Desire in the Canterbury Tales

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The Reeve’s vengeful “quiting” of the Miller is written on the bodies of the women in his story and glossed by their unwitting enjoyment, a spectacular scene throwing into relief the competitive desires of wives and clerks witnessed in fabliaux and other comic tales of an economic cast. According to the logic of Chaucer’s first fragment, married women attract clerks as well as provoke their ire and ridicule, and this situation forms the normative and normalizing universe that the genre’s quotidian comedy projects. We see its contours as the Miller details the erotic interest clerks Nicholas and Absolon naturally display for Alison, the carpenter’s young wife. Absolon’s role as parish clerk places him in the company of such wives regularly as he “Gooth with a senser on the haliday, / Sensynge the wyves of the parisshe faire; / And many a lovely look on hem he caste” (1.3340–42). “Sensynge the wyves,” he carries the censor that blesses his church’s congregation, but, of course, Absolon also indulges in other sensory pleasures. As readers of the Miller’s adulterous comedy know, such innocent “sensynge” provides no limit to clerks’ “daliaunce” (1.211) with wives, and it does not always result in pleasing ends. Absolon later emerges as the butt of the joke when he kisses the “naked ers” of the wife he has been courting in ridiculous fashion, unaware

that she has already taken another clerkly lover (1.3734). That kiss cures him of his lovesickness, prompting violent dreams of revenge with a hot coulter upon his would-be “lemman” that is ultimately visited on his rival, Nicholas, the much-preferred lover who boards in the carpenter’s home. Though aimed at the former object of his affections, Absolon’s aggression also comes from within, functioning as a kind of self-mutilation, since it is a more successful, rivalrous version of himself that he ultimately punishes. Only with such self-purgations can he truly have “his hoote love . . . coold and al yqueynt” (1.3754). But the fast and sharp turn that his feelings for Alison take is telling, and reveals the complex contours of desire between wives and clerks rather than any simple interest clerks seem to have in women.

These antics appear obliquely in any number of comic stories, satires, and farcical scenes. For instance, the friar in the Summoner’s Tale knows Thomas and his wife of old, and not only because he’s been working on Thomas to attain donations for his house. Such clerks are always on the lookout for the “fair[est] . . . wyf / In al the chirche” (3.1808–9). Like the Friar who is described in the General Prologue carrying pins and knives in his “typet” (1.233) as little gifts for the women in his jurisdiction, “freer John” (3.2171) in this tale has visited this home before where he was “refresshed moore than in an hondred placis” (3.1767). We intuit his familiarity from the manner in which he shoos away the cat from the most comfortable spot on the bench (3.1775) and kisses Thomas’s wife (3.1803–5). But their apotheosis appears in the Shipman’s Tale, a story that was likely attributed to the Wife of Bath at an earlier state of the Tales’ composition. This fabliau is unique in Chaucer’s collection for its lack of violent retribution, and as such it is the very antithesis of the Reeve’s story. In the end, no one is humiliated. The circulation of words follows (and explains) the circulation of money, itself a signifier, such that the wife can return symbolic capital to her husband by scoring it “upon [her] taille” (7.416). Not only do such transactions cause all to turn out well, they force the competitiveness of the wife and clerk to take center stage, where they substitute for the competition between men that formerly seemed to be the locus of fabliaux attention. Even as they are attracted to each other and arrange their liaison for when her merchant–husband will be away at Bruges, this pair is also engaged in competition with each other, duping each other more fully than they dupe the wife’s husband.

Yet for an essay that overturns this common assumption about the Shipman’s Tale and also complicates our assumptions about the cohesiveness of the genre of fabliau, see Joseph Dane, “The Wife of Bath’s Shipman’s Tale and the Invention of Chaucerian Fabliaux,” Modern Language Review 99 (2004): 287–300.
Their flirtatious play begins with a dirty joke, a provocation that emerges from a situation of friendship and intimacy the tale carefully cultivates. Their flirtation starts with subtle aggressivity when the merchant retreats to his counting house in order to balance his accounts before a business journey. His withdrawal leaves the wife and monk alone. Seeing that the monk, daun John, has risen early one morning, the wife asks after his health. In response, he slyly defends his early walk in the garden by taking the opportunity to criticize the laziness (or luxuriousness) of married men. This jovial conversation affords the monk and the wife further intimacy. Their dalliance has, of course, been noted, but it has also prompted readers to argue over which of them is the instigator of the affair. On the one hand, the monk is the first one to suggest a sexual innuendo in his characterization of “thise wedded men” (7.103) who spend too much time abed. Such ideas prompt him to say how much he hopes she has not been “labour[ing] sith the nyght bigan” with her husband (7.108): “And with that word he lough ful murily, / And of his owene thought he wax al reed” (7.110–11). By laughing and blushing, the monk gives away his thoughts of being in bed with the wife, of which she is quick to take advantage. But others have read the wife’s quick-wittedness as more deliberate, seeing her initial question as to the monk’s health in more aggressive terms. John Hermann describes the scene as a predatory seduction on the wife’s part: “The merchant’s wife steals up on him to ask whether or not he is ill, apparently the only explanation she can adduce for his rising so early.” Calling the monk’s answer a “gentle sally in response to the wife’s raillery,” he locates the engine of “the risqué conversation” that follows: “Of course, she did not really think he was sick, but wished to imply that he was not the sort of monk who rose at the proper canonical hour to recite his office” (303). Hermann reads the wife’s language critically and aggressively, somewhere between a conscious seduction of daun John with her disingenuous question and a more simple baiting of him into licentious thoughts. Already the aggressiveness of the desires of wives and clerks are felt long before they become entangled in the deception over the hundred franks.

Once the subject is broached, however, their sexual attraction for each other emerges fast. She disavows any such interest in her husband, “lasse lust . . . to that sory pley” (7.116), because of the financial troubles plaguing her. Her distress is measured by thoughts of desertion and death (7.121–22). Vowing their secrecy to each other, as well as their “love and affiance” (7.139), the monk and wife set each other up as they make an alliance

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against the merchant. The wife confesses to a debt she is dangerously close to defaulting in order to entice him to her aid. The monk takes advantage of the situation by borrowing from the merchant to procure the wife as his lover. We could characterize this scene as an economized dramatization of the way clerks like the Miller’s Nicholas “fil with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye” (1.3272). What the Miller describes in summary fashion—he “spak so faire, and profred him so faste, / That she hir love hym graunted atte laste” (1.3289–90)—is more fully shown in the Shipman’s fabliau. From this beginning, each of these figures in the Shipman’s Tale believes (s)he is getting the better of the other and at no cost. Daun John rides off in the end having had his fun with her and acting as the conduit for more generous financial exchange between marital partners that the wife will repay to her husband “in trade.” Neither husband nor wife understands at the time what John is doing with the money; each believes it’s a token of John’s esteem, thus leaving the integrity of their friendship—here punningly expressed as “cosynage” (736), both familiarity and trickery, indeed a trickery only possible between familiares—intact. In these neat transactions, then, the Shipman’s Tale reveals a rivalrous attraction of wives and clerks in one and the same gesture. Without any turn to blinding anger or resentment toward each other, the wife and clerk in this least violent and humiliating of Chaucer’s fabliaux reveal the aggressivity of desire itself, here as a means of gaining power and potency.

The familiarity of wives and clerks, as well as their rivalrous attraction to each other, is writ large in the Canterbury Tales by the dramatic interaction of the Wife of Bath and the Clerk in the so-called marriage group, a set of textual relations and argumentative postures in the poem’s frame that have long held critical attention. The tales leading up to and contained within fragments 3 and 4 especially position the Wife of Bath and the Clerk within a “naturally” aggressive, competitive, and desiring framework. Indeed, their aggressions and competitions are shaped by the desires that the fabliaux witness in distinction from authoritatively academic or ecclesiastic discourse about women, which the Wife of Bath’s Prologue reframes anew.

