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Petrarch's Pleasures, Chaucer's Revulsions, and the Aesthetics of Renunciation in Late-Medieval Culture

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C HARTING THE HISTORY of emotions has a foundational role in medieval studies, but it cannot be considered a steadily developing one. This is clear from Johan Huizinga's most influential but controversial book, known to the English-speaking world since 1924 as *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. First appearing in Dutch in 1919, *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (literally, 'the autumn of the Middle Ages'), later revised (1921) then variously abridged and further revised in successive French, English, and German versions, Huizinga's study was built on a theory concerning the intensity of late-medieval emotional experience, compressed between potent aesthetic and other sensual pleasures, and pervasive constraints on and condemnations of those. "For medieval man," Huizinga declares—in one of his many controversially sweeping statements—all enjoyments of life were sinful. Thus were conjured "all the horrifying ideas about decomposition," including "disgustingly varied notion of the naked corpse": cramped hands and feet, gaping mouth, worms writhing in the intestines. In the Dutch version only, Huizinga wonders, was this "the reaction of an all too intense sensuality that can only awaken itself from its intoxication with life in this manner?" Or is it the "mood of disappointment and discouragement of one who has fought and won and now would prefer a complete surrender to that which is transcendent, but somehow is still too close to earthly passion to be able to make

that surrender?"¹ In the end he favors the idea that "in all of this [there was] a spirit of tremendous materialism that could not bear the thought of the passing of beauty without despairing of beauty itself" (160).

Huizinga's emphasis on the lurid and emotive as the signature mood of late-medieval culture has given his study a bad name in many recent scholarly quarters. But in its original form, his study supplies some topics worth reviving. The comments I have quoted above, for example, from the original Dutch differ fundamentally from the English translation of 1924. In the latter, the discussion of corpse images simply moralizes: "these preachers of contempt for the world express, indeed, a very materialistic sentiment, namely, that all beauty and all happiness are worthless because they are bound to end soon. Renunciation founded on disgust does not spring from Christian wisdom."²

With the Dutch edition now available in English, it can now be seen that Huizinga's study articulated theories about not only the complex status of pleasure in medieval art and literature but also about the history of emotions as a history of the aesthetic—and how renunciation or "contempt for the world" functioned as a key element in both. Indeed, a section framing his entire study, but dropped from the 1924 English translation, proposes a broad, analytical view of the shifting status of the aesthetic as defined by the varying boundary of renunciation or "contempt of the world." In this passage, wholly absent from the popular English version, Huizinga speculates that in medieval culture, licit aesthetic pleasure "lay, in the best of cases, right after reading; the enjoyment of reading could only be sanctified through striving for virtue or wisdom" (40). The Renaissance "managed to free itself from the rejection of all the joy of life as something sinful," but established no clear principle dividing higher and lower pleasures; thus it yielded to the rigors of Puritanism, whose condemnation of "the beautification of life" reawakened a medieval tradition, allowing only forms of beauty that "assumed expressly religious forms and sanctified themselves through their use in the service of faith." With the fading of Puritanism, a new distinction between licit and illicit aesthetic pleasure appeared, which Huizinga considered the basis for "spiritual attitudes" up to the present. A decisively secular version of renunciation reemerged within the aesthetic itself. In this episteme, which he con-

1. Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammtzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 159. Further citations in the text, unless noted, are to this edition. The history of the text is discussed by Payton and Mammtzsch, ix–xviii.

2. Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, trans. F. Hopman (London: E. Arnold, 1924), 136.

sidered to obtain henceforth, “anyone attempting to draw the dividing line between the high and lower enjoyment of life according to the dictates of ethical consciousness would no longer separate art from sensuous enjoyment, the enjoyment of nature from the cult of the body, the elevated from the natural, but would only separate egotism, lies, and vanity from purity” (40–41).

These ambitious claims suggest that the aesthetic, initially rejected, gradually became the encompassing field for both emotions and ethics, with, moreover, the impulse for renunciation serving as a central impetus to both. Perhaps Huizinga judged this perspective too abstract or severe for the American audience he sought in 1924 (whose desires for “This Here, and Soon” Huizinga privately sneered at)—though the passage was also missing from the 1938 French abridgment.³ At any rate, the absence from his book’s popular English version of a more complex view of the changing emotional and ethical place of the aesthetic in terms of the varying categories of “purity” and renunciation may partly explain why for decades so few medieval scholars pursued the history of emotion. A key but fleeting exception was Lucien Febvre. Febvre’s essays on “histoire et sentiment” (1941 and 1943) focus on Huizinga’s study (using the French abridgment) and, though objecting to Huizinga’s claim that the late Middle Ages was uniquely fraught with emotion, approve the idea of using literature, art, and moral writings to begin “une vaste enquête collective sur les sentiments fondamentaux des hommes et leurs modalités.”⁴ Such interdisciplinary scope defines the grand agenda of the “Annales” school of history that Febvre helped found. But the focus on emotion as such, much less the aesthetic as its focal point, almost never emerged in that journal or its intellectual tradition.

The seed, however, sprang up most richly on the post-medieval side of cultural history, often based on a supposition that emotions were raw forces that had to be controlled and “civilized,” a process that (as in Norbert Elias’s influential work) explicitly occurred *after* the “Middle Ages,” which by definition were the period of unconstrained passions—as if emotions were best seen as simply “there,” gushing forces to be channeled or unleashed depending on situation.⁵ By now, histories of emotion have deployed more varied methods and reached many more periods and topics, to explain, for

3. The abridged and revised French is *Le déclin du Moyen-Âge*, trans. Julia Bastin (Paris: Payot, 1938).

4. Lucien Febvre, “La sensibilité et l’histoire: Comment reconstituer la vie affective d’autrefois?” *Annales d’histoire sociale* 3 (1941): 18.

5. See the excellent overview by Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Theories of Change in the History of Emotions,” in *A History of Emotions, 1200–1800*, ed. Jonas Liliequist (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 7–20. Rosenwein describes Elias’ approach as based on the “hydraulic” theory of emotions.

instance, the "irrationality" of economic behavior, or the sociology of religion.⁶ Focus on affect has gained particular visibility in twentieth century studies, where it is greeted as an important new strategy for pondering the nature of "the aesthetic."⁷ Indeed, the rebirth of this topic is due to modern cultural historians such as Raymond Williams, but also, though much less visibly outside their own fields, to a growing number of medievalists. These, as if in direct opposition to Huizinga's sweeping propositions, have usually preceded in tightly focused scope and phenomenological detail, seeking the distinctive cultivation and privileging—rather than simply the unleashing—of specific emotions and postures, attempting to locate these within specific spiritual strategies and local political meanings, even within quite narrowly specific "emotional communities."⁸

This sharpening of focus and method is invaluable. Yet a broader view has seemed to recede from medievalists' grasp. As Barbara Rosenwein, a major contributor to the reemergence of a medieval history of emotions, observes, in spite of all the important results of recent studies, "we do not gain [from them] a sense of the general shape of emotions' history over the long haul."⁹ Huizinga's recently translated thoughts on broad shifts in the boundaries between illicit and licit aesthetic emotion from the late fourteenth through the sixteenth century, and especially the moving boundary between affirmation and denunciation of the "pleasures of life," may, therefore, still be useful for reopening the relation between late-medieval aesthetics and renunciation, as situated within particular but larger cultural terms.

