Imagined Human Beings

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Among the most extreme characters in literature are Walter and Griselda in Chaucer’s “The Clerk’s Tale.” Griselda is the archetypal submissive, long-suffering wife, and Walter goes to absurd lengths to test her. Not all mimetic characters are realized in the same degree of detail. We are provided with varying amounts of information about such things as early history, family relationships, conscious and unconscious motives. Of the characters I shall discuss, Pip and Jane Eyre are the most fully rendered. The least fully drawn are Walter and Griselda, whose behavior is so bizarre that it is usually thought to have only illustrative significance, about which there is much disagreement. However, some critics have seen that Chaucer provides enough mimetic detail to invite motivational analysis, and I find these characters to be amenable to a Horneyan approach. When we see Walter and Griselda in the context of our discussions of Torvald and Nora, Joe and Rennie, they become recognizably human and not just embodiments of medieval ideas about womanhood, marriage, and the relation between God and his subjects. Indeed, it is because these characters are mimetic as well as illustrative that their emblematic functions are so difficult to define.

Although “The Clerk’s Tale” is commonly thought of as the story of patient Griselda, Walter is also important, and we must understand him if we are to grasp the dynamics of their strange relationship. Why does Walter, marquis of Saluzzo, the highest born man in Lombardy, choose to marry Griselda, daughter of the poorest of his liege men? And why, after the marriage, does he take Griselda’s children away from her, leading her to believe that he has ordered them to be murdered, and then pretend to cast her off in order to wed a high-born woman? He says he did these things “For no malice, nor for no cruelty, / But for t’assay in thee thy womanhood” (1075–76), but this seems feeble, and the allegorical interpretations of his behavior are problematic. Walter’s testing of Griselda is compared to God’s testing of “what He wrought” (1152),
but Walter is hardly comparable to God, since he is described by the Clerk as obsessive and cruel. Griselda may be the ideal obedient subject, displaying a Job-like submission, but it is difficult to define Walter's emblematic significance.

The initial descriptions of Walter indicate that he is a very detached person. He does not consider the future, lets serious cares slide, follows his present inclinations, and spends his days hawking and hunting. He cannot be prevailed on to marry. A popular but heedless ruler, he wants nothing to infringe on his freedom or to burden him with responsibility. His aversion to wedlock is disturbing to his people, since if he dies without issue they will be ruled by a strange successor, and they send a deputation urging him to marry. Knowing his temperament, the leader assures him that wedlock is a “blissfull yoke / Of sovereignty, not of service” (113–14). Walter replies that he has rejoiced in his “liberty, / That seldom time is found in marriage; / Where I was free, I must be in servage” (145–47). For someone as sensitive to constraint as Walter, marriage is extremely threatening.

He agrees to marry, however, if the people will accept his conditions. They offer to find him a wife “Born of the gentlest and of the most / Of all this land” (131–32), but Walter insists that he will make his own choice. If he is to forgo his liberty for their sake, he must wed where he wishes. They must not grumble or strive against his decision and must give all honor to his wife, no matter who she is. Walter is not only insisting on his freedom to choose but is also laying the groundwork for his choice of Griselda. He argues that goodness comes from God rather than from noble birth and puts his “trust in God’s bounty” (159), giving an aura of piety to his decision. Walter seems to know immediately that the only way he can tolerate marriage is to wed a woman far beneath him. If he married the kind of woman his people have in mind, he would have to consider her wishes and be careful of offending her family.

Walter feels obliged to perform his duties when pressed but does not wish to give up his freedom. He hopes that choosing Griselda will enable him to satisfy his conflicting needs. She is at the bottom of the class hierarchy, while he is at the top. Janicula, his poorest vassal, is reverently obeyed by his daughter, who, as a female, is even lower on the social ladder. If Griselda exalts her father by her dutiful submission, what might not Walter expect from her? She is a model of feminine virtue, an embodiment of her society’s teachings about the subordination of
women. Walter proposes a bargain to Griselda: he will marry her and raise her to the heights if she is

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\ldots \text{ready with good heart} \\
\text{To all my lust [wishes]; and that I freely may} \\
\text{As me best thinketh, do you laugh or smart,} \\
\text{And never you to grudge it, night nor day.}
\]

(351-54)

I believe that Walter is more concerned with freedom than with domination, which is but a means to his end. Griselda’s submission insures that he can still follow his whims.