When the Wife of Bath takes on the defense of women from the ravages of such clerical authority, she attacks on a number of fronts, both

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from the experience of her unique “scoleiyng” (3.44f) and from the perspective of the object of representation portrayed from “withinne [clerical] oratories,” asking “Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?” (3.694; 692). But beyond her argumentative Prologue, the Wife’s and Clerk’s Tales seem to engage overtly in a debate over the correct (feminine) form of desire in their nearly oppositional narratives of marital conflict and reconciliation. The Wife of Bath’s Tale addresses feminine desire explicitly by subjecting a recreant knight to the task of finding “what thynge is it that wommen moost desiren” (3.905). The Clerk more cannily deflects this question in his exemplification of patient Griselda, the wife who can subordinate herself completely to the desire of another. These ideal images in the Wife’s and Clerk’s Tales, the magical old woman and the humble, desire-less wife, figure ideal self-images imagined and projected by the Wife and Clerk, respectively. Each of these narrators clearly identifies with this figure in his or her story. But this Imaginary scenario can be in no way complete; the Symbolic intrudes upon it at each and every turn, and most emphatically at each tale’s end when its narrator must return to the sociality of the group. The tales may make neatly oppositional claims about the object of desire, but desire’s structuring force relates the stories in unexpected ways.

The Wife of Bath herself explains the naturalness of the charged desires between wives and clerks in more scientific terms in her Prologue. She uses the same “astromye” that Nicholas studies to explain the forces leading to their opposition:

And thus, God woot, Mercurie is desolat
In Pisces, wher Venus is exaltat,
And Venus falleth ther Mercurie is reysed.
Therefore no womman of no clerk is preyed.
The clerk, whan he is oold, and may noght do
Of Venus werk es worth his olde sho,
Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage
That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage!
(3.703–10)

Cosmic determinism naturalizes a rivalry between clerks and wives, which then gives way to more practical explanations in the sexual frustration of

the older clerk, his inability to “do / Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho.” Such physical desire and the impotence preventing its fulfillment provoke the stories about women found in texts like Jankyn’s “book of wikked wyves” (3.685). Where stories like that of “Hercules and of his Dianyre” (3.725) or “Clitermystra . . . / That falsly made hire housebonde for to dye” (3.737–38) would appear to show the desire for a wife to be an illogical and self-defeating enterprise, the Wife’s logic betrays the aggressivity of desire underwriting those very claims: “For trusteth wel, it is an impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wyves, / But if it be of hooly seintes lyves, / Ne of noon oother womman never the mo” (3.688–91). These clerical writings are never unmotivated. In her explanation of their sexual frustrations, the Wife has suggested that discourse like the Clerk’s is propelled by desires he fails to acknowledge. No wonder, then, that the Clerk’s Tale posits an avatar whose simple and unspoiled nature lacks all desire and avoids its temptations at every turn. His complimentary description of Griselda, “no likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne” (4.214), confirms by implication the condemnation of others.

Readers have taken the Clerk’s Tale as a direct rebuttal of these assertions, which are made especially pointed when he refers to the Wife by name in his Envoy. If the Wife’s statement stands as a challenge, the Clerk’s Tale frustrates her claims with the story of an impossibly good wife in patient Griselda. Both the Prologue and Envoy to the Clerk’s Tale make the Wife’s “impossible” quite possible as they locate the story in a particular “clerkly” origin, “Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete” (4.31), and address the Wife of Bath “and al hire secte” respectively (4.1171). The conflict between Wife and Clerk in this matter is, perhaps, largely overdetermined. Not only does the Wife’s idealization of the crafty old woman and cannily judicious Guenevere contrast sharply with the Clerk’s perfectly passive Griselda, the conflict begins even before her Prologue. Chaucer sets the Wife and Clerk at odds through their contrasting descriptions in the General Prologue as “mirror opposites” which are from the beginning “destined to clash.” This rivalry has greater stakes than the dramatic context or competitive narrative of the pilgrimage alone, because what we are talking about here is something that happens in the Wife’s and Clerk’s stories, not some private

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6. See John A. Alford, “The Wife of Bath Versus the Clerk of Oxford: What Their Rivalry Means,” *Chaucer Review* 21 (1986): 108–32, at 109. Even further, Alford argues, they must be understood in terms of each other and each other’s discourse, not as characters. They “come directly from the tradition of the allegorized liberal arts” in which the Clerk is “Logic personified,” while the Wife speaks as “Dame Rhetoric herself” (110). Thus, Alford concludes that “the conflict between the Wife and the Clerk is not personal but historical. It is rooted in the recurrent tension between two modes of discourse, rhetorical and philosophical” (109).
animosity driving the relationship between two narrative genres. It is as much a rivalry between wives and clerks within various stories as between two narrating figures. The desire of clerks and wives witnessed in these tales—desire that appears in such radically different forms—figures the very desiring discourse and its dislocations that produce the _Canterbury Tales_ in the first place. A shift from the ordinary sense of desire to the more linguistically constitutive one at stake here makes the significance of the particular object of desire give way to the persistence of desire itself and the telling symptom in which it is manifested. This means that despite the fact that the Wife and Clerk have such oppositional things to say about women, desire, and women who desire in their tales, their language will also say things about which they are unaware.

Given that they are positioned against one another by so much of what has come before as well as by the Wife’s elaborate anticlerical Prologue, the similar ways in which they end their tales is striking, even if it has long gone unnoticed. Desire’s symptom arises as this structural similarity, which has been largely overshadowed by their argumentative posture. With their different social locations as well as the differing concerns and operations of their genres, it is little surprise these tales sketch idealized representations of female behavior dramatically at odds with each other. The Wife depicts an actively aggressive woman who takes responsibility for the redemptive and transformative power of “magic” in her tale. Indeed she seizes it. She appears magically before the tale’s questing knight, demanding to know his purpose: “Sire knyght, heer forth ne lith no we y. / Tel me what that ye seken” (3.1001–2). The Clerk, on the other hand, idealizes a passive woman whose inhuman constancy is rewarded in the end. Griselda could hardly be more different from the old woman of the wife’s romance. Yet the Wife and Clerk respond to their tales in surprisingly similar ways. Both pilgrims’ closing gestures withdraw from the powerful position of mastery each of their tales has achieved, and both narrating figures speak anxiously, well beyond the simple conclusion their stories eventually reach.

The recoil of these two narrators is striking and has been magnified by various critical attempts to explain the end of each performance. The Wife

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7. In an essay on the Clerk’s Tale, Andrea Denny-Brown repositions its rhetoric in relation to the Wife of Bath and her “sumptuous material world,” to show how he argues against it in increasingly subtle ways. She reads the dressing and undressing of Griselda in the context of the historical significance of material goods and objects, and particularly sartorial legislation and infraction, to the ultimate critique of the “superfluity, frivolity, and love of novelty with not only the common ‘peple’ of his tale but also the _nouveaux riches [sic]_ merchant class and its spendthrift ‘arch’ wives”—a critique pointedly relevant, in yet another way, to the Wife of Bath. See “Povre Griselda and the All-Consuming Archewyves,” _SAC_ 28 (2006): 77–115, at 80.
of Bath’s diverse arguments for the beneficence of female dominance culminate, for instance, in a fairy-tale ending from which she withdraws back into belligerence in the space of a mere eight lines (3.1257–64). Likewise, the Clerk proffers an idealized image of female submission that proves heroically dominant at the end of his tale. In a more prolonged fashion, he recoils from the power Griselda exerts over Walter in eleven stanzas of Petrarchan apology and allegorization. Even more excessively, the Clerk adds an antifeminist harangue that closes the debate in his ironically caustic Envoy (4.1142–1212) by redoubling the Wife’s closing aggression. In these conclusions, the Wife’s and Clerk’s Tales both reveal a form of narrative jouissance, an ecstasy of pleasure that abruptly turns to unpleasure, provoking their aversion and a retreat to the safety of the stereotyped Symbolic once more.

