Fashioning Change

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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The late-medieval fascination with naked Griselda and her changes of clothing is, at its heart, according to modern critical discussion, a fascination with translation. Most influential in this respect have been the studies of Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale by Carolyn Dinshaw and David Wallace, which have deepened our comprehension of Griselda’s sartorial symbolism through an understanding of her figure in relation to masculine hermeneutics, her role as a text undressed and dressed, or read and “translated” by educated men, often for sociopolitical purposes. As these and other studies have shown, each new translation of the Griselda tale—from Boccaccio’s original through Petrarch, Philippe de Mézières and the anonymous French translations, Christine de Pizan, Chaucer, and forward to the early modern renditions—revised not only the interpretative adornment of the challenging tale, but also the descriptions of Griselda’s clothes themselves. The readings of Griselda’s sartorial translations have varied over the years: while earlier studies tended to concentrate on Griselda’s allegorical and spiritual translations, more recent readings have focused on ritualized investitures, hagiographic translation, and the social performances involved in marriage, divorce, death practices, and (in the early modern period) guild membership. As I will elaborate in this chapter, Griselda is not merely translated; rather, as Chaucer’s text states, she is translated “in swich richesse” (CT 4.385). This often-overlooked adverbial phrase is a vital and underdiscussed element of Griselda’s figuration whose linguistic purpose can serve as momentary metaphor for the critical shift this chapter follows. I would like to extend our attention outward from
the actions performed on Griselda’s body—the verbal translating, stripping, and testing—to include the objects modifying these actions: the riches, gems, clothes, and rags that materialize the changing world and changing perceptions around her.

In a basic sense this chapter attempts to take Griselda’s clothes at face value, to understand the text’s obsession with changing clothes as just that—an obsession with changing clothes. But whose obsession? Griselda’s own lack of attachment to the goods that adorn her body, her Boethian stability in the face of extreme misfortune and fortune—literal rags and riches—seems to dismiss the possibility that it holds a lesson about material desires. Yet Griselda’s sartorial stoicism rests in implicit comparison with a desiring audience; her own indeterminate or utterly absent reactions to her clothes serve to emphasize the overt reactions of the people around her. This heightened audience reception and perception of Griselda’s alternately rich and rude clothes in Chaucer’s work reveals the type of classifying of consumption and objectification that Pierre Bourdieu defines as the “distinction” of cultural tastes, or “the social relations objectified in familiar objects, in their luxury or poverty, their ‘distinction’ or ‘vulgarity,’ their ‘beauty’ or ‘ugliness.’” Further, the consumer categories associated with clothing are manipulated and appropriated in Chaucer’s tale; whereas garments are presented as holding the power to transform peasant social status and to sway bourgeois public perception, for example, they are also presented—on the surface, at least—as holding no apparent appeal for the sober and shrewdly insightful aristocratic eye of Walter. As I will discuss, while the Clerk may condemn Walter’s tyrannical testing of Griselda, he celebrates to a disturbing extent his prudential ability to see through rude material surfaces to inner beauty and virtue. In contrast, he identifies and targets those who are seduced by aesthetic beauty and the cultural capital behind it, ultimately aligning superfluous, frivolity, and love of novelty with not only the common “peple” of his tale, but also the nouveaux riches merchant class and its spendthrift “arch” wives.

Reading against the grain of Chaucer’s poem allows me to explore how this rhetorical offensive against conspicuous consumers grows out of the potential of sartorial consumption as a new form of cultural resistance, an example of what Michel de Certeau calls the “tactics” that consumers use to get around the “strategies” of disciplinary forces. In a world in which the problem of status-blurring garments and ever-changing, ever-more exorbitant fashions was fast becoming one of the most prominent social concerns, the Clerk’s Tale situates itself at the very crux of the debate: the sartorial basis of social change and public perception. By underscoring the disparity between a woman who remains exactly the same whether in rags or riches and the
public’s constantly changing perception of her, the tale not only invokes what
Lee Patterson calls the “quintessentially bourgeois” appropriation and dislo-
cation of social values (here aristocratic gentillesse), but also comments on that
process, putting into question the very apparatus of that dislocation (here
clothing) in the medieval imaginary.10 Griselda’s lack of material appetite is
thus inseparable from the importance that Walter and his subjects (and we
the readers) give to array and appearance, and ultimately from the moral
judgment that the Clerk renders on this mistaken importance.