Griselda readily accepts Walter’s conditions, promising “never willingly” to disobey “in work nor thought” (362–63). She is as eager to submerged herself in Walter as he is for her to do so. Marriage to Walter is the culmination of her search for glory. The lowest of the low, she transcends her humble position by loving virtue and cultivating moral perfection. For a woman in her society this means, above all, reverent obedience to male authority. As Janicula’s “pearl” of a daughter she gains a reputation for goodness, seriousness, and sagacity, and this, combined with her beauty, catches Walter’s attention. His proposal of marriage is the reward of her virtue. To her, his conditions are light because she is practiced in womanly self-effacement. Indeed, they are welcome because she wishes to merge with him as a way of participating in his glory. She feels vastly inferior to Walter, telling him that she is unworthy of so much honor, but she eliminates the distance between them by erasing herself completely and accepting his will as her own. Like Nora and Rennie, she seeks to escape her sense of inferiority and gratify her repressed expansive desires by becoming one with a powerful male. By abandoning herself to Walter she can satisfy her conflicting needs to be both humble and great.

According to the terms of their bargain, Griselda’s submission binds Walter to her: “when I say ‘Yea,’ he say not ‘Nay,’ / Neither by word nor frowning countenance? / Swear this, and here I swear our alliance” (355–57). His testing enables her to solidify her claim to him by showing that no matter what he asks she will be agreeable. When he announces that he must take away her daughter, she is “not a-moved” (498) and “not agrieved” (500): “My child and I, with hearty obeisance, / Be yours
all, and you may save or spill / Your own thing; worketh after your will" (502–4). We can interpret this allegorically as meaning that God has the right to do what he likes with his creatures or historically as Griselda's acceptance of her culture's patriarchal view of marriage, but these sentiments are also in keeping with Griselda's character. If Walter treats her as chattel, to spare or kill as he pleases, he is acknowledging her as his wife. She possesses him by being possessed.

A scene in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* may help us to understand this triumph through submission. Having rejected Tess on their wedding night after she confesses her affair with Alec d'Urberville, Angel Clare carries her toward a river while sleep-walking, and Tess thinks that he may be about to drown her: "So easefully had she delivered her whole being up to him that it pleased her to think he was regarding her as his absolute possession, to dispose of as he should choose. It was consoling... to feel that he really recognized her now as his wife Tess, and did not cast her off, even if in that recognition he went so far as to arrogate to himself the right of harming her" (ch. 37; see Paris 1976a). Angel's regarding her as his absolute possession, whom he has the right to harm, means that he recognizes her as his wife, and Walter's behavior has a similar meaning for Griselda. Both women feel vastly inferior to the men they adore and are ready to sacrifice everything, even life itself, to the glory of being united with them. There is something similar in the readiness of Nora and Rennie to die for Torvald and Joe.

While Griselda's behavior can be interpreted allegorically, it also clashes with an allegorical reading if we look at it closely. Griselda proclaims that there is nothing she desires to have "Ne dread to lose, save only" Walter (507), who is "her very worldly suffisance" (759). She values Walter above God or her own soul and is ready to sacrifice her child in order to keep him. She tells her infant daughter, "this night shall thou dien for my sake" (560). These sentiments are not commensurate with the Clerk's idealization of Griselda, or with most thematic readings, but they make sense psychologically. Griselda is living for the worldly glory that Walter represents, her need of which is so intense, because of her base position perhaps, that she will sacrifice anything to hold onto it. Like Rennie and Tess, she cannot criticize her husband's cruelty because that would diminish the man on whom her glory depends. Since she believes that Walter cannot abandon her as long as she honors their bargain, her submission gives her a sense of control over him and her destiny.
One of Walter’s conditions is that whether he offers “laugh or smart,” she must be “ready with good heart” and never show “a frowning countenance” (351, 353, 356). Griselda swears never to disobey in deed “or thought” (363), thus promising to make her innermost life conform to his desires. She so succeeds that they seem to have between them “but one will” (716). One of the things that has troubled readers about Griselda and made her seem unrealistic is that she does not have the emotions that would be natural in response to the loss of her children and Walter’s casting her off. A psychological explanation would be that the emotions are there but deeply repressed, since expressing or even feeling them would invalidate Griselda’s bargain and cost her that which is dearer than life. In Horneyan terms, she has an idealized image of herself, imbied from her culture and refined by Walter’s demands, that generates tyrannical shoulds. She must be unmove d and unaggrieved no matter what is inflicted upon her, or she will forfeit her claims, lose her glory, and experience unbearable self-hate. She says she would rather die than disobey in deed or thought though she is “loath to die” (364).