Attempts to explain the tales’ closing gestures have treated them in isolation, thus the critical misrecognition of the shared structure of these performances. Opposed in philosophic ideas and feminine ideals, these tales both work to conceal a similar recognition. In René Girard’s formulation, both tales “defend the same illusion of autonomy,” or what the Wife and Clerk call sovereignty, by means of tracking the kind of feminine or feminized power each tale is most interested in exalting. But in offering a particular account of sovereignty, each tale depends on a mastery that ultimately disrupts any neat identification with these ideal heroines. Into the imaginary fiction of autonomy that each figure has offered, such mastery inserts an other that gives the lie to the fantasy of sovereignty each story proffers. In their structural similarity, then, the Wife’s and Clerk’s Tales momentarily reveal a desire—much like the Franklin’s Dorigen discussed in the introduction—for what each speaker seems most desperate to deny. The Wife’s rhetoric of mastery and exemplary female sovereignty covers over a wish to submit to masculine power, while the Clerk’s ideal of passive suffering, Christ-like in its exemplification, is driven by a disavowed desire to dominate, seemingly unchristian in its very aspiration. For all their supposed differences, the Wife and the Clerk reveal the same divi-

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8. Girard’s quasi-Hegelian formulation of mimetic desire and triangulation looks to account for the way desire arises through social relations rather than in imitation of one’s originary and imaginary relation with the other, the objet petit a. See René Girard, Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965), 16. In distinction from Lacanian accounts, Girard makes desire an instantaneous and entirely social (and thus symbolic) formation.

sion in the structure of desire, the desire for (and thus to be) the Other’s desire, that unravels the neat close of their fictions and provokes a number of ironic readings of those endings. This shared structure suggests an analogy between the two figures and between their tales that rewrites our conception of the marriage group as a simple debate in these fragments. This analogy, in turn, disrupts the very opposition between wives and clerks that readers of Chaucer’s poetry have all too easily accepted and shifts our attention to the productive value of desire—even if desire means lack—for the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole.10

Where Chaucer’s *Tales* originate in a human desire embedded in and obfuscated by the artifice of its opening sentence, the individual tales’ conclusions typically resound with the satisfaction of a narrative crescendo like the one the Miller’s comedy offers. Its narrator’s voice comes crashing down upon his conclusion—“This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!” (1.3854)—much like the carpenter hanging from the rafters at the climax of the Miller’s comedy. The Wife’s speedy ending appears less a departure from the Miller’s tidy conclusion than the Clerk’s multiple endings, which include Petrarchan moral and antifeminist song. We know these tales have ended, not least because the Host likes to give his opinion and resume control as soon as possible. The Wife’s Tale closes with the transformation and happy marriage of beautiful, young, and faithful lady with reformed knight (3.1250–58), a world improved by the ministrations of women: not merely the old woman whose request challenges and tests the knight’s understanding of the superior wisdom she has demonstrated, but also Guenevere, whose justice outstrips the rule of law that Arthur would impose.11 The Clerk’s ends with the re-exaltation of Griselda and her emotional reunion with her children (4.1079–1127). Griselda is thus restored “and ther she was honored as hire oghte” (4.1120) in a “revel” and “feste” that is “more solempne” and more costly than her wedding (4.1125–27). Both endings bring their protagonists reward and satisfaction, and, we might imagine, their narrators too. They seem to have accomplished their

10. See Kristyn Gorton, *Theorising Desire: From Freud to Feminism to Film* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), for a recent discussion of the unhelpful opposition staged between Deleuzian and Lacanian accounts of desire.

11. The Wife’s Tale has been dramatizing the answer to the question of feminine desire from its very beginning. When Guenevere asks Arthur for the right “to chese wheither she wolde hym save or spille” (3.897), she has already shown the knight the answer he sets out to find.
narrative and argumentative goals. But the Clerk’s Tale has always been invested in broader concerns than those we might attribute to Walter or Griselda. His interests are abstract and political rather than personal. His tale’s prospective vision goes so far as to suggest the future happiness and security that motivated the tale in the first place. Walter’s son, we are told, eventually “succeedeth in his heritage / In reste and pees, after his fader day” (4.1135–36). These endings are conventional in that they resolve the conflicts each tale stages. Problems arise, then, only from their narrators’ own doing. Much like the Franklin’s Dorigen, whose travail emerges from an excess of words uttered after she had already given her refusal, these narrators speak in excess of their meaning, beyond the conclusion each tale had carefully orchestrated. The Wife and Clerk continue to speak as if fearful that their points have not been made clearly enough. But we might also read them as anxious acknowledgments that they have been spoken all too clearly or directly. Like Dorigen’s words uttered “in pley” (5.988), words that assuage the harsh refusal of Aurelius’s suit, these conclusions have provoked, even necessitated, discursive intervention.

While these endings are foregrounded by critical attempts to supervene them, such evasive readings only repeat the tales’ own evasive and resistant gestures.12 For instance, just as the Wife offers the transformative, happily-ever-after ending—“And thus they lyve unto hir lyves ende / In parfit joye” (3.1257–58)—she returns, even before she can finish the sentence, to the Prologue’s masterful terms she had finally seemed to transcend:

. . . and Jhesu Crist us sende

Housbondes mecke, yonge, and fressh abedde,
And grace t’overbyde hem that we wedde;
And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves
That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;
And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,
God sende hem soone verray pestilence!
(3.1258–64)

12. Charlotte Morse and William McClellan, in very different ways, challenge us to rethink our response to and what we supposedly know about the Clerk’s Tale. In its uncanny scene of domestic violence, we have to avert our eyes, and this aversion leads to highly critical responses to the tale: we historicize it, we allegorize and dehumanize it, as we make it into something “as for oure excercise” (4.1156). See Morse, “The Exemplary Griselda,” SAC 7 (1985): 51–86; and McClellan, “‘Ful Pale Face’: Agamben’s Biopolitical Theory and the Sovereign Subject in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” Exemplaria 17 (2005): 103–34. As a last resort, I suppose, we might ironize the Clerk’s narration—even before the satiric Envoy—or Chaucer’s depiction of the Clerk himself and so release him from all authority.
The happiness produced at the end of the Wife’s Tale as proof that female sovereignty makes for perfect male felicity in marriage is short-lived. What could be a two-line conclusion (by ending, that is, at line 1259’s “fresh abede,” or even earlier in “parfit joye,” at 1258) runs on for almost ten, following an associative chain of thought that brings us back to the marital reality the Wife knows firsthand. Her characters’ perfect joy, it would seem, inspires thoughts of her own intimate pleasures: “Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abede.” Forgetting something of the corrective goal of the tale, her language recalls other aspects of marriage retailed in her Prologue. Similarly, the continuation of such joy “unto hir lyves ende” is an “end” with which the Wife is only too familiar: “Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal” (3.45). Her comic prayer to outlive these “meeke, yonge, and fresh” husbands raises the specter of death, which is what she wishes on those men resistant to her superior knowledge. At one point the Wife calmly concluded her Breton lai with the mutual satisfaction of reformed knight and transformed lady: “A thousand tyme a-rewe he gan hire kisse, / And she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng” (3.1254–56). But the account of such bliss, contingent finally upon female obedience, quickly moves to the kind of pre-emptive curse in terms more familiar from her Prologue.

The situation is not particularly hard to explain given the resemblance of the Wife to the wily old woman of the tale. As a projection of the Wife’s ideal self-image, the old woman can position herself, through shrewd argumentation (or the enchantments of fiction), to be transformed by the “maistrie” ceded to her by her new husband (3.1236), a transformation much harder to effect at the level of the Canterbury pilgrims and their competition. Attaining mastery over the man in deed, rather than in mere word, and in earnest, rather than in naïve repetition of what she “rowned . . . in his ere” (3.1021), produces the best marital arrangement in this fictive world. It consolidates their marriage, guaranteeing her love and fidelity: “we be no lenger wrothe, / For, by my trouthe, I wol be to yow bothe— / This is to seyn, ye, bothe fair and good” (3.1239–41). Much as she expects, the reward delights the husband: “For joye he hente hire in his armes two. / His herte bathed in a bath of blisse” (3.1252–53). Such physical affection also delights the Wife/wife, who has entered into the terms of conventional marriage in idealized form. Giving women what they want will always end in men’s happiness: “happy wife, happy life,” she might more economically say. But the ideals espoused here are also placed into conventional terms harder to assimilate after the Wife’s pragmatically knowledgeable Prologue. Miming the wedding vows themselves, which
solicit a promise to love, honor, and obey from the woman, and which ensure the legal rights a husband attains in marriage, she promises to love and “be also good and trewe” (3.1243) in a way that returns to him ultimate power over her: “Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest” (3.1248). These words appear as a heightened expression of the exchanged affections at the end of the story. The old woman has cornered the knight with her demand for marriage in payment for her lifesaving answer to Guenevere’s question and traps him once again in the choice she offers him on their wedding night:

I prey to God that I moote sterven wood  
But I to yow be also good and trewe  
As evere was wyf, syn that the world was newe.  
And but I be to-morn as fair to scene  
As any lady, emperice, or queene,  
That is bitwixe the est and eke the west,  
Dooth with my lyf and deth right as yow lest.  
Cast up the curtyn, looke how that it is.  
(3.1242–49)