It is within this latter textual presence—that is, the nuanced style, termi-
nology, and object(s) of the Clerk’s moralizing rhetoric—that I have found
the strongest evidence for this materialist reading. While much of the sump-
tuary detail in the Clerk’s Tale and Envoy is undoubtedly generated by the
repressed sociohistorical environment commonly referred to as the “textual
unconscious,” the Clerk’s Tale’s profound interest in comparing spiritual and
material interpretation, and the placement of these concerns in the mouth of
the logician Clerk, leads to a significant amount of what appears to be aes-
thetic (or anti-aesthetic) ‘intent’ on the Clerk’s part.11 As I argue in this chap-
ter, it is specifically through the Clerk’s self-conscious insistence on rhetorical
and material frugality, coupled with his open address to the sumptuous mate-
rival world of the Wife of Bath and “al hire secte” (CT 4.1171), that this tale
links larger gendered and hegemonic formulations of marriage, authority, and
feudal subjectivity to the more immediate problem of the influence of mate-
rial goods on the medieval worldview. In its attempt to shape audience inter-
pretation according to class and gender, the text grapples intently with the
different lenses through which Griselda might be seen, aligning the seemingly
divergent but equally illogical forces of tyranny, temptation, and fashion, and
it does this through a figure, I will argue, whose own frugality betrays an
excessiveness equal to the superficialities that he shuns.

GRISELDA’S RICHESSE

Stylistically, the Clerk’s Tale, like the Clerk himself, is stripped of almost all
ornament and color, pared down well beyond the simple to the plain.12 Yet,
despite—or as I will suggest, because of—its divestiture of the type of sumpt-
uous detail found in, say, the clothing descriptions of the Wife of Bath or
Prioress in the General Prologue, or the delectably decorated Alisoun of the
Miller’s Tale, the Clerk’s Tale is more profoundly invested in the implications
of material ornament than perhaps any of the other Tales. The first pivotal
moment for this reading is the scene of Griselda’s translation into richesse:
And for that no thyng of hir olde geere
She sholde brynge into his hous, he bad
That wommen sholde dispoillen hire right theere;
Of which thise ladyes were nat right glad
To handle hir clothes, wherinne she was clad.
But natheles, this mayde bright of hewe
Fro foot to heed they clothed han al newe.

Hir heris han they kembd, that lay untressed
Ful rudely, and with hir fyngres smale
A corone on hire heed they han ydressed,
And sette hire ful of nowches grete and smale.
Of hire array what sholde I make a tale?
Unnethe the peple hir knew for hire fairnesse
Whan she translated was in swich richesse.

(CT 4.372–85)

The question directed in the Clerk’s own voice toward the listener or reader in line 383 represents Chaucer’s most dramatic addition to this scene, parts of which he borrows from both Petrarch’s version of the tale and the anonymous French Le Livre Griseldis. While this type of editorial comment is far from unusual for Chaucer or his sources, its strategic placement here introduces and even publicizes the Clerk’s complicated interest in the subject of clothing. For one, the contradiction that lies at the heart of the occupatio form itself—a device that purports to draw the reader away from a specific subject and toward a larger narrative purpose, even as it effectively highlights that subject with its rhetorical intercession—also lies at the heart of the Clerk’s rhetorical question: how can one simultaneously address and refute the subject of “array”?