6. George Lowenstein and Scott Ricks, "Economics (Role of Emotion in)," in *Oxford Companion to Emotion and the Affective Sciences*, ed. David Sander and Klaus R. Scherer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 131–33; Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

7. See, e.g., Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

8. Raymond Williams's early exploration of "structures of feeling" as "social experiences in solution" remains the crucial starting point: *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–35. For the adoption of such concerns in medieval inquiries, see, e.g., Barbara H. Rosenwein, ed., *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); and the important range of essays in Piroska Nagy and Damien Boquet, eds., *Le sujet des émotions au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Beauchesne, 2008); for Chaucer, see John Hill, *Chaucerian Belief: The Poetics of Reverence and Delight* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); for Gower and others, see Andrew Galloway, "The Literature of 1388 and the Politics of Pity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," in *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, ed. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 67–104. See also Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009). The phrase "emotional communities" derives from the important study of sixth- and seventh-century Gaul by Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

9. Rosenwein, "Theories of Change in the History of Emotions," 19.

The Griselda story presents an especially “passionate” focus for the fusion of aesthetics and renunciation on a European-wide scale. This account of a woman impassively accepting her husband’s tormenting “testing” of her stoic vows of obedience to him, which circulated widely between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, has indeed already elicited some important hints at an inquiry of the kind suggested above, in Anne Middleton’s 1980 essay, “The Clerk and his Tale: Some Literary Contexts.”¹⁰ In the context of the present interest in such studies, those hints deserve to be revisited and expanded. In her essay, Middleton drew attention to the strange pleasures of Francesco Petrarch, the looming source of Chaucer’s version of this tale, including the emotional reactions that, he claims, his recitations of the tale provoked. In his prefatory letter to his Latin translation of Boccaccio’s story of patient Griselda in the *Decameron*, Petrarch, writing in 1373, a year before his death, declares that the story

ita michi placuit meque detinuit ut, inter tot curas pene mei ipsius que immemorem me fecere, illam memorie mandare voluerim, ut et ipse eam animo quociens vellem non sine voluptate repeterem, et amicis ut fit confabulantibus renarrarem.

[so pleased and detained me that, among so many concerns that made me almost unmindful of myself, I wished to commit it to memory, so that I might repeat it in my mind often, not without pleasure, and retell it to friends with whom I happened to be speaking.]¹¹

So too, as Petrarch goes on to declare, when he allowed the tale to be read by a friend from Padua, “a man of the highest intellect and broad knowledge,”

10. Anne Middleton, “The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1980): 123; hereafter cited in the text.

11. Until the completion of the *Res Seniles* from the series VII Centenario della Nascita di Francesco Petrarca (Florence: Casa Editrice Le Lettere), the fullest critical edition of this portion of the *Res Seniles* (17.3) remains Thomas J. Farrell and Amy W. Goodwin, eds. and trans., in *Sources and Analogues of the “Canterbury Tales,” vol. 1*, ed. Robert M. Corrales and Mary Hamel, *Chaucer Studies* 28 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 108–29, here at 109–11. Further quotations of Petrarch’s letter to Boccaccio retelling the Griselda story are from this edition, cited by page in the text. Translations of all texts here are mine unless noted. The most complete editions of Petrarch remain the sixteenth-century editions, e.g., *Petrarchi Opera Omnia* (Basel: Henricus Petri, 1554), 3 vols., more readily available because of Google books than most of the modern editions of the Latin. Modern critical editions of various portions of Petrarch’s letters and other writings are cited below. Those seeking English translations are more fortunate: see Aldo Bernardo, trans., *Letters on Familiar Matters*, 3 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982–85; repr., New York: Italica Press, 2005); and Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin, and Reta A. Bernardo, trans., *Letters of Old Age*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992; repr., New York: Italica Press, 2005).

this man repeatedly "stopped, being overcome by sudden weeping," and after several attempts had to pass the work to another person to finish reading it. This Petrarch judges to be a better response than that of another reader who said he *would* have wept had he believed that the tale could be true, but he was able to persist dry eyed by the conviction that women such as Griselda could not exist. Such inability to conceive of an extreme response merely shows that "there are some who consider whatever is difficult for them, impossible for everyone," judging everyone simply "by their own measure."¹²

Observing these emotional strands linking the story's circulation, Middleton notes that Petrarch's framing of the tale, with these mentions of its further readers, defines a process not of textual interpretation in the medieval clerical vein but a confirmation of a new kind of literary vocation and its participants: "the ideal of the lettered life as a vocation, an international community of the elect, whose changing moods and various tasks are to its secular devotees as fast, meditations, prayers, and self-examinations are to the vowed religious" (127–28). It is thus "justification of . . . refined style and thought as a way of life at once secular and otherworldly, an *apologia* for the life of the untensured and unbeneficed clerk" (133), which "constitutes Petrarch's chief invention" (149). The historical point neatly foreshadows subsequent critical comment on Petrarch, such as Giuseppe Mazzotta's discussion of Petrarch's "ethics of writing" as a new "theory of culture that is rooted in leisure, *otium*, which is [both] the core value of monastic contemplation and is the ideal of classical humanism."¹³ Middleton, focusing on the new status of secular literary production, further argued that the *Clerk's Tale* invokes and extends the ideals of Petrarchan literary vocation and community, challenging the simple dichotomy of "serious" and "playful" kinds of literature. Instead, the tale is offered as refreshment of a new kind, by which literary play tests the "noble heart and the refined feelings," using a style "to be judged by the standards proper to poetic fable, and . . . tested by its adequacy to that affective rhetorical end" (135). In Chaucer, the Clerk's bookish demonstration of this affective testing challenges the Host's more traditional ideas of the extremes of clerical performance as either humor or didacticism. Against those options, Middleton says, the Clerk instead purveys a new kind of Petrarchan "serious entertainment" (147).

Subsequent decades have seen much attention to Chaucer's confrontation with Petrarchan modes of literature and aesthetics. David Wallace's

12. *Seniles* 17.4, *Letters of Old Age*, 2:669.

13. Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 92, 148.

studies have been particularly suggestive and influential. Wallace takes the *Clerk's Tale* as a key to a conflicting movement across Chaucer's writings between two literary and political paradigms: that of the "absolutist" outlook of Petrarch, whom Wallace (in vigorous resistance to other Petrarchan criticism) takes as a misogynist tool of autocrats, and that of a more associational, mercantile world epitomized by Boccaccio.¹⁴ Yet even Wallace's major contributions to our understanding of what Petrarch and Chaucer did with this tale have not pursued the affective and aesthetic implications of renunciation on which Middleton fleetingly remarked. In both Petrarch's and Chaucer's versions of the tale, affect is so mobile and self-contradictory that it invites fuller examination. Contemplating the passionate responses by those who read the tale he wrote, for instance, Petrarch immediately recalls Juvenal (*Satire* 15, lines 131-32),

mollissima corda
humano generi dare se natura fatetur . . .

[Nature admits
She gives the human race the softest hearts . . .]

The irony, unstated by Petrarch though informing everything he says about the tale, is that this trait is precisely what Griselda does not display.

Indeed, part of the force of the tale is that the contradictory emotions it presents and evokes are exchanged and shared by all those encountering Griselda's impassivity, beginning with those around her in the story itself and extending out to the narrator and his portrayed readers. Pleasure mixed with distress seems to slide as easily into Gualterius's tears of sympathy when he expels Griselda from his house to make way for a new bride (actually her returning daughter, whom he himself had abducted) as it does into the joy he has "proving" Griselda's "hardness" in the face of the torments he inflicts on her. Griselda's nearly silent victory over fortune and necessity may define a severe form of pleasure, that of executing a form with perfect control over self. Yet she gains this victory by not providing even a glimpse of her pain for others to witness and share. *Not* openly sharing emotion is her triumph, the challenge she places before her husband Gualterius as well as the succes-

14. David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), esp. 261–98; and Wallace, "Griselda before Chaucer: Love between Men, Women, and Farewell Art," in *Through a Classical Eye: Transcultural and Transhistorical Visions in Medieval English, Italian, and Latin Literature in Honour of Winthrop Wetherbee*, ed. Andrew Galloway and R. F. Yeager (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 206–20.

sion of moved male readers and redactors—an exceedingly non-Aristotelian premise for literary efficacy.