Her life, and his very power over it, provides the guarantee against the possibility that she is tricking him again here. When he wakes up tomorrow morning she will be just as beautiful as she is now when he lifts up the curtain and just as faithful “as any lady, emperice, or queene.” Offering this power over her life would seem an appropriate gesture for such a lowborn figure, who must clearly find a way to align herself with these aristocratic feminine types. So too does the humble Griselda offer her life to Walter under far less joyful circumstances. She claims that she and her child are his to do with as he pleases: “ye mowe save or spille / Youre owene thyng; werketh after youre wille” (4.503–4). Her marriage and all her actions are produced under the sign of his “luste” (4.659–65). Indeed she would do his will before he asked it of her if she “hadde prescience / [His] wyl to knowe” (4.659–60). Even more explicitly, she offers: “wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese, / Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese” (4.664–65). Griselda’s willingness to die because “Deth may noght make no comparisoun / Unto [his] love” (4.666–67) delights her husband with near embarrassment. He must “cast adoun / His eyen two” for the shame and delight they betray (4.668–69). Such delight also affects the Wife’s knight, rendering him speechless (3.1252–54).
The Wife's Tale's expression of the knight's joy in her transformation and the power it affords him is inscribed with the Wife's name: his heart *bathes* in a *bath* of bliss at this critical juncture in which the woman answers in proper wifely fashion: “And she *obeyed* hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng” (3.1255–56; my emphasis). Occurring in the signifier, “bath,” the odd discrepancy between the very conventionality of this ending and the unconventional Wife who narrates it has led to various arguments about the impact of the wish-fulfillment aspect of her story.¹⁴

The end of the Wife of Bath’s Tale thus shifts from argument and opposition (“we be . . . wrothe”), from a marriage won through guile and female mastery, to elaborating man’s “real” happiness in marriage. The image of the tale’s characters with which the Wife closes also forms the conclusion to her argument: the formula for happy, contented husbands. We end not with female mastery or sovereignty but with an image of *male* bliss, *his* “plesance or likyng.” One can massage this tale’s conclusion in terms of mutual sovereignty or shared mastery, but the Wife’s Tale more strategically shows men what they need to relinquish so as to gain complete happiness and obedience from their wives. If she reveals the conditions under which men and women ultimately give up their claims of mastery over each other, as Dorigen and Arveragus attempt by means of their courtly marital contract, she ends somewhere deeply uncomfortable: with the lady offering the power of life and death to the knight. The Wife has made us attentive to the masterful terms of worldly and spiritual matters, sharpening the rhetoric of romance and its subjugations at the end of her own story. We have been prompted to laugh at the Wife’s annoyed response to her idealized romance story, chalking it up to Chaucer’s sophisticated characterization. As with many of the digressions, illogicalities, and falsehoods used locally and to comic effect in her Prologue, this obstreperous and abrupt ending characterizes her discourse as stereotypically “feminine” precisely because self-contradictory and thus works in accord with what we see elsewhere in her Prologue and Tale. It makes her sound like “herself,” a characterization that may, in fact, obscure our realization of how much

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¹³. This uncharacteristic lexical redundancy, “bathing in a bath of bliss,” reinscribes her name, perhaps testifying to the fiction of identity at stake here.

like every self she sounds, since desire is located and revealed, precisely, at such points of discontinuity and contradiction.\textsuperscript{15}

If we enjoy the comic reversal by which the Wife of Bath’s Tale returns to the forceful rhetoric heard in the Prologue, the ending of the Clerk’s Tale provokes a more heated debate about its endgame and one that has been posited in terms of a very different characterization as well. As one reader puts it, multiple “closing frames of the Clerk’s Tale offer shifting evaluations . . . [that] are marked by changes in the clerkly voice of the narrator, and his ostensible audience of address.”\textsuperscript{16} In far more dramatic fashion, the Clerk’s Envoy has provoked a variety of critical responses, not the least of which concerns the textual status of its ending. Long read as caustic irony within the frame narrative of the Tales, and, to its critical admirers, “a passable display of wit . . . a heartily ironic tribute to the Wife of Bath, . . . and a vivacious and sarcastic song,” the Clerk’s Envoy has complicated our responses to the unobtrusive pilgrim Harry Bailly has introduced as a wife, “ryd[ing] as coy and stille as dooth a mayde / Were newe spoused, sittynge at the bord” (4.2–3).\textsuperscript{17} Thus the wife–clerk friction is clearly something bigger than just a provocation between two pilgrims. It already circulates in the discourse of the Host.

The standard printed version of the Clerk’s Tale in the Riverside Chaucer and its derivatives displays its ambiguous textual situation through a number of formatting choices that make for a story with a markedly different mise-en-page than the majority of other Canterbury tales. It is broken into sections with Latin incipits and explicits, and it has a prologue and formal envoy in different verse forms with at least one rubric. The Envoy also remains problematic at the level of structure and narration as well. Readers have found its tone glib and far out of character for its otherwise erudite and somewhat unassuming speaker.\textsuperscript{18} But the Envoy might also be too easily read as an addition to the story that ruins its elegant allegory. Sepa-

\textsuperscript{15.} See, for instance, the discussion by Judith Butler in Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 186ff.


\textsuperscript{17.} Steven Axelrod, “The Wife of Bath and the Clerk,” Annuale Mediaeval 15 (1974): 109–24, at 112. Axelrod’s essay recuperates the Clerk “for the witty, spirited, flawed and attractive human being he is” (113). Dinshaw has also made much of the Clerk’s position as a newly “spoused” (4.3) wife (Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics 135).

rated from the tale by a rubric, this feature puts the Envoy's textual status in doubt even as it attempts to clarify its status. And if the Envoy's final line—"And lat hym care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille!" (4.1212)—were not immediately picked up by the Merchant and transformed into the opening of his own prologue—"Wepyng and wawlyng, care and oother sorwe / I knowe ynoth, on even and a-morwe" (4.1213–14)—it might have long been cancelled by editors as a crudely antifeminist interpolation. The scribes of the manuscript tradition may perhaps be warding off just such a cancellation by marking the passage now at 4.1177 as "Lenvoy de Chaucer," signing its author's name.

The change in verse form in the Envoy may also make necessary that authorial signature. Introducing "a song to glade yow" after the "ernestful matere" of his tale (4.1174–75), the Clerk switches from his elevated rhymeroyal stanzas to the form of the double ballade (six-line stanzas with only three rhymes). Formally different from most others in the Canterbury collection, the Clerk's Tale's differences from itself are most illuminating. These differences are embodied in the name of the author, signed as rubric to the Envoy's beginning, a signature ostensibly offered to guarantee the authority of the text. But the imposition of an authorial signature, even if only in the manuscript apparatus, here works the opposite way as well by breaking the fiction of the speaking character and marking all too clearly the absence of a consistent voice in the Clerk's performance. Ironically, if the scribes were looking to preserve an authentic part of the Clerk's speech at the end of his story—a desire in which the modern editor also indulges— they do so by indicating Chaucer's name rather than the fictional speaker's. Preserving the text as Chaucer's, they disrupt the Chaucerian fiction of the Clerk's discourse.

19. The rubric introducing the Clerk's Envoy is attested in most of the base manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales; see Farrell, "Envoy de Chaucer," 329, and John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., The Text of the Canterbury Tales, Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts, 8 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 3534–35. According to their view Chaucer revised the ending of the Clerk's Tale, at which time he added the Envoy to link directly to the Merchant's Prologue.

20. Following line 1212 stands what is called "the Host's stanza," which, according to the Riverside textual notes, "is generally held to have been written early and canceled when Chaucer wrote new lines for The Merchant's Prologue containing an echo of 1212 [see Manly and Rickert above, n23]. It is found in Ellesmere, Hengwrt, and 20 other MSS" (Riverside Chaucer 884). John Ganim finds "the evidence seems to indicate that the envoy was added after the tale itself was originally written, perhaps much later," possibly expanding on Manly-Rickert's presentation of evidence. See Chaucerian Theatricality (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990), 80.

21. The most elaborate analysis of these metrics, particularly in the Envoy, is found in Chicker ing, "Form and Interpretation." See also Ganim, Chaucerian Theatricality, 86–87.