Ascetic simplicity in both speech and clothing were expected characteristics of young scholars in Chaucer’s time, and for this reason the Clerk’s pronounced position on vestimentary goods at first appears merely to be consistent with his overall soberness and place in life. On the surface his indifference to all and any ornamentation, what Charles Muscatine calls his spurning of poetry’s “ordinary riches” and of readers’ corresponding “extravagant taste,” also seems in keeping with the “pleyn” tale that the Host requests of him so that he and the other pilgrims “may understonde what ye seye” (CT 4.19, 20). I would argue, however, that through implied comparisons to the secular, worldly, commercial members of his audience, the Clerk’s careful sartorial and rhetorical austerity speaks about the untutored
masses as much as for them. For instance, while on the one hand his portrait in the General Prologue appears to present an ideal and ascetic Clerk, this idealness is primarily presented in terms of its contrasting relation to consumption and exchange. To begin, while his garment is “ful thredbare,” it is also a “courtepy” (CT 1.290), or a short, secular tunic that would have been considered part of the “new” fashion of the period. This shabby yet once fashionable garment is but one example among manifold other consumer analogies in the Clerk’s description that together reveal a surprisingly consistent economics of self-mortification: leanness discussed in terms of being “nat right fat” (CT 1.288), philosophy in terms of “litel gold in cofre” (CT 1.298), education in terms of borrowed money “spente” (CT 1.300), desire for purchasing books in terms of shunning “robes riche” (CT 1.295), and poverty in terms of his refusal of secular or “worldly” employment (CT 1.292). Just as this subtext of his General Prologue portrait suggests the interface between Chaucer the narrator’s (and other pilgrims’) worldly, commercial perspective and the Clerk’s own performed (and possibly exaggerated) asceticism, so the Clerk’s metatextual dismissal of “array” in Griselda’s first clothing scene speaks to the greater interaction between the moral lesson embedded in his rhetorical performance and the reception of his audience. In the Prologue to the Clerk’s Tale the Host demands, for the pleasure of the listening audience, not only a plain tale, but also a cheerful, or “‘myrie tale’” (CT 4.9) that does not cause the pilgrims to lament about their vices (CT 4.12–13); technically the Clerk delivers this, but solely on the surface: his is a deceptively simple tale whose comedic cheer lies only in its basic premise (it is about a peasant girl who becomes marchioness, after all), and in which, as I will discuss, he encodes not only moral lessons, but moral lessons shrewdly directed back at his pilgrim audience. Like his hero Walter, the Clerk gives all the appearance of complying with the wishes of the people (or in this case, their secular representative, the Host), but in fact acts on his own terms and even at their expense.

Indeed, the Clerk’s question about array not only inherently brings to the forefront the presence of his audience but also invites the reader to contemplate the audience’s own desires—for the “riches” of literary-cultural entertainment, for protracted descriptions of attire, and arguably, for luxurious attire itself. Despite the fact that it is a rhetorical question and thus not meant to be answered, for instance, there are some ostensibly obvious answers to the question of why an educated narrator such as the Clerk would “make a tale” of array, most of which have to do with medieval literary theories on audience reception of fictional material: Macrobius’s influential concept of narratio fabulosa, for example, describes fiction as the veil or dress necessary
to express the most serious of philosophical or sacred truths (a device one would think especially pertinent to the Clerk’s own ultimate allegorical leanings); Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s popular *Poetria nova* also encourages lengthy passages describing women’s attire as part of “the food and ample refreshment of the mind” that *is descriptio.* Chaucer of course knew both of these texts, and his most popular work creates its own type of sartorial presence; Laura F. Hodges’s scrupulous work on the lexis of clothing in the *Canterbury Tales* has uncovered the extensive range of his knowledge and interest in sartorial terminology.