Such pleasures as *Griselda's* history offers her readers and, implicitly, herself is, of course, deeply ascetic, in the sense of denying the "normal" emotional attachments and their expressions. But the story, in Petrarch's and then Chaucer's hands, provides a means for probing more deeply the affective complexities that secular asceticism involves, and moreover for tracing how those features might have resonated with different ideological and discursive strands in Italy and in England. By "ideology" I mean what is unconscious or at least assumed as a beginning point for thought; by "discursive" I mean widespread terms and notions that could gain meanings or lose credibility, even survive as or be inverted into something like their opposite. In these terms there is what we may consider a cultural rather than simply immediately material history of deprivation and need.¹⁵ Hans Baron's studies of Petrarch's varying dedication to philosophies praising some form of severely Spartan livelihood, if never harsh poverty, Franciscanism or Stoicism, situate this issue in late-medieval intellectual culture in general and Petrarch's Italy in particular.¹⁶ Such work can spur further cultural, psychological, and aesthetic inquiries into how need as such is figured in both authors in relation to aesthetics, and in turn to the broader cultural contexts they inhabit.

Petrarch's version of the story emphasizes the good of redirecting desire away from the worldly benefits that Fortune controls. But Petrarch's account also suggests Gualterius's longing for identification with a glacially remote figure who incarnates such an ideal state of being, and this in turn appears to spur Gualterius's repeated effort to dominate and control *Griselda* utterly. Political postures directly follow from this complex power relation. David Wallace suggests that Petrarch, as a despotic supporter of tyrants and covert misogynist, finds a surrogate or calque in Gualterius as tyrant. Theories of gender identities and dynamics are also significant. Wallace shrewdly notes Petrarch's tendency to "play the woman"—in the sense of using conciliatory and intellectually flirtatious rhetoric—in his dealings with other men.¹⁷ Wallace elsewhere amplifies this to suggest that the patterns of identifica-

15. See Andrew Galloway, "The Economy of Need in Late Medieval English Literature," *Viator* 40 (2009): 309–31.

16. Hans Baron, "Franciscan Poverty and Civic Wealth in the Shaping of Trecento Humanistic Thought: The Role of Petrarch," and "Franciscan Poverty and Civic Wealth in the Shaping of Trecento Humanistic Thought: The Role of Florence," both in *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 1:158–225.

17. Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 365.

tion in Petrarch's address to Boccaccio move in many directions: "within the restricted, all-male environs of this tale-world, . . . any one man can play all the parts, imagine himself into all the subject positions: Petrarch is Walter and Boccaccio Griselda; Galeazzo Visconti is Walter of Salerno and Petrarch is simple-hearted, poor-loving Griselda; and so on."¹⁸

But renunciation, especially the refusal to make one's own need an object of others' control, has further properties not entirely subsumable to gender or politics. The capacity to derive pleasure from a mastery of pain and need, by oneself or another, may be pondered through the psychosocial operations that Friedrich Nietzsche—founding figure, surely, in the psycho-historical study of emotion—describes for asceticism. Nietzsche asserts that, in Christian culture, primal impulses to violence and aggression are transformed into asceticism in order to provide those impulses a sense of meaning.¹⁹ This focus on inverted and redirected violence is certainly apt for this tale's pretended deaths, pretended divorce, and constant and real competition: a swarm of aggressive energies brought to an apotheosis in the self-inflicted violence of Griselda's immunity to any emotional reaction. Her domestic asceticism serves as the epitome of redirected violence in the secular realm, whereby she is made a marvel for and an aggressive challenge to all around her.

Nietzsche's terms may moreover help us proceed further into the principles of aestheticism as well as asceticism. If asceticism is one form of violence redirected, aesthetics based on renunciation is logically another. A zeal for formal control and emotional discipline suggests a principle of the aesthetic particularly suited to late-medieval culture in the terms that Huizinga suggested, especially if considered—as it briefly will be below—against the new forms of renunciation and status of neediness developing in England and Italy. As Petrarch presents Gualterius, the latter's affirmation of Griselda's *sculpting* of herself—behaving with perfect grace under endless torments, displaying decorous restraint for its own sake beyond any interest in the immediate elements of her various kinds of social dependency—smoothly rebounds to Gualterius's own profit. His project of "testing" her seems designed to restore his own faith in the human capacity to make the needy self into a transcendently valuable entity. Such testing also, incidentally, proves his discernment in seeing her as a prospect for demonstrating this: "because he had recognized so clearly the extraordinary virtue concealed

18. Wallace, "Griselda before Chaucer," 213.

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Third Essay: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?" *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 231–99.

by her poverty, his prudence was widely praised" (*vulgo prudentissimus habebatur*; pp. 118–19).

Such pleasure in sculpted, renunciatory subjectivity is clearly tied to the Boethian and stoic tradition, and on this score Petrarch and Chaucer had much in common. Petrarch's *voluptas*, he says, derives from being 'recalled to himself' by reading and frequently meditating on the story of Griselda, amid so many cares that he had nearly forgotten himself (*inter tot curas pene mei ipsius que immemorem me fecere*; p. 111). Until he stumbled onto this tale, he was "angry" with himself and with the things distracting him (*et illis et michi, ut sic dixerim, iratus*; p. 111). Apart from its emphasis on self-inflicted anger, Petrarch's introduction follows the opening of Boethius's *De consolazione*, when Philosophia first arrives to guide the lachrymose narrator toward learning to be *sibi ipse sufficiens*, sufficient unto himself. As with Petrarch's frame for his tale, Boethius begins with Philosophia's efforts to bring Boethius's attention back from cares in which he has forgotten himself:

Sui paulisper oblitus est; recordabitur facile, si quidem nos ante cognoverit.
Quod ut posit, paulisper lumina eius mortalium rerum nube caligantia
tergamus.

["He has for a little forgotten himself. He will soon recover—he did, after all, know me before—and to make this possible for him, let me for a little clear his eyes of the mist of mortal affairs that clouds them."] ²⁰

Self-sufficiency in the face of fortune's blows is a pervasive if not banally common late-medieval ethical and literary ideal. Yet this may be seen not as a simple goal to have an uncaring immunity to necessity or need, but as a constantly induced struggle, deliberately solicited by constant reminders of the state of contingency that threatens the self and its ideal self-possession. Thus, as J. Allan Mitchell says, Boethian *fortuna* is "more than a figure to be discarded on the way toward philosophical enlightenment": Fortune presents a "fundamental *datum* . . . without which enlightenment will not come in the *Consolation*."²¹ The most dynamically staged encounters with need and with the opportunities for renunciation that Fortuna provides appear more

20. *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, I. metrum ii.1–5; prosa.ii.9–16. Text and translation (the latter modified for a more literal sense) are from *Boethius: The Theological Tractates and the "Consolation of Philosophy"*, ed. and trans. H. F. Tester, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); hereafter cited in text.