In later episodes Griselda seems remarkably free of anguish when she is tested, but not at first. She does not weep or lament when Walter’s villainous looking agent comes to take away her daughter, but she begs to kiss the child before it dies, takes it into her lap, lulls it, commends its soul to Christ, and bids it a farewell that would have rent the heart of a mother or nurse. She quickly controls her emotions, however, and Walter finds her “As glad, as humble, as busy in service, / And eke [also] in love as she was wont to be” (603–4). The emotion Griselda displays when she loses her daughter suggests the feelings she represses more fully when her son is taken away and when Walter divorces her. She seems unreal, to be sure, but it may be the unreality of a person who behaves in a rigidly neurotic way and is not in touch with herself.

Although we see indications of anguish when Griselda is first tested, there is no display of anger with Walter, since to blame him would not only violate her shoulds but would damage her image of him, which she must preserve at all costs. In King Lear we do not see Cordelia’s anger at her father’s injustice because to display resentment would violate her idealized image, but her vindictive feelings are present in the play and are acted out by Goneril and Regan. She can forgive Lear so easily because her sisters have punished him terribly for his mistake (see Paris 1991a). Walter is not punished for his cruel behavior, but he is repeatedly condemned. The resentment that Griselda cannot allow herself to
feel is expressed by others. Before the first test, the Clerk describes Walter as obsessed by his need to test Griselda’s constancy and declares that it is “evil” “To assay a wife that it is no need, / And putten her in anguish and in dread” (460–62). Before the second test, he again asserts that Griselda was tempted needlessly and observes that “wedded men ne knowne no measure, / When that they find a patient creature” (622–23).

Walter’s subjects are appalled by the seeming murders of his children, and their love turns to hate. The third test is deplored not only by the Clerk but also by Walter’s subjects and by Janicula, who feels confirmed in his expectation that once the marquis had satisfied his desires he would feel disgraced by his low alliance and abrogate it.

Griselda’s resentment does in fact surface when Walter casts her off, but in an indirect way that enables her to preserve her idealized image. She seizes on his statement that she can take again the dowry she brought with her, pointing out that it was only her wretched clothes that were worth nothing and would be difficult to find. “O good God!” she exclaims, “how gentle and how kind / You seeméd by your speech and your visage / The day that maked was our marriage!” (852–54; my emphasis). She continues in a similar vein, testifying to the truth of the statement that “Love is not old as when that it is new” (857). She may be excusing Walter by saying that men are like that, but there is reproach in her words. Afraid that she has violated her vows by complaining about her husband, she quickly reaffirms her self-sacrificial devotion, saying that she would never repent having given Walter her heart whatever the adversity, even if it were death. She resumes her attack, however, by asking if he really means to do “so dishonest [shameless] a thing” as to send her home naked, letting “the womb in which your children lay” be “seen all bare” (876–79). It is unlikely that this is what Walter had in mind, but he has provided Griselda with a pretext for characterizing him as infamous and reminding him of the children. This scene reveals some of Griselda’s buried emotion.

Before we look further at Griselda’s response to her ordeals, let us consider Walter’s motivations. We have examined his reasons for choosing Griselda, but why his “mervellous desire his wife t’assay” (454)? It seems that after his marriage he needs to be reassured that he has not been tethered, that he can still do as he pleases. Griselda has given him no cause for complaint, but he cannot be sure of her submission unless
he offers her woe. Like many detached people, Walter compulsively needs to prove that he is free. The Clerk is aware that he is being driven by emotions over which he has no control:

But there been folk of such condition
That when they have a certain purpose take,
They can not stint of their intention,
But, right as they were bounden to a stake,
They will not of that first purpose slake.

(701-5; my emphasis)

Walter has strong reasons for taking away the children, quite apart from his desire to assure himself of his liberty. He had tried to resolve the conflict between his need to comply with the wishes of his people for a successor and his need to retain his freedom by marrying a woman who would give way to him in everything. He is profoundly uncomfortable, however, at having allied himself with someone so poor and low. His discomfort is evident in the lies he tells Griselda when he removes the children. Griselda has performed splendidly in her lofty position, charming the people, gaining fame for her virtue, and advancing the public good. His subjects hold Walter to be "a prudent man" because he has seen "that under low degree / Was often virtue hid" (425-27). But Walter tells Griselda that his nobles regard it as "great shame and woe / For to be subjects and be in servage / To thee, than born art of a small village" (481-83). He says that he is being forced by the will of the people to take away her daughter, presumably because the child of such a lowly mother should not occupy such a high social position. Walter may have invented this lie so as not to appear cruel ("And yet, God wot, this is full loath to me"—491), but it also expresses his sentiments.