22. On the textual tradition of the Envoy and the Chaucerian signature by which it is introduced, see Farrell, "Envoy de Chaucer."
Despite these problems, the Envoy remains, and it remains to be explained by readers of the Clerk's allegory. Beyond the various arguments preserving, assimilating, and nullifying the Envoy are those justifying the Clerk's sarcasm and integrating its ironies into the argument of the tale as a whole. John Ganim, for instance, argues for "the festive nature of the envoy," part of a critical trend that separates the Envoy from the tale.\(^{23}\) Reading it as independent lyric, Ganim returns it to the conditions set by the Clerk's own Prologue. In the Envoy, filled with "comic sexual reversals, . . . Harry's mastery of the proceedings and his sense of how stories are meant to be understood is made fun of, certainly as much as the Wife of Bath's ideas on marriage are ironically praised" (82). Ganim reads the Envoy as a decided shift to the sort of performances, "song, minstrelsy, student prank—[that] dramatize th[e] failure" of the tale for the contest's judge (84). It is too difficult and demanding for the likes of Harry Bailly, who wants no preaching or scholarly terms but only "pleyn" language (4.12–19). Separating the Envoy from the tale, then, Ganim attaches it more securely to the Prologue and changes its immediate audience from that named, "for the Wyves love of Bathe / . . . and al hire secte" (4.1170–71), to the Host. If such a separation is meant to allow us to read beyond the dramatic principle or a marriage group—beyond a conflict with the Wife herself—this reading only widens, by including the rest of the pilgrim company, its dramatic context. Even as a separate poem, then, the Envoy is directed toward a larger dramatic audience.

Registering a similar difference at the end of the Clerk's Tale, Elizabeth Salter hears the voice of the tale's conclusion as the Clerk's. In her extremely influential study Salter writes, "If, during the Tale, we have sometimes been uncertain about the exact identity of the narrator, we are now clearly intended to understand that the voice we hear is that of the Clerk, speaking familiarly to his fellow pilgrims, and establishing a second raison d'être for his story—an outer frame of reference."\(^{24}\) The two voices Salter hears in the Tale echo the two registers, allegorical and verisimilar, in which Chaucer seeks to write and which he sets in open competition. The Clerk's story emerges, in Salter's words, as caught "between two worlds" and two very different styles, demanding opposing kinds of audience response that cannot be reconciled: "the one expressing itself in austere modes, with controlled religious echoes, the other in lively language, critical, sentimental, dramatic" (62). In this way she explains the Envoy's humor and

\(^{23}\) Ganim, Chaucerian Theatricality, 82.

the Clerk’s self-abasing ending to his story as a “skillfully managed return to the miscellaneous crowd of pilgrims on the road to Canterbury” (64). The Envoy continues with its humor by “recommend[ing], tacitly, those very virtues and behaviour [prudence, humility, innocence, reverence] they seem to scorn” (Salter 65). Thus, according to Salter, if Griselda cannot be believed in any realist sense, the Envoy makes her “a more acceptable, less preposterous creation than the Wife of Bath and ‘archewyves’ of her kind” (65). Yet we might note even further that, much like the ending of the Wife of Bath’s Tale, the Clerk’s humor and shift in tone return us to its narrator’s own anxious uncertainty. Read as a continuation of the tale, a reinscription into the marriage debate, or part of the linking framework of the entire poem, the Envoy has made Chaucer’s readers uncertain as to what it is as well as the Clerk’s control over its discourse.

Also a bit out of character like the Clerk’s volta face shift in tone, the Wife’s bid for mastery and her practical argument for its foundation in nature and divine creation are complicated by the tale she chooses to tell. Her Prologue makes an openly hostile rebuttal to clerical judgments about women that borders on diatribe, but the unexpectedly nuanced and idealist Arthurian romance she tells offers a more sophisticated articulation of the mutual bliss made possible through women’s sovereignty in marriage. In these claims I have very consciously moved from one of the Wife’s operative terms, “maistrie” (mastery), to another, “soveraynetee” (sovereignty), because of the importance of both words and their sometimes unexamined relations. The elision of sovereignty and mastery emerges from the general discourse of power and the hierarchies it generates. A sovereign has power or mastery over others, as does Arthur in the Wife of Bath’s Tale or Walter in the Clerk’s over their subjects. But no one holds power over the sovereign, who has complete self-determination. This is why the old woman in the Wife’s Tale must clarify the power she has gained from the

25. In “The Semantics of Power: Maistrie and Soveraynetee in The Canterbury Tales,” Modern Philology 84 (1986): 18–23, Donald C. Green discusses these terms and four others (servage, servyse, governaunce, and assente), with particular attention to the Wife and Clerk, to reread sovereignty (contra the Wife) as subordination to a role and in a proper order. He writes, “Chaucer has made a careful distinction between the individually defined relationships of maistrie and servyse on the one hand and the role-defined relationships of soveraynetee and servage on the other” (23). The Wife, who conflates mastery with sovereignty, performs a heresy in Green’s reading: “It is significant, then, that the term maistrie does not occur in the Clerk’s Tale. Walter’s sovereignty is acknowledged from the beginning, and the story is not about winning or losing mastery; rather, it is about assent to that higher sovereignty whose yoke, if Griselda’s example is to be believed, may not be blissful at all times but which leads to the ultimate bliss” (23). For a more skeptical reading of the Tale, see Susanne Sara Thomas, “The Problem of Defining Soveraynetee in the Wife of Bath’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 41 (2006): 87–97.
knights: “Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie . . . / Syn I may chese and governe as me lest?” (3.1236–37). Her control in this situation is actually self-control, the ability to “chese” herself over and against the privilege marriage affords to men. As her husband has shown: “For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me” (3.1235). So too in the Clerk’s Tale, Walter’s subjects try to explain marriage as something other than constraint, “soveraynetee, noght of servyse” (4.114), an explanation that is clearly more difficult. Because the “yok” (4.113) of wedlock “streyne[s]” him and is set against the “liberte” (4.145) he previously enjoyed, Walter’s acceptance of this bond “of soveraynetee” must be immediately turned into a dramatization of his self-determination in the scenes of subordination (of his subjects and of Griselda) to his will.

The ease with which the idea of sovereignty (self-determination) slides into a discourse of mastery (control over another) has always been a problem in and for the Wife's story. Her critical readers have found it difficult to define the sovereignty the Wife advocates because it looks so much like mastery over another plain and simple.26 Similarly difficult for readers, and for the Clerk himself, is Walter’s compulsive desire for mastery over his wife.27 While “some men preise it for a subtil wit” (4.459), the Clerk finds Walter’s trial of Griselda both unnecessary and unendurable, and therefore he interjects some rather glaring first-person commentary into the tale: “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” (4.460–62). While “mastery” is a word that neither the Clerk nor Walter uses to describe his desires or Griselda’s subjected condition, the idea of Walter’s mastery looms large over the tale and Griselda’s sworn obedience to him.28 It is heard when Walter assents to the idea of marriage, an idea to which he claims “I nevere erst thoughte streyne me” (4.144) in the tale’s beginning, as well as in the testing scenes in which he invokes Griselda’s promises of perfect obedience by reminding her of the state to which he has raised her. He begins:


27. For an extensive study of this situation as one reflecting the issue of Lombard tyranny with which Chaucer came into contact on his Italian voyages, see David Wallace, Chaucerian Policy: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 261–98. A more general discussion of the tale’s commentary on tyranny in relation to English politics can be found in Carol Falvo Heffernan, “Tyranny and Commune Profit in the Clerk’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 17 (1983): 332–40, as well as Staley’s “Postures of Sanctity.”

28. Significantly, the Clerk uses the term “maistrie” only once, just before the Envoy, when he speaks specifically about the Wife of Bath herself, “Whos lyf and al hire secte God mayntene / In heigh maistrie” (4.1171–72; my emphasis).
Grisilde . . . that day
That I yow took out of youre povere array,
And putte yow in estaat of heigh noblesse—
Ye have nat that forgotten, as I gesse?
(4.466–69)

Walter’s mastery over Griselda, his people, and the institution of marriage itself are woven into the first movement of the story in which the Marquis’s loving subjects suggest a marriage in order to ensure the continuity of his lineage and rule. As many critics have elaborated in the material already cited, the analysis of marriage in the Clerk’s Tale never fully escapes its political function. Marriage remains consistently unrelated to personal pleasure (in sharp distinction to what the Wife of Bath claims) and stands in opposition to the “lust present” (4.80) upon which Walter’s youthful attention is fixed. The Clerk thus blames him for a failure to consider “in tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde,” as Walter instead focuses on immediate enjoyments, “for to hauke and hunte” (4.79; 81). Divorced from pleasure, marriage, for Walter, signifies prudence and responsive responsibility to his people.