21. J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Eventfulness in Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 16–17.

commonly in works by secular than religious writers in the later Middle Ages. This emergence of secular asceticism, a regularly enacted affirmation of “refined style and thought as a way of life at once secular and otherworldly” as Middleton says, may be a chief reason for the Griselda story’s popularity. Certainly, new ideals of secular asceticism are found in England as well as Italy, as in the range (some politically dangerous) of kinds of self-denial explored by the English nobility, from ostentatiously austere funerals to flirtations with Lollardy. So clear is this refined asceticism that the mysterious ‘S-S’ in the Lancastrian livery might even refer to the Boethian ideal of *sibi ipse sufficiens*, most likely in the English nobility’s French, “soi suffisant.”²²

The ideal, even its place in secular noble culture, is faithful enough to Boethius’s work, whose narrator must learn to set aside emotional attachments in the midst of past or present wealth (which makes you more needy), glory, even pride in his children, in favor of an acceptance of his own free choice yet the perfect perspective of a God who stands outside of any agonies of hope or despair, or any temporal frame at all. Thus Boethius’s argument avoids either imposing “necessity” on our free choices or, “to shift the force of necessity over to the other side,” as Boethius’s *Philosophia* says (*necessarium hoc in contrariam relabi partem*), imposing necessity on God himself, by making him the helpless perceiver of actions we carry out. And just as God is perfectly self-sufficient, not subject to need or necessity, so we can seek some measure of that by contemplating without fully grasping God’s perfect understanding, which gives him foreknowledge “in some way” concerning “even those things which have no certain occurrence” (V.pr.v). All this, so familiar in Petrarch’s and well as Chaucer’s writings, reformulates the Stoic position, especially as that appears in Seneca, but with important refinements. One is that acceptance of and submission to Fortune’s mutability as such is precisely an expression of free-will. A further implication is that such submission may allow self-sufficiency even while enjoying the goods of this world, so long as their basic limit—that we cannot truly possess them the way we can always possess ourselves—is recognized.²³ Boethian self-

22. On aristocratic asceticism at funerals, see Jeremy Catto, “Religion and the English Nobility in the Later Fourteenth Century,” in *History and Imagination: Essays in Honor of H. R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 43–55; on their connections to Lollardy, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 110–17; on the mysterious ‘S-S’ badge (without the suggestion made here), see Doris Fletcher, “The Lancastrian Collar of Esses: Its Origin and Transformations down the Centuries,” in *The Age of Richard II*, ed. James Gillespie (Phoenix Mill, UK: Sutton, 1997), 191–203.

23. For the intellectual lineage of both Stoicism and Platonism behind these issues in Boethius,

sufficiency does not *require* full deprivation of worldly goods: a point that is crucial for the success of this outlook in affluent late-medieval courtly worlds. Such self-possession is a dynamic encounter with need, not a state of grinding indigence. Its performance involves a rigor both ascetic and aesthetic, marked by "trials" of self-control which thus affirm a worldly but inner self's transcendent value.

Certainly Griselda's self-sufficiency is dynamically sustained in Petrarch's narrative, a matter of her overcoming again and again the force of "hard necessity," as she rises to unheard of heights then falls, then rises again. The good and bad fortune that randomly descend on her, *negotium inopinatum*, the "necessity" or "hard necessity" of obeying that confront her as it does Gualterius's other servants (*necessitas parendi; dura parendi necessitas*), and the increasingly frequent descriptions of Gualterius's own tormenting demands as springing from his "hard" will or "inhuman hardness" (*inhumana duricia*)—all these provide opportunities for her and her readers to revel in indomitable self-possession, which trumps Gualterius's or necessity's hardness with even greater hardness. The climax in Petrarch is when she hears of Gualterius's supposed plan to marry a new wife and send her away: "Que fama cum ad Griseldis noticiam pervenisset, tristis, ut puto. Sed ut que semel de se suisque de sortibus statuisset, inconcussa constitit" ("who, when such news had come to Griselda, was sad, as I suppose. But just as she had stood fast once before concerning the fortune allotted to herself and her children, so she stood unbowed"; 123).

An early and otherwise authoritative manuscript of Petrarch's *Epistolae Senilis*, Cambridge, Peterhouse College MS 81, here reads "as she had stood *senilis* [mature]" as a variant for *semel* ("once and for all") found in the other manuscripts (123). That reading, though probably not authorial, suggests contemporary awareness of the key terms and issues. For the textual variant in question echoes Petrarch's frequent elaboration of "maturity" as a label for the ability to feel deeply yet rise to control the self fully, and indeed to forge want and its lack into a subtle instrument for defining and to some extent controlling identity. Petrarch introduces Griselda by mentioning her "virilis senilisque animus" ("manly and mature soul"; 115), and Petrarch's own ideal as the writer of "mature letters," *Epistolae Senilis*, link this to himself directly. Griselda's manly, *senilis* soul is trained like that of a Spartan warrior by her hard upbringing: "Hec parco victu, in summa semper inopia educata, omnis inscia voluptatis, nil molle nil tenerum cogitare didicerat,

see John Magee, "The Good and Morality: *Consolatio* 2–4," in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. John Marenbon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 181–206, esp. 185–86.

sed viriles senilisque animus virgineo latebat in pectore” (“with little food, raised always in the worst poverty, entirely ignorant of pleasure, she learned to think of nothing soft or tender, but a manly and mature soul lay hidden in her virginal breast”; 115). She even turns her “manly and mature” zeal for competition onto her supposed rival, Gualterius’s proposed new bride. In response to his final demand that she prepare the wedding feast for his new bride by whom Griselda herself thinks she is being replaced, she proclaims her final triumph: “Unum bona fide te precor ac moneo,” she tells Gualterius before the wedding, “ne hanc illis aculeis agites quibus alteram agitasti. Nam quod et iunior et delicatius enutrita est, pati quantum ego auguror non valeret” (“yet in good faith I ask and pray for one thing: do not sting her with those goads that you have used on another woman. For she is younger and more delicately raised, and I imagine that she cannot endure so much”; 127).

Petrarch’s Griselda has a fully “needy” thus fully worldly and contingent self, but she protects and affirms the value of that by her mastery of that self and world, including an aggressive competition to *be needed* more than she herself needs. This goal, involving display and manipulation of those viewing and seeking, is consistent with Petrarch’s other strategies of conferring value on his own intellectual and literary production. He often deploys remarkably subtle control—remarkable for a period before any sense of copyright—of how his writing is kept scarce, or seemingly scarce. It is Petrarch’s regular practice to drive up his texts’ value by coy reluctance or delays or apparent negligence in purveying his works, by gestures of destroying or threatening to destroy them, and by insisting that he has no need for mere worldly goods, including the writings he continually produces. He claims to be outraged, for instance, when someone to whom he has sent a passage from his *Africa* has secretly made a copy of it, and disseminated it before Petrarch says he was ready.²⁴ These Griselda-like strategies are clear as early as Petrarch’s claim at the beginning of his *Epistolae rerum familiarum* that he has assembled the cumulative body of his letters and prose and verse out of the fragments of what he was too tired to throw into the fire. The gesture of his value beyond any material value continues to his final sentence in his *Testament*, that “Ego Franciscus Petrarca scripsi, qui testamentum aliud fecissem, si essem dives, ut vulgus insanum putat” (“I, Francesco Petrarca, have written this, who would have drawn up a different testament if I were rich, as the insane rabble believes me to be”).²⁵

24. *Seniles* 2.1; *Letters of Old Age*, 1:38–39.

25. *Petrarch’s Testament*, ed. and trans. Theodor E. Mommsen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957), 92–93.

Such supposed disinterest in worldly literary glory in order to provoke and incite others' need for him might be seen as a form of profiteering, whose commodities are both his works and his own capacity to generate them, all framed by his often violent gestures of depriving any readers of them:²⁶

Itaque cuncta passim occursantia uno impetu vastanti et ne his quidem—
ut tunc erat animus—parsuro, vestrum alter ad levam, alter ad dextram
adesse visus, et apprehensa manu, ne fidem meam et spes vestras uno igne
consumerem, familiariter admonere. Hec illis evadendi precipua causa fuit;
alioquin, crede michi, cum reliquis arsissent.