Importantly, however, within this larger sartorial inventory in the *Tales*, Chaucer seems to associate clothing *descriptio* at least in part with lower-class or bourgeois (versus aristocratic) tastes; for it is only in the Miller’s “nyce” or silly tale (*CT* 1.3855), heartily enjoyed by all but the Reeve, that we find the type of lavish head-to-toe clothing description suggested in Vinsauf. If, therefore, Chaucer’s Clerk refuses to divulge sartorial details, perhaps it is in part to contrast his tale and its heroine from the type of conspicuously ornamented object of desire such as Alisoun, whose trappings proclaim, for all to see, the newfound wealth of her carpenter husband’s (and miller narrator’s) social class. Moreover, if we consider that the Host’s opening comment to the Clerk—that he appears like a new bride at a feast, or “sittynge at the bord” (*CT* 4.2–3)—works not merely as a slight about the properly modest demeanor of a clerk, but also as a reminder of the highly charged culture of consumption that makes up the tale-telling competition, in which both tales and tale-tellers, and both men and women, are continually evaluated and assessed by the other pilgrims, as metaphorical “feasts” offered up by the Host, then we can also see the Clerk’s tale as a repudiation of and comment on that culture. Further underscoring this reading is the way that the Clerk’s question marks a thematic shift in the passage from describing how the “ladyes” dress Griselda to how “the peple” see her, from the courtly “dressing” of her crown and “setting” of her jewels to the public’s “knowing” of her: “Of hire array what sholde I make a tale? / Unnethe the peple hir knew for hire fairnesse” (*CT* 4.383–84). The question behind the question is perhaps not whether or why array belongs in tale-telling, but *how* it belongs.

In the rest of the passage dealing with Griselda’s first sartorial transformation, the Clerk maintains this uneasy balance between seeming to avoid sartorial detail and seeming to emphasize, through culturally charged terms, the public’s use, abuse, and perception of her sartorial goods. Although we are clearly made to focus on the *fact* that Griselda is reclothed “fro foot to heed” (*CT* 4.378), for example, we hear nothing about the color, material, style, or embroidery of her attire. This dearth of detail goes against not only
literary tradition but also the long tradition of elaborate clothing symbolism and ritual in royal marriages, which used investiture as a way of performing, through careful color, embroidery, and livery symbols, the social, political, and economic import of the new alliance. It also distinguishes itself from the extensive detail of contemporary homiletic and legislative discourses, which, as Claire Sponsler has pointed out, often “acted unwittingly as shopping lists for would-be consumers, laying out all the wares available for (forbidden) consumption.” Instead the Clerk gives his audience a list of base generalities devoid of color, ornament, or detail: “olde geere” and “clothes” for her former peasant attire, and “corone” and “nowches” for her new courtly clothes.

These apparently generic accounts are thus easily (and I would suggest deliberately) overshadowed by the reactions they invoke. In addition to the Clerk’s own reaction to the scene in the form of his occupatio, and to the aforementioned reaction of “the peple” who “hardly” recognize her, for example, we also have Chaucer’s enhancement of the response to her peasant garments by the court ladies, who are “nat right glad / To handle hir clothes” (CT 4.375–76). In contrast to this threefold response, Griselda’s own reaction is duly absent; this scene is rather about the perception of the people around her to the clothes that she wears. Griselda merely forms the backdrop: she is never specifically named or even made physically visible in the passage. Instead, she becomes the blank material to be adorned with the jewels of human artifice, literally “sette . . . ful of nowches grete and smale” (CT 4.382), and the passage’s running references to hir, she, and this mayde become the general field against which the “wommen,” “the peple,” and the narrative “I” gauge their own prejudices and ideas about the garments. The Clerk effectively strips the marriage ritual down to its basic structural purpose—the control of audience perception by ceremonial material goods—without appearing to indulge in those material goods himself. In the end the combination of the colorless clothing descriptions and the dramatic reactions of the people to them powerfully enlists the reader’s own imagination to fill in the narrative and aesthetic gaps regarding Griselda’s clothing—one reason, perhaps, for the heightened critical interest in hermeneutics and the word translated in this passage. Yet I would argue that it is in the last words of the passage—that she was translated “in swich riches”—that much of the interpretive weight of the description lies.

Chaucer uses the word richesse, meaning primarily “riches,” “wealth,” or “abundance,” sparingly yet purposefully in his Tales, almost always invoking the notion of temporeel richesses, or the Boethian sense of false riches of Fortune’s material goods. The Parson describes “richesses” as the first of
three main categories of earthly pleasures that require penance (along with “honours” and “delices” [CT 10.185]), and states that those who enjoy such wealth while alive will suffer a painful fourfold poverty in hell: poverty of treasure, of meat and drink, of clothing, and of friends (CT 10.191–99). Richesse represents a fantasy that embodies the uncertainty and changeability of both life and its trappings; as the Parson states, “alle the richesses in this world ben in aventure, and passen as a shadwe on the wal” (CT 10.1067).

In Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee, Prudence likewise condemns the “sweete temporeel richesses, and delices and honours of this world” (CT 7.1410) that have skewed Melibee’s perception away from God. That worldly richesse is perceived as being materialistic, corrupting, and ungodly by the Parson as well as Prudence, the two most morally upright (and excessively didactic) of Chaucer’s characters in the Tales, is especially enlightening, for they seem to correspond quite accurately to the Clerk’s own abstemious performance and moralizing perspective. Indeed, even in his strict economy the Clerk is careful to emphasize that the garments clothing Griselda are extreme: she is not simply translated into riches, but into “swich richesse” (CT 4.385; italics mine).29

By far the most thorough discussion of richesse in Chaucer’s works and the clear source of much of the rhetoric of richesse in the Tales is his translation of Boethius’s Consolatio Philosophiae. The word dominates Philosophie’s discussion of “the yiftes of Fortune” (4–5) in Book II Prosa 5 of the Boece. Here richesses concern not only questions of false “beaute” and “bountee” (40) but also the excesses of “superfluyte” (78), “covetyse” (123), and, in the following meter, the “anguysschous love of havynge” (II.m.5.30–31). Like most of her teachings, Philosophie’s discussion of richesse quickly becomes a question about mortal self-knowledge: “Richesses ben they preciouse by the nature of hemself, or elles by the nature of the?” (II.pr.5.8–10), she asks Boethius. She interrogates the poet’s and reader’s understanding of richesse by revealing the buried foundations of human investments in material goods: the false sense of importance, value, and beauty they bestow; the hunger for power they induce. To Philosophie, richesse represents only misunderstanding and transgression—the “errour” and “folie” (II.pr.5.158) of humans, whose desire for “diverse clothynge” (II.pr.5.86) and “strauuge apparailementz” (II.pr.5.160–61) condemns them to bestial ignorance about themselves and the world. Moreover, last and ironically, richesse also brings destitution. When in the form of money, richesse gains its true worth only in exchange: when it is “transferred fro o man to an othir” (II.pr.5.18–19), and more importantly, in the context of Griselda, “whan it is translated” to other people (II.pr.5.20–21). Because it cannot be shared without its value diminishing, and because the richesse of one brings poverty to so many others, Philosophie
depicts wealth itself as abject: “‘O streyte and nedy clepe I this richesse’” (II. pr.5.33).

In light of Chaucer’s uses of the concept, Griselda’s sartorial transformation into *richesse* has intriguing moral implications specifically linked to her new rich clothing. Like the description of *richesse* in the *Boece*, Griselda’s transformation into “swich richesse” could test her own potential for pride and greed; like the *Boece*, it could test her self-knowledge and possible artifice; like the *Boece*, it could test her value as a possession transferred and “translated”; and finally, like the *Boece*, her transformation could be seen to test the very notion of good fortune, illustrating through Walter’s sadistic tests the abject side of *richesse*. Its consistent use by the moral figures of the Parson, Prudence, and Philosophy further suggests that the word’s placement at such a crucial moment in the *Clerk’s Tale* could be meant to trigger personal meditation on the dangers of material goods and the beauty and power they bestow. Griselda’s story certainly depicts the cyclical nature of *temporeel richesses*: the arbitrary gaining and losing of material goods at the whim of Fortune, with whom Walter is repeatedly associated throughout the tale (69, 756, 812).

But importantly, although she acts as the didactic vessel, Griselda is not the recipient of the lesson of *richesse*. Like so much about Griselda, her clothing symbolism gains the necessary clarity only through comparison. The moral targets another vital character in the tale: “the peple” who gaze at her “fairnesse / Whan she translated was in swich richesse” (*CT* 4.384–85), and who are mentioned no less than twenty-eight times throughout the tale (the exact number, incidentally, that Griselda herself is named). The “peple” of the *Clerk’s Tale* represent a significant elaboration on Chaucer’s part that subtly transforms the tale’s social framework; as Lynn Staley has pointed out, Chaucer’s creation of “a single force, point of view, and voice that he designates as ‘the people’” diverges substantially from the representative mix of lesser nobles and courtiers in Petrarch’s tale. Susan Yager also argues that the distinction between the terms “peple” and “folk” in this tale forms part of Chaucer’s larger exploration of intellectual, behavioral, and class differences between the ignorant many and the refined and knowledgeable few.