However, marriage also gets framed as a pledge of obedience from his people and is therefore implicated in the sovereignty he holds over them. Much as he will with Griselda, Walter exacts a promise “agayn my choys . . . neither [to] grucche ne stryve” from his subjects (4.170). In fact, in the story’s opening Walter’s subjects foreshadow the humble position Griselda will assume in the very next part of the tale, when they promise their obedience to his pleasure upon their knees:

With hertely wyl they sworen and assenten
To al this thyng—ther seyde no wight nay—
Bisekyng hym of grace, er that they wenten,
That he wolde graunten hem a certein day
Of his spousaille, as soone as evere he may;
For yet alwey the peple somwhat dredde,
Lest that the markys no wyf wolde wedde.

29. In this way Walter demonstrates the paradoxical operations of what Fradenburg calls “sovereign love,” which offers “a relation of social and economic ‘necessity’ . . . refigured as volitional.” See Louise [Aranye] Fradenburg, City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland (Madison: U Wisconsin P, 1991), 85. I am indebted here to Fradenburg’s analysis of the Song of Songs and her conception of the uses of marriage for the articulation of sovereignty, particularly her chapter on “Sovereign Love.”
He graunted hem a day, swich as hym leste,
On which he wolde be wedded sikerly,
And seyde he dide al this at hir requeste.
And they, with humble entente, buxomly,
Knelynge upon hir knees ful reverently,
Hym thonken alle; and thus they han an ende
Of hire entente, and hoom agayn they wende.
(4.176–89)

This kneeling throng, “with humble entente” and “buxomly” as a wife, presages Griselda’s actions before the Marquis only one hundred lines later:

The markys cam and gan hire for to calle;
And she set doun hir water pot anon,
“Biside the threshhold, in an oxes stalle,
And doun upon hir knees she gan to falle,
And with sad contenence kneleth stille,
Til she had herd what was the lordes wille.
(4.289–94)

The Marian imagery of buxom maid on knees waiting to hear the Lord’s will has overshadowed the secular and ideological dimension of Griselda’s state, her reproduction of (and symbolic substitution for) the people’s political position in relation to Walter’s governance. William McClellan reads the Clerk’s Tale “enact[ing] a kind of primal scene of sovereign power, showing how it exerts itself over those it subjects.” Reading Walter and Griselda quasi-allegorically in Giorgio Agamben’s terms of “sovereign power” and “bare life,” respectively, McClellan shows how their marriage translates Griselda into a political subject. “At the same time, Walter subjects Griselda to the most abject treatment and outrageous demands, to which she gives silent ‘assente’” (107), illuminating the paradox of sovereignty and the agency of its subject(ions). Such a reading also makes the Clerk’s Tale into an explicitly political drama. Insofar as Griselda’s promise to obey her husband and to follow his will figures the assent of Walter’s people to his rule, marriage in the Clerk’s Tale forges perfect, idealized political relationships—or at least it should.31

31. McClellan also returns to this point, “the secret contract of obedience between sovereign and subject. . . . As Agamben maintains, the oldest secret of sovereign power is that obedience
More than mere romance such as the Wife offers, then, the Clerk’s Tale presents marriage as always signifying something beyond itself. Individual motives drive no figure in this story, save Walter’s strange desire to test his wife. His people, on the other hand, desire only political continuity and stability, what they call living “in sovereyn hertes reste” (4.112). Similarly, Griselda marries the Marquis for no personal gain or pleasure but out of obedience to her “Lord,” which variously refers to her father, to Walter as Saluzzo’s ruler, and to God. Marriage thus figures, quite literally, Walter’s relation to his people and his right to rule. In both Walter’s assent to his peoples’ concern for an heir and in the choice he makes for a wife, the Clerk dramatizes the political figurations of marriage that exceed the pleasures or personal desires anatomized by romance and the Wife of Bath’s Prologue.

But within the Clerk’s political economy, Walter’s choice not only displays his benevolent rule, it also exacts a price from the audience for whom it is publicly performed. Even before revealing Griselda as his chosen bride, he demands a promise of obedience from his subjects:

What wyf that I take, ye me assure  
To worship hire, whil that hir lyf may dure,  
In word and werk, bothe heere and everywheere,  
As she an emperoures doghter weere.  
(4.165–68)

His choice of a simple, lowborn maid not only appears prudent, it also offers the opportunity for testing his subjects’ loyalty and obedience. Indeed, the choice is staged as such for his subjects as the “retenue [of] the bachelrye” (4.270) follows Walter into Griselda’s village, while she, around whom the drama is constructed, waits unaware of her role in his elaborate wedding plans. Griselda’s consent to follow Walter’s will, “in werk ne thoght . . . [never to] disobeye” (4.363), is only as important as the consent of his people to “swere . . . [never] / Agayn [his] choys shul neither grucche ne sryve” (4.169–70). In fact, the parallel terms in which each must make its promise to Walter, by full assent, only renders the political function of marriage all the more visible. To Walter’s demands Griselda must:

be . . . redy with good herte  
To al my lust, and that I frely may,

precedes every institution of power. . . . Chaucer shows us how the sovereign coerces the human subject to ‘assente’ to the demand of obedience” (“’Ful Pale Face’” 126).
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte
And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
(4.351–54; my emphasis)

In similar terms, Walter exacts the same promise from his subjects before he consents to wed: “this shal ye swere: that ye / Agayn my choys shul neither grucche ne stryve” (4.169–70; my emphasis). Thus, Walter marries to satisfy and to subdue his subjects. He turns their request for his marriage from a constraint placed upon his will into an exercise of that same will. And in the end, his correction of his subjects, the “stormy peple” (4.995) who shift their sworn allegiance from Griselda to the idea of a new wife, shows how much they stand in need of such correction.

Not so with Griselda herself. Instead, as a number of feminist readers have recognized, she subdues Walter. Indeed, as we shall see, the satisfaction Griselda offers to Walter’s curious desire “hir sadness for to knowe” (4.452) results in a similar alignment of satisfying and subduing her husband. Such a performance contravenes the Wife’s discussion of marriage, particularly her subtle understanding of the economics of desire governing its operations. For the Wife, marriage turns upon someone’s desire, typically her own. The Clerk’s abstract ideas of marital union and its figural significance, played out not only in the allegorizing ending of the tale but also at the literal level of the story—in the signifier—in the political figurations elaborated above, could not be further from the Wife’s completely human and corporealized assumptions about marriage and its relation to personal desire.

Of course it is the human actions of Walter at the tale’s literal level that provide the most difficulty for the Clerk and that trigger his well-known interjections of opinion into the fiction. Walter’s “lest / To tempte his wyf” causes embarrassment for the Clerk, even as it fuels the story of Griselda’s unendurable and exemplary patience (4.619–20). But Walter’s monstrous acts—dramatized child murders and spousal abandonment—are matched by the unfathomable monstrosity of Griselda herself, whose maternal and human feelings have been called into question. In fact, one could charge

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the Clerk’s recoil from his tale, his speedy transition into the satiric song of the Envoy, upon her as well. But to see Griselda as the monster rather than Walter, the Wife “and al hire secte” (4.1171) might argue, amounts to a form of feminist heresy as well as the vanishing point of the tale’s figural and thus moral significance. Whether an allegorical success or a failure, the Clerk’s exemplum of patience extols its virtue by taking the narrative to the limit, perhaps even threatening to exceed such limits and thus to know no limit at all. She “wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng” (4.646); she will do and say nothing, no matter how gross the cruelty of Walter’s design. But at this limit Griselda explodes the very concept of limits; her passivity in the face of all Walter can devise for her, becomes, like Christ’s, the greatest action, as an act of will, to which the tale can bear witness.34

Because the Clerk’s Tale works to argue for passive suffering as the more powerful role for women in marriage, and because it figures the most sublimely heroic model of human behavior possible, we might find even more shocking the Clerk’s recoil from its achievement. The Clerk’s success, it would seem, comes at a heavy price. Griselda’s strength in the face of her own rejection, Walter’s request that she “voyde anon hir place” (4.806), as well as her forbearance to arrange his new bride’s accommodations, quickly becomes a machinery that threatens to permit the most heinous and inhuman of actions: an incestuous union of father and daughter. Though Griselda is completely unaware of the drama Walter scripts (much as she was in the beginning of the tale when he processed up to her door and chose her as his bride), the narrative tension staged for the Clerk’s audience is almost palpable. In these final moments, we see Walter continually upping the ante “to the outtreste preeve of hir corage” (4.787).