[Therefore, as I was about to destroy everything that came to hand with one impulse and certainly not planning on sparing these [works that I am now sending]—for such was my intention—one of you two [friends] seemed to appear to me to my right, and the other to my left, just as my hand was raised, and to admonish me that I not destroy in a single blaze both my promise to you and your faith. This was the main reason why these works were spared; otherwise, believe me, they would have burned with the rest.]²⁷

Such threats, like Petrarch's more casual use of delays or long silences, seem designed to evoke further desire for the philosophical and literary "goods" he possesses and only reluctantly purveys (e.g., closing a letter, "my book, *De vita solitaria*, which you request as solace for your solitude, I cannot send for the present, for I had only two copies and no more, to begin with").²⁸

This complex manipulation of scarcity and need, his own and others', and violence against himself as well as others, all redirected to the pursuit of a uniquely prestigious secular literature, pose some complications to the view that Petrarch's understanding of and commitments to need were "traditional." Thus for Baron, Petrarch tended to restrain his "wavering ideas on poverty and avarice" to more traditionally anti-civic conclusions and a "philosophy of withdrawal" from the relations of wealth and power in urban Italian life, from which he finally retired near the end of his life to take up a

26. This claim stands in contrast to the view of David Wallace in *Chaucerian Polity*, who presents Petrarch in stark opposition to Boccaccio's use of "story-telling as commerce" (365). My view of Petrarch's "absolutist" mode is fundamentally indebted to Wallace's arguments, but I do not see this mode as inconsistent with the ethic that subtends mercantile and capitalist culture.

27. *Epistolae de rebus familiaribus* 1.1; Latin text from *Pétrarque: Lettres familières I-III / Rerum familiarum I-III*, ed. Ugo Dotti and trans. (in French) André Longpré (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2002), 21.

28. *Res Seniles* 10.1; *Letters of Old Age*, 2:357.

life as rural and “simple” as he had had in his early years.²⁹ Rather than only slightly testing the limits of traditional intellectual commitments to poverty and renunciation, Petrarch’s emotional performances can be read as generating a novel if paradoxical affirmation of a self-interested scale of values, a continual manipulation of want and deprivation that generated supple ways of creating a sense of value in his writings as commodities, and in renunciation itself as a form of abundance, profit, and aestheticism. As Gur Zak argues, Petrarch’s goal is not to “renounce the self” but rather “elucidate the truth about his condition and assimilate and internalize it to establish the self as an authority over itself, over the passions and the fluctuations of fortune.”³⁰

As this logic suggests, secular asceticism participates in other cultural mechanisms and issues, especially what is commonly identified as “singular profit” or self-interest. Both Italy and England included many voices asserting that such appetites were a major, indeed growing, problem, and both cultures energetically sought to contain the values of self-interested economic pursuits, especially mercantilism, within larger rationalizations. The idea of need is central to these. Thus as the Italian Dominican Thomas Aquinas wrote in the 1270s, drawing on Aristotle’s *Politics*, there are only two kinds of exchange: one is “natural and necessary, by means of which one thing is exchanged for another, or things for money to meet the needs of life”—an exchange carried out not by traders but by “household managers or statesmen, who have to provide a family or a state with the necessaries of life.” The other is that of “money for money or of things for money, not to meet the needs of life, but to acquire gain.” The first, serving “natural needs” and possessing a “necessary end,” is virtuous; the second is categorically dishonorable, because it serves the desire for gain, which, unlike natural need and necessity, knows no limits. For Aquinas, a system based on the pursuit of profit inevitably entails endless desire, a condition he assumes would be enacted in the hearts of individual participants. Traders may direct their gains to “some necessary end,” such as for the support of a household “or even to help the needy,” and only then is gain justified.³¹

In England, by the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries an elaborate social contract was sometimes spun out of the idea of need. Thus *Dives and Pauper*, a prose English dialogue between a “Rich man” and a “pauper” writ-

29. Baron, “Franciscan Poverty: Petrarch,” 177, 180.

30. Gur Zak, *Petrarch’s Humanism and the Care of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 116. Though Zak’s ideas are consistent with the arguments here, Zak makes only passing mention of the story of Griselda, and in a different connection (156–57).

31. *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae q.77 art. 4. resp.

ten 1405–10 in East Anglia and extant in four copies, draws fully on Aquinas but goes further to define need as the central principle of social cohesion:

Diues. Ȝif alle meen weryn as pore as þu art, þu shuldyst fare wol euele. *Pauper.* Ȝif alle meen weryn as ryche as þu art, þu shuldyst faryn mechil wers. Qhoo schulde þanne tylþin þin lond? Whoo schulde heldyn þyn plow? Qhoo repyn þyn corn? Qhoo kepyn þinne beestys? Qhoo shapyn þinne clothis or sowyn hem? What myllere wolde þann gryndyn þyn corn? Qhat baxtere bakyn þyin bred? Qhat broustere brewyn þin ale? Qhat cook dyghtyn þin mete? Qhat smyth, qhat carpenter, amendyn þin hous and othere thynggys necessarye? Þu shuldyst moun goon sholes and clothles and goon to þin bed meteles. Al muste þu þanne doon alone . . . þerfore seyȝt Seynt Austyn quod diues et pauper sunt duo sibi necessaria. The ryche man and the pore been too thynggys wol needful iche to other. And, as I seyde ferst, the ryche man hatȝ more nede of the pore mannys helpe þan the pore of the ryche.³²

As so detailed an elaboration suggests, this theory of social and economic relations seeks to acknowledge and discipline ever-wider ranges of individual and this-worldly need. The Thomistic solution is luxuriously expanded into an entire economy, although it thereby risks losing any claim to be a strictly ethical or spiritual analysis.

Indeed, from the mid fourteenth century on is found the notion of neediness as a particularly worrisome affirmation of personal, subjective registers, in which “need” was not an objectively claimed category to be defined in others, but an affect affirmed by the subject—*I need*. This inversion of all objective morality opened “need” into “want,” in the sense of unverifiable, unlimited desires.³³ The ambiguity visible in the word itself points to something fundamentally destabilizing in the notion of need in late-medieval culture. Whether “need” is an objectively or subjectively asserted condition became both crucial and impossible to know.

Many instances in England might be marshaled to show this ambiguity or inversion in the notion of need.³⁴ In the last quarter of the fourteenth century, for instance, *Piers Plowman*, throughout focused on the pursuit of a just economy, ends by dwelling on the figure Need who is personified and

32. *Dives and Pauper*, ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum, 2 vols. in 3, EETS 275, 280, and o.s. 323 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975–2004), vol. 1, pt. 1, 63; see also the patristic (or pseudo-patristic) sources cited in note at 2:15.

33. Galloway, “Economy of Need.” For another word for economic value undergoing paradoxical changes in the period, see Jill Mann’s survey of Middle English “enough”: “Satisfaction and Payment in Middle English Literature,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 5 (1983): 17–28.

34. See Galloway, “Economy of Need,” 328–30.

thus, daringly, speaks for itself: by linguistic literalism, this figure must, paradoxically, argue for all the personal advantages of claiming need—unraveling by this strategy alone the discourse of mutual need as an objective, socially impersonal principle of economics, salvation, or social relations. One can look further toward the dissolution of this as a social ethic. In the fifteenth century, un-ironic paeans to profit eclipse the issue of need as the basis of a social contract still further.