Unlike Griselda, the Clerk’s “peple” are ripe for a lesson on the dangers of temporal riches. For one, their collective desire maintains a formidable presence throughout this poem, from their initial request of Walter that he “‘hastily to wyve’” (*CT* 4.140), which spurs the central action of the poem, to Walter’s own repeated assertions to Griselda that his (monstrous) actions toward her are not his, but his people’s wishes—“‘Nat as I wolde, but as my peple leste’” (*CT* 4.490). Yet even more palpable than the people’s desire, or
“poeplish appetit” as Yager calls it, quoting Crisseyde, is their observing and watching of Griselda: they witness nearly every narrated action between Walter and Griselda, beginning with the moment Walter enters Janicula’s house to ask for her hand, and even those things that they do not literally witness, such as Walter’s ‘murdering’ of his children, eventually come “to the peples ere” (CT 4.727). Essential to the related themes of desire and surveillance is the people’s collective gaze at Griselda’s array, which first emerges in this scene of her translation into richesse and grows increasingly significant with each subsequent scene of sartorial consequence. As we ultimately find out, while Walter does not marry Griselda for her richesse (CT 4.795), it seems that “the peple” do.

GRISELDA’S RUDENESSE

The problematic material subtext of Griselda’s richesse accrues its full weight only when compared to her corresponding aesthetic of rudenesse. The Clerk describes Griselda as born and raised in “rudenesse” (CT 4.397), an attribute that manifests itself physically first in her “rudely” unkempt hair (CT 4.380) when Walter first has her transformed into richesse, and later in the old “rude” cloth (CT 4.916) that her father places on her shoulders after her exile. The latter is a garment so wrought with holes that, again according to Chaucer’s elaboration of his sources, it has lost its fundamental purpose of concealing her body:

And with hire olde coote, as it myghte be  
He covered hire, ful sorwefully wepyng.  
But on hire body myghte he it nat brynge,  
For rude was the clooth, and moore of age  
By dayes fele than at hire mariage.  
(CT 4.913–17)

This torn garment is arguably the most memorable image in the Clerk’s Tale. Ostensibly it is a symbol of pared-down simplicity like the Clerk’s own threadbare garments, used to counter the richesse in which Walter had clothed her and of which he had her stripped. Griselda’s stoic bearing of her ragged clothing can thus be said to embody a lesson about the false importance of material goods and clothing in itself. But it is the Clerk’s almost obsessive reiteration and visualization of this “rude” attire that seems to encompass a most fascinating moral directive, for Griselda’s torn garments are continually
and repeatedly mentioned in a way that her garments of richesse are not. In fact, between the moment in which she dons the olde coote and the moment she reconciles with Walter, Griselda’s decrepit garments are described no less than nine times: her clothing is of “rude . . . clooth” and of great “age” (*CT* 4.916); “badde” and “yvel” (*CT* 4.965); “rude” and “eek torent” (*CT* 4.1012); “povre” (*CT* 4.1020); “povreliche” (*CT* 4.1055); and once again, “rude” (*CT* 4.1116).