With the birth of his daughter, Walter becomes acutely conscious of the disparity between himself and Griselda and the ambiguous status of their child. He is still resentful of the pressure put on him to marry, which is one reason why he presents himself as a victim of coercion, but he is also ashamed at having degraded his family and failed in his duty to his subjects by siring a child of such base descent on the mother’s side. He shows his independence of the people by apparently killing the child, thus frustrating their desire for him to have offspring, but at the same time he satisfies his social conscience by sending the child to his sister, who will bring her up as a lady. Griselda is socially accomplished despite having been "born and fed in rudeness" (397), but Walter may be afraid
that she will instill her lowly spirit in his child. He wants his wife to be a doormat but not his daughter.

Walter tells a similar set of lies when he removes their son: “My people sickly bear our marriage; / And namely [especially] since my son y-born is” (625–26). In reality the people have rejoiced at the birth of the child, thanking and praising God. According to Walter, however, there are murmurings that when his reign is done “Then shall the blood of Janicule succeed / And be our lord” (632–33). He presents himself as being harried by opinions that are being secretly advanced in his dominions: “For to mine ears comes the voice so smart / That it well nigh destroyèd has my heart” (629–30). I think that Walter is profoundly disturbed by these opinions, which are not his subjects’ but his own. He secretly sends his son to his sister’s noble household, where he will receive a princely education. His preoccupation with issues of class may be an even more powerful motive for his behavior than his need to assay Griselda.

In his final test, the casting off of Griselda, Walter again explains his behavior as forced upon him by his people. He did not marry her for “lineage” or “riches” (795) but for her goodness, truth, and obedience. His subjects, however, “me constraineth for to take / Another wife” (800–801). Walter complains that “in great lordship . . . / There is great servitude in sundry wise” (797–98) and that he “may not do as every plowman may” (799). “This is true, of course. His position has accustomed him to indulge every whim, but it also imposes responsibilities by which he feels oppressed. He experiences his inner compulsion to do his duty as servitude and coercion, leading his lies to take the particular form that they do.

Walter’s pretense of divorcing Griselda and betrothing a highborn lady is designed less as a final test of Griselda’s patience than as a vindication of his children and himself. His daughter is deemed fit to be his wife, the people agreeing that “fairer fruit between them should fall, / And more pleasant for her high lineage” (990–91). This tribute to his daughter is also, ironically, a tribute to his wife. Walter’s son is likewise approved by the populace. The taint of being Janicula’s descendants has been removed from the children, and they can rightfully occupy their exalted positions henceforth. They are no longer half-breeds, so to speak, but full-fledged members of the nobility. The daughter marries a wealthy lord and the son succeeds to the inheritance. The danger of the daughter’s being too much like her mother has been averted. As Griselda
herself warns, the girl has been “fostered in her nourishing / More tenderly” (1040–41) and must not be goaded and tried as she has been. The vindication of the children vindicates Walter’s choice of Griselda, and, no longer tormented by guilt and fear of condemnation, he can own her proudly at last. His people had given her the honor he had demanded, despite her low birth, but he had been unable to do so himself. Only now does Walter relieve Janicula of his poverty and invite him to live at the court.

Griselda responds to the loss of her son as she had to the loss of her daughter, except that she suppresses her anguish completely and is even more self-abasing. Not only does she assure Walter that it does not grieve her “at all / Though that my daughter and my son be slain / At your commandment” (647–49), but she says that if she had known his will before he told it her, she would have done it “withouten negligence” (661)—presumably meaning that she would have killed them herself. “For,” she continues, “wist I that my death would do you ease, / Right gladly would I dien, you to please” (664–65). Viola makes a similar statement in Twelfth Night when Duke Orsino threatens to kill her (disguised as Cesario) in order to spite Olivia: “And I, most jocund, apt, and willingly, / To do you rest a thousand deaths would die” (5.1.127–28). Like Tess, Griselda and Viola conceive of death at the hands of the beloved as an ecstatic experience of union through submission, of possession by being possessed. “Death,” says Griselda, “may not make no comparison / Unto your love” (666–67). As long as she has Walter’s love she escapes her sense of unworthiness, participates in his grandeur, and feels that her idealized image of herself is being confirmed. This is more important to her than mere existence.