This increasing instability in England in the status and limits of need as a principle of social relations meant that new kinds of disciplinary structures were required that might answer to the new pressures to govern and define need. Moralists and historians of the period tended to declare themselves horrified by the sudden deterioration of morality in all social realms and the inversion of communal ethics into instantaneous self-interest, especially among populaces displaying new forms of social identity and political and economic self-consciousness, frequently marked (as in the sumptuary laws) by the rise of a luxury market in clothing.³⁵ The visible signs of a stable hierarchy of mutual need persisted, but its substance became unnervingly volatile; each estate, many English writers of this period claim or imply, adopted the forms of clothing of the estate above it—all seemed possessed by what Ranulph Higden, an influential mid-fourteenth-century chronicler, described as the English propensity for *varietas*. The socially undecipherable “variation” of new luxury fashions, whereby members of each estate hungered for the trappings and appearance of their betters, seemed to show the transformation of an objective scheme of a hierarchy based on mutual need into a swarming pursuit of self-interest. For Higden and many of his translators and adapters, this opened a dangerous new chapter in history, keyed to social changes for once rather than *Heilsgeschichte* and the Apocalypse: this new world of untrammled self-interest and personal wants foretold the coming destruction of the English by the Scots—the most devastating in a series of conquests that the English had had to endure.³⁶ Given the inversion

35. See, e.g., *Knighon's Chronicle, 1337–1397*, ed. and trans. G. H. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 508–9.

36. Ranulph Higden, *Polychronicon, together with the English Translation of John Trevisa . . .*, ed. Churchill Babington and Joseph Lumby, Rolls Series 41 (London: Longman, Green; Longman, Roberts and Green, 1865–86), 2:174. For the implications and some of the immediate followers of Higden's discussion of this, see Andrew Galloway, “Latin England,” in *Imagining a Medieval English Community*, ed. Kathryn Lavezzo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 45–73. The degree of pressure on the idea of proper clothing recalls the period's expansions of and contradictions in the idea of *habitus*—as a sphere of authorized thought as well as the distinct professional religious clothing—discussed by Katharine Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150–1400* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

of "need" from an impersonal articulation into self-centered discourse, no wonder satire against friars, with their professional insistence on indigence, grew so rampant in England, and could even, as in *Piers Plowman*, become apocalyptically inflected. A new and unplumbed age seemed at hand in the simple emergence of a first person subject bespeaking need, shifting *there is need* to *I need*.

This English context might be set next to Baron's richer but similar view of a major break in Florentine intellectual culture around 1400. At that point, Baron argues, a "traditional" if "wavering" commitment by fourteenth-century moralists and intellectuals to principles of poverty and renunciation gave way in Italy to a "sudden intellectual transformation."³⁷ Baron attributes the change to growing awareness of the heretic implications of the views of the Fraticelli, and to the increased prosperity of Humanist intellectuals themselves. But the breadth of this change suggests that a broader view might be valuable. For all of the "advance" of Italy over England in the movement toward "modernity," some pervasive instability rippled through social values and social relations in England and Italy alike. In both, it brought a new valuation of self-imposed and invisible renunciation, an implied demonstration of the needy self yet a sharply controlled—*aestheticized*—management of that need. In due course, a new ideology of the legitimacy or potential legitimacy of profit emerged, as part of a new ideal of carefully managed need and renunciation, which may be seen as already shifting the boundary of renunciation deep into secular culture and discourse.

Many critics have recognized that the narrator of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* finds more of a problem in Walter's act of testing and witnessing Griselda's fortitude than Petrarch ever seems to. Indeed, Chaucer's narrator frequently can barely contain his revulsion at what he describes, regularly interrupting his narrative to query Walter's "testing" of Griselda, and denouncing his source's claims to confer some hyperintellectual fruits:

What neded it

Hire for to tempte, and alwey moore and moore,
 Though som men preise it for a subtil wit?
 But as for me, I seye that yvele it sit
 To assaye a wyf whan that it is no nede,
 And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede.
 (457–62)³⁸

37. See Baron, "Franciscan Poverty: Petrarch," *passim*, and "Franciscan Poverty: Florence," 192.

38. Quotations of Chaucer, hereafter in the text, are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

The logic-chopping inquiry into *necessitas* is rejected as mere self-indulgent teasing of “subtil” issues, where more immediate sympathy for the emotional consequences would be more appropriate. This passionate repudiation is anti-academic in style, yet still deeply “clerical” in the secular sense that Middleton suggests. In turn, Walter’s “hardness” is shown to be an all-too-human effort to usurp providential or fortuitous authority, driven by efforts to prove that his social supremacy over her is justified by her emotional vulnerability. He too cannot fully master his emotions; against his rising frustration, such competitive self-justification is in vain:

For now gooth he ful faste ymaginyng
 If by his wyves cheere he myghte se,
 Or by hire word aperceyve, that she
 Were changed; but he nevere hire koude fynde
 But evere in oon ylike sad and kynde.
 (598–602)

In Chaucer’s narrative, emotions cannot be regulated, sorted, and dismissed nearly as cleanly as in Petrarch’s emphasis on Griselda’s “mature patience.” For one thing, in Chaucer’s tale, an “official” emotion, serving official social duties, typically covers others, implicitly less honorable ones. Amid Walter’s most triumphant claims to a perfect knowledge of Griselda’s is a sour note; his words of victory are undercut by multiple currents of doubt and regret. “Now knowe I, dere wyf, thy stedfastnesse,” Walter finally declares (1056), adding with a visible effort to defend the purity of his own motives,

“I have doon this deede
 For no malice, ne for no crueltee,
 Bur for t’assaye in thee thy wommanheede . . .
 Til I thy purpose knewe and al thy wille.”
 (1073–78)

But the narrator makes it clear that Walter has failed utterly to understand the mind and heart—the “purpose” and “al thy wille”—that he sought to control and possess, and identify with. When Walter reveals the safety of her children to her, Griselda is, as in Petrarch, unresponsive, but in Chaucer this is not because of her own more triumphant mental detachment. Instead, she is unresponsive because of trauma, in our psychological sense:

she for wonder took of it no keep;
 She herde nat what thyng he to hire seyde;
 She ferde as she had stert out of a sleep,
 Til she out of hire mazednesse abreyde.
 (1058–61)

At the same time, her ability to survive such a state, and to do so able to return in full control of her own reaction, is a skill she has been forced to learn from early in life, thanks to hard circumstances. For Petrarch, that impoverished background is displayed as proper training for her competitive edge in self-control. For Chaucer, it is an indication of reflexive response to circumstances, with, at first at least, no basis for triumph. It holds a hint of deep misery that no social elevation can touch, in Griselda's one warning to Walter: "ne prikke with no tormentynge / This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo; / For she is fostred in hire norissyng / Moore tendrely, and . . . / . . . koude nat adversitee endure / As koude a povre fostred creature" (1038–43). By the end of the tale, however, as for instance in this slyly sharp late rebuke, Griselda seems to recover enough to control and shape her need in socially self-conscious terms. The aesthetic shaping of her own need is clear in the punctilious deflection of self-interest. She could have said "as ye han doon *me*." Even the difference of one letter shows her ability to shape and wield her need.

