale undermines the Clerk’s attempts to guide his audience, however. Thomas J. Farrell argues that it is “essential ... to make the distinction” that “[t]he Envoy, while a part of the Clerk’s performance, is in some important way not a part of the *Clerk’s Tale*” (332). While the Envoy may not be a part of the tale itself, its sudden appearance at the end of “The Clerk’s Tale” is unavoidably noticeable. The Envoy directly addresses wives in the audience, urging them, “Folweth Ekko, that holdeth no silence” (Chaucer IV 1189) and “Ne suffreth nat that men yow doon offense” (IV 1197). Though the Clerk states in his prior closing statements that he believes it “[is] inportable” to expect wives to be as patient and humble as Griselda (IV 1143-44), the Envoy ardently opposes the thought that wives should suffer being put into any situations which would ask them to be like Griselda at all. Further complicating the tale is the extract from the Host which does not appear in all of the original manuscripts. In his later response to “The Merchant’s Tale,” the Host states his disdain for “whiche sleightes and subtilitees / In wommen been” (IV 2421-22), and when one views this alongside the extract at the end of “The Clerk’s Tale,” it becomes clear that the Host’s “purpos” and “wille” (IV 1212F) are to have a wife like Griselda. This closing section to “The Clerk’s Tale” - as well as “The Merchant’s

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Prologue” - serves a distinctive yet initially unclear purpose: every character who responds to the Clerk’s story does so in a way which ignores the Clerk’s moralizing. Taken alongside the Clerk’s insistence upon pushing his moral guidance onto the audience, the tale turns from one encouraging “every wight [...] / [To] be constant in adversitee” (IV 1145-46) into one which asks the audience to think about the act of interpretation itself.

“The Clerk’s Tale” remains a conundrum for its readers. The Clerk’s own voice persists throughout the tale as one purportedly of reason, imploring the reader to take the perspective the Clerk insists upon. However, the complexity of the characters within the story invites multiple potential readings; within the greater narrative of *The Canterbury Tales*, the other Pilgrims do not respond the way the Clerk urges. Chaucer, as the author, deliberately subverts the supposed message of “The Clerk’s Tale” to provide an examination of the diverse ways in which readers will respond to a story. The Clerk’s inability to convince his companions to follow his own moralization thus becomes part of the ultimate point of the tale, bolstering Chaucer’s overarching argument that careless words can easily lead the reader toward dangerous interpretations.

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