Beyond murder and divorce, the Marquis would also have Griselda return as the servant of a new bride, who also happens to be her daughter. Like the dramatic spectacle staged for Walter’s wedding, but with far more of an uncomfortable effect, these intricated plans are set to bring final resolu-

34. On the modern (largely Protestant) inability to understand Griselda’s passive power of assent, see Linda Georgianna, “The Clerk’s Tale and the Grammar of Assent,” Speculum 70 (1995): 793–821. Lynn Staley compares Griselda specifically to the intimidating Jesus figure of the mystery plays. She writes, “His silence, his dignity under torture, his willing assumption of suffering, and his understanding of the dynamics of power are attributes of absolute authority” (“Postures of Sanctity” 254).
tion to matters in Saluzzo and restoration to Griselda and to the audience watching her perform.

Griselda’s refusal to break her promise of perfect obedience to Walter’s will propels him to potentially horrific ends. Refusing to stand in the way, she will assist in Walter’s union with his own daughter. Griselda’s monstrosity, should the tale be said to contain this, has been configured as a lack of womanly or maternal resistance to Walter’s designs. Caught between virtue and neglect, her lack of resistance drives Walter to the altar of incest and provokes an impending scene of pollution that he alone must forestall. Walter stops matters with the very same words he used earlier in the tale to exact Griselda’s promise of obedience in marriage: “This is ynogh, Grisilde myn” (4.1051; cf. 4.365), marking an explicit connection in the signifier. Where such a statement once halted the flow of her words, a promise “in werk ne thought, I nyl yow disobeye, / For to be deed, though me were looth to deye” (4.363–64), by the end of the tale those words must stop more than speech. They must prevent the act that would prove the absolute limitlessness of Walter’s power by violating one of human civilization’s primary laws.

If Walter is finally satisfied with Griselda’s constancy, despite or actually because “he so ofte had doon to hire offence” (4.1046), that satisfaction subdues—and conquers—him as it positions him to do the unthinkable in making his daughter his bride. Griselda’s patience forces him to curtail his will and to relinquish his fiction of remarriage before it becomes a different story entirely. At the end of the incestuous fiction staged before her, Griselda triumphs over Walter’s plot by making him relinquish the position of complete mastery he has so confidently exercised at all other points throughout the story. Griselda thus gives the lie to “sovereynty,” the Marquis’s absolute self-determination, by turning Walter’s power inside out, extending its limits beyond his own seemingly “limitles” desires.

In the midst of this, Griselda’s greatest trial, the Clerk unleashes an animus (possibly against Walter as much as Griselda herself) on the “stormy peple” (4.995), who were so easily swayed by the allure of a new and more noble bride. One could say that their responses throughout the tale were the ones Walter had been tempting his wife to exhibit:

O stormy peple! Unsad and evere untrewe!
Ay undiscreet and chaungynge as a fane!
Delitynge evere in rumbul that is newe,
For lyk the moone ay wexe ye and wane!
Ay ful of clappyng, deere ynogh a jane!
Youre doom is fals, youre constance yvele preeveth;
A ful greet fool is he that on yow leeveth.
(4.995–1001)

The steadfast Griselda, “sad and constant as a wal” (4.1047), provides the contrast for this image of the jangling and changeable “peple,” “ful of clappyng.” But they also bear an archetypically feminine resemblance to the “archewyves” in the Envoy, who are urged to “clappeth as a mille” (4.1200). Even more, besides the noise of “clappyng” common to both passages, the image of the moon with its changeable cycle is one of the most persistent images of femininity, elaborated early in the *Canterbury Tales* in the Knight’s depiction of Diana’s temple (1.2077–78). Much like the gossiping of wives seen in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, the crowd’s “rumbul” echoes women’s language, heard when Midas’s wife “bombleth in the myre” (3.972) to satisfy her irresistible urge to tell his secret. In the elaborate circulation of these signifiers, this subtle feminine characterization of Walter’s people refigures them into the image of a bad wife, one that specifically recalls Alison of Bath, who stands as an ostentatious and hyperbolic version of the wife Griselda refuses to become.

The Clerk’s Tale unleashes a number of transferred effects here, at the point at which Griselda turns from victim of Walter’s tests to victor over his incestuous plot. This movement shapes the Clerk’s proof of his implicit argument, ostensibly setting to rest all the division and discord unleashed by the tale and the fictions maintained by Walter’s repeated testing of his wife that is reinscribed as a test of his people. Conflating ideas of passivity and passion, Griselda’s passive suffering triumphs in an intently active way.35 About this paradox Linda Georgianna writes, “For all of his seeming

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35. On this conflation, see Georgianna, “Grammar of Assent,” esp. 803–5. Georgianna’s stricter historicism articulates the active will of Griselda’s passive suffering and also uncovers a latent protestant critical ethic in readings of Griselda. In her view, the Clerk fails to understand Griselda’s story and reads it, much as modern critics have, in too rational terms. Georgianna calls for an emotive, numinous experience of reading the tale’s pathos, an articulation that leaves the higher historicist claim somewhat troubled. Georgianna would see the critical (mis)reading of passivity in negative terms (i.e., the critical rebuke of Griselda for neglect of her children) as a purely historical problem: “Passivity as a psychological abnormality found especially in females is a modern, post-Freudian usage” (803n22). But the narrator’s own misunderstanding of his tale, which she posits on 814–15, makes it less so. The Clerk’s Tale appears to dramatize the difference between such renderings of passivity, showing Griselda’s passive will as different from itself. A similar deconstruction of the idea of “sadness,” a term, like “passive” here, strongly policed by philologists as completely separate from its modern emotional signification, would also seem in play. And, of course, what Georgianna’s historicism can nowhere address is the salvific fantasy of symbolic plentitude such a reading offers via identification with Griselda herself.
power and authority, Walter becomes increasingly reactive, following rather than directing Griselda’s assent” (815; emphasis in original). Even further, Griselda’s passion amounts to a mastery that the tale formerly seemed to resist; in the telling words of Lynn Staley, “Griselda appears less victim than master of the man who apparently masters her.”

We might wonder here why the Clerk does not end on the note of triumph he has worked so hard to orchestrate. Was this not “ynogh”? Even further than the Wife’s, the Clerk’s Tale reaches beyond fairy-tale endings, which see a “pitous day” result in a “blisful ende” (4.1121):

For moore solempe in every mannes syght
This feste was, and gretter of costage,
Than was the revel of hire mariiage.

(4.1125–27)

Much of this close to the Clerk’s Tale repeats with excess the opening drama of Walter’s wedding, retranslating Griselda from yet another “provre estaat” (4.473) back into “swich richesse” (4.385), “ther she was honured as hire oghte” (4.1120). In referencing the opening “revel of hir mariiage,” this “moore solempe” close must also exceed its “costage” to form a fitting and final conclusion. It must repeat with a difference: as a renewal of the politico-marriage drama it marks both points of origination and conclusion as such. Yet as a final end, it must also denote its singularity, its unrepeatability—it “ys ynogh” and more. This should be his tale’s proper end, and yet, the Clerk continues beyond this point to assure us, with the certainty of history, that all turned out for the best.