Walter's feelings in Chaucer's version unfold far more clearly than in Petrarch as undisciplined appetites to know fully, and thus identify somehow with, a mind capable of shaping its own desires so firmly. Walter can only feebly aspire to her freedom from emotions. His desire not to desire, his violent need not to need, provokes him seemingly uncontrollably to ever greater sadism in his drama of playing *fortuna*. His experiment in trying to control or at least directly glimpse her emotions concludes with defeat. He displays not Petrarchan joy in witnessing perfect passionlessness but barely repressed frustration at not bringing out any uncontrolled feelings in her, though that self-restraint is precisely what he has demanded of her. Amid such perversely contradictory impulses and frustration, any guilt he might feel for the pain he has inflicted dissipates. Thus he manages to frame his feelings into non-committal sympathy for another's distress, the most he can achieve in the direction of her supreme self-control:

And whan this Walter saugh hire pacience,
 Hir glad chiere, and no malice at al,

And he so ofte had doon to hire offence,
 And she ay sad and constant as a wal,
 Continuyng evere hire innocence overal,
 This sturdy markys gan his herte dresse
 To rewen upon hire wyfly stedfastnesse.
 (1044–50)

The effort to shape his aggression into sympathy is explicitly conscious self-cultivation: he “gan his herte dresse / To rewen.” With all her family present, the only remaining attempt he can make to force her to display uncultivated signs of need is to offer back the children he has abducted. Yet even in the literally stunning shock of discovering that her children are alive, in Chaucer’s description she shapes her most effusive emotional display in the tale to conform strictly to what circumstances demand and no more. Recovered from her blinding faint, she immediately takes up the actions and emotions explicitly proper to a mother, “tendrely kissynge / *Ful lyk* a mooder” (1083–84; my emphasis). However conditioned by poverty, however goaded by Walter, her control over herself returns, supreme and supremely aesthetic. Given her children back at last, Griselda addresses not them but God “and youre benynge fader” to thank those for preserving unexpectedly their lives. In one of the many penetrating touches Chaucer adds to undercut this punctiliously perfect self-control, the children themselves must be pried from her arms by the court attendants: “with greet sleighte and greet difficultee / The children from hire arm they gonne arace” (1102–3).

Both the need she suppresses, and the aesthetic control she uses to suppress it, are the means for creating the “full” though scripted and sculpted self that in Chaucer she achieves, the self-possessed identity that is the goal of an aesthetics of renunciation. But in Chaucer, as not in Petrarch, the dynamic struggle and thus *price* of this goal is fully visible. In Griselda’s abnegation of need and artistic perfection is a coldly aggressive defense, as in Walter’s desire to prove that abnegation (or rather the desire to prove its failure) is an aggressive sadism. As Wallace stresses, Chaucer’s criticism of Petrarch’s political affiliations to absolutist modes constantly assimilates Petrarch to Walter.³⁹

Chaucer’s Clerk also challenges Petrarch’s aesthetic values, indeed, as vehemently as his absolutist ones. The Clerk’s narrative reveals how the public elements of authority—including the “heigh stile” that, he emphasizes, Petrarch wrote this in—are carefully manufactured and deployed commodi-

39. Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 44, 74, 213, 261ff.

ties, denying direct social and physical experience, even the writer's own. In Chaucer's tale, Petrarch's pleasures reside strictly in claims to rhetoric, clothing, and other such tools of controlling human natural existence, though natural death will claim Petrarch in the end: "He is now deed and nayled in his cheste; / I prey to God so yeve his soule reste!" (29–30). Like the clothing Griselda is given whose constant changes Chaucer's version stresses—with an ironic invocation of the period's constant anxieties about the inappropriately luxurious clothing worn by the lower estates—such literary properties as Petrarch has transmitted are granted value only as any commodity might be.⁴⁰

In this sense Chaucer's *Tale* seems to challenge Petrarch's view of the aesthetic as framed in these terms of renunciation as deflected aggression. Chaucer's narrator seems to simmer with resistance to Walter's plan unfolding throughout. Yet the only direct aggression Chaucer's narrator himself displays is against the tale's luxuriant opening. Here surely lies a key to Chaucer's dynamic grappling with Petrarchan ideas of the aesthetics of renunciation as deflected indulgence, deflected aggression and passion. Chaucer's narrator rehearses but denigrates Petrarch's long initial passage describing the path of the Po down to Venice:

I seye that first with heigh stile he enditeth,
 Er he the body of his tale writeth,
 A prohemye . . .
 . . . The which a long thyng were to devyse.
 And trewely, as to my juggement,
 Me thynketh it a thyng impertinent,
 Save that he wole conveyen his mateere.
 (52–55)

Though repeating while repudiating Petrarch's long opening passage—and showing, like Griselda, that perfect obedience to authority can also be utter renunciation of that authority's power—the Clerk calls the passage twice a "thyng," as if the material trappings of its rhetoric lacked any intrinsic value, merely clothing the essence or "body" of the *Tale*. "Thyng" suggests that Petrarch's flourish is a mere empty token of value, a bit of frippery like the elegant clothing that Griselda adopts and discards so impassively.⁴¹ The

40. For Chaucer's elaboration of and emphasis on Griselda's changes of clothing, but assessed to a different end, see Kristine Gilmartin Wallace, "Array as Motif in the *Clerk's Tale*," *Rice University Studies* 62 (1976): 99–110.

41. On "thing," see Ad Putter, "The Poetry of 'Things' in Gower, *The Great Gatsby* and Chaucer,"

treatment thus coheres with Chaucer's general handling of the *Tale's* issues. The anger it displays is both an unwillingness to accept literary form as an end in itself, and a higher degree of such control of form, through renunciation as the apotheosis of the aesthetic. By assailing Petrarch's rhetorical indulgence as hypocritical, Chaucer's narrator makes the aggression within the aesthetic of renunciation more visible, but he also makes a bid for the rewards of that struggle. Chaucer's *Griselda's* deployment of those ideals defines an untouchable sufficiency of identity and selfhood; she stands in the end, if in infinitely discreet and decorous ways, as a triumphant political and rhetorical agent of the overwhelmingly oppressive context she inhabits, which presents itself as if its many forms of violence were good form itself. Chaucer does not "medievalize" the tale's Italian values, but out-absolutizes Petrarch's, defeating him in a bid for emotional and moral control and sovereignty by means of the very values of self-subordination that he proposes. Chaucer's narrator shows that the final aesthetics of renunciation must be the renunciation of aesthetics.

Yet Petrarch's use of that opening passage of the Po is itself no simple flourish. Its flaunted writerliness—one of Petrarch's most visible additions to the story in Boccaccio—was resisted by other literary respondents besides Chaucer. An anonymous late-fourteenth-century French translator of Petrarch's narrative, for instance, simply omits it.⁴² Given the zeal for deprivation in the rest of Petrarch's narrative, this opening indeed constitutes a remarkably contrasting indulgence:

Est ad Ytalie latus occiduum Vesulus ex Appennini iugis mons unus altissimus, qui, vertice nubile superans, liquido sese ingerit etheri, mons suave nobilis natura, Padi ortu nobilissimus, qui eius a latere fonte lapsus exiguo, orientem contra solem fertur, mirisque mox tumidus incrementis brevi spacio decurso, non tantum maximorum unus amnium sed fluviorum a Virgilio rex dictus, Liguriam gurgitem violentus intersecat; dehinc Emiliam atque Flamineam Veneciamque discriminans, multis ad ultimum et ingentibus hostiis in Adriaticum mare descendit.

[On the western side of Italy, a lofty mountain named Vesulus reaches its peak out of the Apennines and into the rarified air above the clouds. This mountain, famous in its own right, is most renowned as the source of the

SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 22 (2009): 63–82. Putter, however, does not discuss this instance or tale.

42. See Amy Goodwin, "The *Griselda* Story in France," in Correale and Hamel, *Sources and Analogues of the "Canterbury Tales,"* 1:140–41.