When Walter tells Griselda that, with the consent of the Pope, he is taking another wife, he violates their bargain, but Griselda’s self-effacing defense can accommodate even this. Her humility has been her claim to moral grandeur, and she takes refuge in it when Walter discards her. Her “poverty” makes no comparison with his “magnificence” (815–16); she was not worthy to be his chambermaid, much less his wife. She never thought of herself as “mistress” of his house but rather as an “humble servant” to his “worthiness” (823–24). He has not treated her badly because she has no rights. Walter’s behavior confirms the sense of inferiority that Griselda has never shaken off, and this makes it easier for her
to reconcile herself to her fate. His treatment of her as unworthy has a value to Griselda, for, as Horney observes, a morbidly dependent person "craves to surrender . . . body and soul," but can do so only if her pride is broken, if she "feels, or is, degraded" (1950, 246).

Griselda does not give up her search for glory. She continues to live up to her idealized image of herself, which she can do independently of Walter, and she continues to glorify him, saying that she will always think of him "Above every worldly creature" (826). We may wonder why she idealizes the man who has treated her so cruelly, especially when she has lost him, but her behavior makes psychological sense. By reminding her of her lowliness, Walter reinforces his elevation above her, inducing her to venerate him all the more. She continues to exalt him because she can still be proud, in her self-effacing way, of having been Walter's wife. Her glory is in the past, but it is glory nevertheless. She thanks her God and Walter "That you so long of your benignity, / Have holden me in honor and nobly [regard], / Where as I was not worthy for to be" (827–29). She attributes the honor she enjoyed to Walter's benignity rather than to her own deserts, thus preserving her humility, but her pride shows through nonetheless. She will remain faithful to him as a way of affirming both her virtue and his exalted status: "God shield such a lord's wife to take / Another man to husband or to make [mate]" (839–40). By remaining loyal, she will maintain her sense of still being Walter's possession.

Thus she comes "with humble heart and glad visage" (949) when Walter asks her to help entertain his bride, for this gives her an opportunity to define her new role. She will endeavor "to serve and please" him in her own "degree" (969), for no matter what, she will never stop loving him best. I am reminded of Desdemona's statement that even if Othello shakes her off "to beggarly divorcement," she will always "love him dearly": "Unkindness may do much; / And his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love" (Othello 4, 2). Like Desdemona, Griselda is determined to hold onto her idealized image of her husband and of herself as the perfect wife. She achieves independence of Walter and fortune because she will always worship and love him, even when he causes her grief. She has found an impregnable defense, one similar to that offered by a religion that preaches unconditional submission to the will of God. If we love God no matter what, life will always have meaning and we will share in his high magnificence.

Although Desdemona's self-effacing defense leads to her death (see
Paris 1991a), Griselda’s is successful because Walter has always intended to honor their bargain (he does not really mean to divorce her and marry his daughter), and he is compelled by her submission. Her children are restored, untainted by her low birth, and she and Walter live on in “high prosperity” and “concord” (1128–29). Griselda finally receives the confirmation of her worth to the pursuit of which she has devoted her life. Were she to die this moment it would be nothing, she tells her husband, “Since I stand in your love and in your grace” (1091). Her search for glory has now truly succeeded. The Clerk had said that Walter’s trials could only produce evil, but they have a very positive result. Walter’s neurotic needs are fulfilled in the ways we have seen, and so are Griselda’s. She attains the glory not only of winning Walter’s love and favor but also of outshining all other wives, since she was tested most. The Clerk praises her humility, comparing her to Job and citing her as an example of how we should “Receiven all in gree [patience] that God us sent” (1151).

One of the difficulties in analyzing “The Clerk’s Tale” is that there is ample evidence to support contradictory readings. The tale has been interpreted both as an allegory about the virtue of obedience to God or his human representatives and as an ironic commentary on such allegories. There is a great deal of rhetoric glorifying Griselda, and it is supported by the action. Her submissive behavior is highly rewarded, whereas she would have lost everything had she complained. Yet the Clerk says that it would be “inportable” [insupportable, unendurable] for wives to “Follow Griseld as in humility” (1143–44), and the Envoy has so confused readers that some contend that it ironically praises Griselda while others argue that it mocks her. Critics cannot agree whether the tale is saying that women should or should not be like Griselda. To my mind, what emerges from “The Clerk’s Tale” as a whole is ambivalence toward Griselda’s extreme self-effacement. She exemplifies her culture’s teaching about ideal womanhood and patient submission to authority, but she and Walter are two sick people in a pathological relationship, and Chaucer seems to be aware of this.