In this elaborate allegorizing, the Clerk may position marriage far beyond personal pleasure or desire, but not so for the Clerk’s performance. His unstoppable speech and nervous “song” reveal a number of desires in his narrative both proclaimed and disavowed. Even as he offers a broader reason for Griselda’s testing, which fills the lack the story answers, his proliferating words betray their insufficiency. More information than seems needed follows: their daughter’s marriage, Janicula’s death, their son’s succession are all foretold. But the factuality of these events cannot conclusively interpret and guarantee the story. He then offers the meaning Griselda’s story does not hold:

This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were inportable, though they wolde, . . .
(4.1142–44)

But the Clerk’s disavowed reason for telling the story provides no final word or conclusive raison d’être. And that lack of finality or conclusion, it seems, propels him to keep speaking, to beg for another word, just a bit more of his audience’s attention: “But o word, lordynges, herkneth er I go” (4.1163); “I wol . . . / Seyn yow a song to glade yow” (4.1173–74); “Herkneth my song that seith in this manere” (4.1176). These pleas to his audience repeat, and thus ultimately show the failure of, his invocation of Petrarch’s purpose, which is itself introduced in similar terms: “Herkneth what this auctour seith” (4.1141). With a more opaque motive than would appear for the Wife’s, perhaps because of his quiet and reserved character, the Clerk’s Tale also nervously withdraws from its own triumphant end. These self-fracturing endings are not some symptom of a failure with these idealizations; indeed, on its own each succeeds brilliantly. But the recoil of these momentarily triumphant narrators ultimately articulates the desire, and thus the lack, that drives them toward narration in the first place. In this sense, then, the Clerk’s aggression against the Wife in the Envoy to his tale is not so much a hostility to the content of her tale as much as it is his attempt to control the circulation of the signifier between them and who properly “owns” it. Seeking the recognition always at the heart of desire, he speaks as if he wants to be sure of having the last word.

Yet where the Wife’s and Clerk’s Tales offer radically different idealizations of femininity, to an uncanny degree they work and speak alike within their fictions. If a hideous, undesirable (yet magical) crone in a fanciful Arthurian romance appears too distinct from the exemplary Griselda, we have only to turn to the powerful mobility of these figures to see their connection. The old woman changes her own form, appearing repulsive on her wedding night only to reward her husband with what he wants in a mate. We are even led, retrospectively, to attribute to her the abrupt vision of dancing ladies that lures the questing knight into her company in the first place. Similarly mobile, Griselda is “translated” (4.385) by marriage to Walter out of her inferior social position and filthy clothes at the opening and close of her tale. Her transformation differs from the magical old woman’s as much as the genre of the Clerk’s story trumps the ostensible frivolity of romance. Yet, Griselda’s translation ultimately marks an essential lack of change, her stability from her first words out of the
“oxes stalle” in which she is found, throughout her trials by Walter’s cruel design, to the tale’s final denouement. Griselda’s initial translation works as a kind of revelation, a shift in appearance (much like the old woman’s) that articulates an essential, if misrecognized, inscription of value. In this Griselda appears as a living figure of the wife’s pillow lecture on the illusions of “old richesse” (3.1110) and the origin of “gentilesse [that] cometh from God allone” (3.1162). The Wife’s old woman might as well be describing in advance the virtue of Griselda herself.

Despite what may seem to us their differences, in the end Griselda and the old woman offer the very same argument in their tales; the fairy does so explicitly in her pillow lecture while Griselda does so implicitly by her constancy. These female figures, of course, give the lie to the assumed value of inherited wealth and station. Both subvert the social conditions of aristocratic privilege upon which so much of the discourse of the Canterbury Tales is founded. They offer in its place a moral order of heritability: “Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse” (3.1117). As the hag puts it to the knight she rebukes: “Looke who that is moost vertuous alway, / Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay / To do the gentil dedes that he kan; / Taak hym for the grettest gentil man” (3.1113–16). Much like the narrators recoiling at the end of their respective tales, we may be shocked to learn that, in more ways than one, the Wife and Clerk, misreading both themselves and each other, have told the very same story.

The desires of the Wife of Bath have always been easy to discern from the way she openly acknowledges them in her Prologue and Tale. Not so for the Clerk. In a tale where the limitless desire for sovereignty must be curtailed by one who lacks any desire whatsoever, his story provokes a number of questions about its narrator’s desires and those of his presumed audience. With whom should we align the Clerk’s desire? Although the question orients us toward the figures in his tale, to a choice between Walter and Griselda, the real answer appears to be the Wife of Bath. To attain the narrative sovereignty and autonomy to which the Wife and Clerk aspire (and which anyone engaged in Bailly’s competition implicitly seeks), they must lay themselves open to the mastery they have supposedly abjured. In this way they define themselves not by sharing any similar appetite (in this they remain opposed), but by and through the Other’s desire—the working of the Symbolic order to which they must submit.38 Both narrators align

38. We might note the way the self-sufficient Walter paradigmatically assumes the desire of the Other in the Clerk’s Tale. Walter’s desire to marry, we will recall, comes from elsewhere; it originates with his people’s desire and their concern for the “tyme comynge” (4.79). He claims to have “nevere erst thoughte streyne me,” but Walter immediately orchestrates a wedding that proves his
themselves with feminine heroes idealized by their tales, the old woman/young and beautiful lady and Griselda, figures that inhabit the place of the Other’s desire for each of them. And each tale ultimately narrates the assumption of this desire for the Other. Desiring an other they imagine and formulate in radically different terms, the Wife and Clerk desire to be the object of the Other’s desire.

These terms undo the confusion between sovereignty and mastery at the end of the Wife’s Tale and rescript them into a fiction of subjectivity and its attendant (mis)recognitions. Given the “sovereynetee” to decide for herself, the old woman asks her husband to qualify his choice: “Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie” (3.1236). The wife/Wife defines her sovereignty in terms of mastery over her husband, and thus gives the lie to the subject’s simple fiction of autonomy and self-determination. Gaining sovereignty, the power of self-determination, is a fiction of subjectivity, which demands far more mastery, as well as the others mastery necessitates. To become a “self” one must also become a subject—and endure subjectification—which means recognizing and identifying with the Other. In fact, the misrecognition of the conditions of mastery as sovereignty is one of the primal fictions of the subject out of which desire, and the language that aims to fulfill it, emerges.

Such a reading thus turns the Clerk, through his identification with Griselda’s desire, into one who desires complete mastery: “But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I” (4.361). It also turns the Wife into the one subjected to an absolute master to whom she relinquishes all control. Seen in this way, the Wife and Clerk come to inhabit the desires of each other’s stories insofar as the raped maiden who has to submit “maugree hir heed” (3.887) functions as a version of the passive Griselda and as Walter appears as a more exalted exemplar for the bachelor knight who deserves redemption. If the Wife’s and Clerk’s Tales center on ideal images, then, these projections come at a cost, which is the fundamental alienation that the assumption of identity and language incurs. Particularly for the Clerk—who so wishes to universalize his ideal as a model for human rather than feminine or wifely behavior—this cost is pressing. Difficult to calculate, these costs do not appear as such on the surface but stalk these ideal images in abjected form as raped maiden and voracious husband, respectively.

Ultimately, it may be no surprise to find out that the Clerk envies Walter’s sovereign will, particularly insofar as it can be admired in the opening beneficence and forethought. Walter similarly constructs his choice for a wife as other to the desire of the people for one “born of the gentilleste” appropriate to his “honour” (4.144; 131, 133). He works according to a logic beyond the aristocratic form by which his people presume to find him a suitable match.
scene of the tale, before Griselda demystifies its lack. Such power subtends the meek and threadbare Clerk’s desire. More shocking is the recognition of the Wife’s analogous fantasy of submission to a worthy man, a desire that positions her somewhat uncomfortably as the silent maiden and accounts for the rape opening her unique version of this traditional story. Such associations (and the extreme versions of the desire they articulate) make it all that much clearer why the Wife and Clerk recoil from what they have accomplished in their tales. Their fictions witness the structure of desire underwriting them, their so-called rivalry, and the storytelling game more generally, putting the desires of safely moral tales more closely in line with those of romance. Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, the desires of such stories are anything but what they seem in their disfiguringly ascetic religious form.

39. We might read the Clerk’s one resounding criticism of the noble Walter in this context. After delineating his conventionally noble attributes the Clerk abruptly objects: “I blame hym thus: that he considered noght / In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde” (4.78–79). Such a curiously, even awkwardly, articulated evaluation in the Clerk’s own voice amounts to the kind of performative utterance that does and means far more than it says. Not only symptomatizing the Clerk’s veiled desire to dominate in advance of the story, his “blame” aligns him further with Walter’s power, much of which operates in terms of performative utterances and orchestrated dramas Walter stages for an internal audience.

40. In her discussion of the sources and analogues to the Wife of Bath’s Tale, Helen Cooper writes, “The rape that opens the tale has no parallels in these other English versions, though similar adventures are on occasion credited (or discredited) to Gawain in some French romances” (159). Cooper, Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989).