Po. The river falls from a small spring on the mountainside and, carried toward the rising sun, is quickly swollen in a brief space by numerous tributaries. Thus it becomes not only one of the great streams but (as Virgil calls it) the king of rivers. It rushes through the Ligurian rapids; from there it bounds Emilia, Flaminia, and Venice and finally descends to the Adriatic Sea in a great delta.] (p. 110)

Petrarch's relief at returning from Milan to the rural world of Carrara may be recalled in this effusion, by which natural simplicity is recognized and re-valued by (his) narrative into luxury.⁴³ Petrarch's luxurious description here of the Po also likely has other, and more learned associations and roots. Near the end of *De consolazione*, for example, Boethius's *Philosophia* presents the notion of *casum inopinatum*, unexpected chance, as a thundering confluence of waters which yet has some complex order:

Rupis Achaemeniae scopulis ubi versa sequentum
 Pectoribus figit specula pugna fugax,
 Tigris et Euphrates uno se fonte resolvunt
 Et mox abiunctis dissociantur aquis.
 Si coeant cursumque iterum revocentur in unum,
 Confluat alterni quod trahit unda vadi;
 Convenient puppes et vulsi flumine trunci
 Mixtaque fortuitos implicet unda modos,
 Quos tamen ipsa vagos terrae declivia casus
 Gurgitis et lapsi defluus ordo regit.
 Sic quae permissis fluitare videtur habenis
 Fors patitur frenos ipsaque lege meat.

[Among the crags of the Achaemenian cliffs, where turned in flight
 The fighting Parthian's arrows pierce his pursuers' breast,
 The Tigris and Euphrates rise from one spring,
 Next they separate and their waters divide;
 If they should come together, into one course brought back again,
 If all that the water of each stream bears should flow into one,
 Their ships would meet, as will tree-trunks torn up by the river,
 And their mingled waters in chance paths will twist and turn.
 Yet these chance wanderings the very slopes of the land
 And the down-flowing nature of the slipping stream control.

43. Baron, "Franciscan Poverty: Petrarch," 177–80.

So too that chance which seems slack-reined to roam
Endures its own bridle, and itself moves by law.] (V.m.i)

That this is a subtext in Petrarch's text is supported by Petrarch's use of the same section from Boethius in a letter of 1367, just a few years before translating the *Griselda* story. In the earlier letter, Petrarch also stressed the power of the human spirit over "fortune," using the example of the despotic ruler of Liguria, Galeazzo Visconti II, who had ruled Milan as a dictator (and nearly destroyed Florence) just before Petrarch's own patron from the same family, Giovanni Galeazzo, had assumed power. In Petrarch's view, Galeazzo, crippled by gout, "views his tortured and aching body as if it belonged to some unknown stranger," as Petrarch writes to the physician Tommaso del Garbo. The violent Galeazzo displays a patience with his own pain so great that it "amazes bystanders that, like a veritable prodigy, a man of delicate constitution, reared in the utmost luxury . . . endures not only with dry eyes but an untroubled brow what makes healthy men sad and groan just to see." The character of *Griselda* that Petrarch later elaborates is limned here; the aggressively competitive Galeazzo's self-sustaining and self-defining patience—at least as Petrarch confers that image on him—displays the pinnacle of theatrical subjectivity. A supreme good for its possessor, sustained by constant performance, such self-possession is also an object of wonder and pleasure to its many voyeurs.

Other texts and themes regularly invoked by Petrarch are likely also at play in the description of the coursing Po, suggesting deeper meanings to the passage and, if anything, overdetermining its appearance in the narrative. In his famous letter about his ascent of Mt. Ventoux on April 26, 1336 (though the immediacy of that letter is part of its fiction: it was likely written at least sixteen years later, a decade after the death of its supposed addressee), Petrarch had said that at the summit, he scanned the Rhone river laid out before him, then opened his ever-present pocket copy of Augustine's *Confessiones*, only to cast his eye on the words, "men go to admire the high mountains and the great flood of the seas and the wide-rolling rivers . . . and they abandon themselves." The words do not humble him as they did Augustine; quite the contrary, they "stunned" him into considering how "nothing is admirable except the soul, beside the greatness of which nothing is great."⁴⁴ Nearly as eighteenth-century writers would describe the "sublime"—and indeed the performance of neediness, self-loss, then self-

44. *De rebus familiaribus* IV.1. On the date and choice of nominal addressee, see the excellent edition, commentary, and translation by Rodney Lokaj, *Petrarch's Ascent of Mount Ventoux: The Familiaris IV, I* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 2006), 30–33.

re-making anticipates that much-celebrated later phenomenon—Petrarch's opening vista of the Po Valley as a Boethian metaphor of the world's "concurring causes" spurs his appreciation of an inner grandeur, one he will pursue through his fashioning of Griselda's virile self-assertion against "hard necessity." Against this vista, self-assertion overcoming the force of necessity is not only affirmed, it is apotheosized.

Nor does this exhaust the possible subtexts, the subterranean energies and associations, in the river's description. Petrarch's deep and long familiarity with Augustine's *Confessiones* is a clue to another likely basis and allusion, this one affirming narrative as well as psychic fecundity. In the *Confessiones*, Augustine proposes that Scripture, in all its complexities of metaphysical and literal assertions of God's and creation's goodness should be seen as a torrent, whose joyous and pleasure-giving uses are infinite, limited only by the human beings who exploit it according to their needs and abilities:

Sicut enim fons in parvo loco uberius est pluribusque rivis in ampliora spatia fluxum ministrant quam quilibet eorum rivorum, qui per multa locorum ab eodem fonte deducitur, ita narratio dispensatoris tui sermocinaturis pluribus profutura parvo sermonis modulo scatet fluenta liquidae veritatis, unde sibi quisque verum, quod de his rebus potest, hic illud, ille illud, per longiores loquellarum anfractus trahat.

[For as a fountain though pent within a narrow compass is more plentiful, and with his streams serves more rivers, over larger spaces of ground, than any of those rivers do, which after traversing wide regions, is derived out of the same fountain: even so this narration of that dispenser of thine, which was to benefit many who were to preach upon it, does out of a narrow scantling of language, overflow into streams of clearest truths, whence every man may draw out for himself such truth as he can upon these subjects, he, one observation, and he, another, by larger circumlocutions of discourse.]⁴⁵

Against this text, so familiar to him, Petrarch can be seen to present both Boccaccio's narrative and his Latin retelling—a still purer distillation of the *fluenta liquida veritatis*—as a potent affirmation of literature: it is a form of secular scripture. Here narrative creation epitomizes personal control, and invites consumption without limit, offering Petrarch himself as the purveyor of an endless and infinitely valuable resource for everyone's use like the

45. *Confessiones* 12.27; text and translation are from Augustine, *Confessions*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. William Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

unceasing Po. That this claim transposes Augustine's description of the Bible onto a contemporary literary product, and onto a contemporary rather than biblical literary producer—none other than Petrarch himself—affirms present human subjectivity and contemporary literary creativity far more than can be sustained by the socially capacious ideology of mutual need, certainly more so than the form generated, even when it is satirically unraveled, by Chaucer and late-medieval English writers.

Perhaps only an absolutist politics can sponsor so strong a pleasure in pure subjectivity and endlessly valuable literariness. Perhaps only an equally pure commitment to mercantile principles—the sparing allocation of a valuable resource whose scarcity keeps its users and viewers always desirous—can create so freely surplus a pleasure in the aesthetic. Both depend on the deflected aggression of renunciation, though in a mode that can look much more like purified and elite indulgence of the self and the literary. Only after both absolutism and mercantilism are fully dominant (if irreconcilable) principles can there be a full shift from an emphasis on need as an explanation for worldly life, toward the more banal assumption that profit, surplus, and demand are central to everyday, non-aestheticized social relations. Primary among the ways in which this transition unfolded was the aesthetics of renunciation, in whose disciplining and refashioning the story of Griselda so productively figured.