The prominent aesthetic of this garment in a tale that goes out of its way to strip itself of imagery, and the tale’s blunt insistence that we reimagine Griselda’s rags over and over, work to implicate and then appropriate visual as well as material modes of consumption. For while the *Clerk’s Tale’s* exploration of gentillesse endeavors to compare moral and material treasures more broadly, the Clerk’s careful handling of Griselda’s appearance serves specifically to highlight and categorize the way people perceive and desire material ornament and especially clothing. When he first introduces his heroine, the Clerk takes care to emphasize how others view her low socioeconomic status: her father is not merely poor, he is the person that even the “povre folk” (*CT* 4.204) hold to be the “povrest of hem alle” (*CT* 4.205); correspondingly, it is upon Griselda as a “povre creature” (*CT* 4.232) that Walter first literally and metaphorically “sette his ye” (*CT* 4.233). Furthermore, while the Clerk makes an initial gesture toward Griselda’s physical attractiveness to others—she is “fair ynogh to sighte” (*CT* 4.209)—he immediately and somewhat self-consciously channels this into a description of moral rather than physical “beautee”:

> But for to speke of vertuous beautee,  
> Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne;  
> For povreliche yfostred up was she,  
> No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.  
> (*CT* 4.211–14)

Yet even when he purports to avoid material description here, he includes a significant detail about consumer desire: unlike the Miller’s bourgeois Alisoun, who has a “likerous ye” (*CT* 1.3244) to go with her eye-catching clothing, Griselda’s poor upbringing ensures that she carries no greedy desire or “likerous lust” in her heart.35 In the Clerk’s view, Griselda’s own lack of desire is inversely proportionate to her beauty and her fairness—a “fairenesse,” we remember, that “the peple” can only see after her transformation into richesse.

Indeed, according to the Clerk, to recognize (Griselda’s) true value one
must have the ability to look not only through rhetorical artifice (as he makes clear in his allegorical interpretation of Griselda at the end of the tale) but also through artificial trappings, which ultimately Walter has the capacity to do but his “peple” do not. The Clerk takes the time to clarify, for instance, that when Walter gazes at peasant Griselda before choosing her as his wife, he does not look at her with lascivious or foolish intentions, but in a serious manner:

And whan it fil that he myghte hire espye,
He noght with wantown lookyng of folye
His eyen caste on hire, but in sad wyse
Upon hir chiere he wolde hym ofte avyse.

\(\text{CT 4.235–38}\)

The Clerk further presents his assessment of Walter’s clear-sightedness in direct contrast with the flawed or absent “insight” of the people:

For thogh the peple have no greet insight
In vertu, he considered ful right
Hir bountee, and disposed that he wolde
Wedde hire oonly, if evere he wedde sholde.

\(\text{CT 4.242–45}\)

According to the Clerk’s subjective evaluation, just as Walter’s “sad” or serious way of looking corresponds to his keen perception of Griselda’s value despite her rude clothing, so the people’s lack of “insight”—literally, their inability to see into, or beyond the surface—corresponds to their ultimate “[u]nsad” nature \(\text{CT 4.995}\) and their superficial attachment to her richesse. The people’s perception thus by default becomes identified with the “wantown lookyng of folye” that Walter avoids. This problematic looking evokes what Chaucer’s Parson elsewhere calls people’s “coveitise of eyen” \(\text{CT 4.852}\)—namely, the obsessive gazing at the opposite sex that both incites and is incited by conspicuous consumption. The Parson specifically links wasteful consumption and “fool lookyng” \(\text{CT 4.852}\) under the sin of luxuria, denouncing men and especially women whose lechery causes them to “dispenden . . . hir catel and substaunce” on the opposite sex \(\text{CT 4.848}\). In the Clerk’s Tale, the people’s impaired (in)sight means they literally cannot understand who or even what Griselda is when she returns to her rudeness: “they wondren what she myghte bee / That in so povre array was for to see” \(\text{CT 4.1019–20}\).
Hence the Clerk assures that it is the literal sight of copious luxurious clothes that makes the people finally betray Griselda for (what they think is) her younger, richer replacement. When Walter’s “newe markysesse” (*CT* 4.942) arrives with her brother, the people interpret her superior worth based solely upon her sumptuous appearance, and for the first time they begin to question Griselda’s own merit:

For which the peple ran to seen the sighte  
Of hire array, so richely biseye;  
And thanne at erst amonges hem they seye  
That Walter was no fool, thogh that hym leste  
To chaunge his wyf, for it was for the beste.  
(*CT* 4.983–87)

The repeated emphasis on seeing in this passage, the twofold *seen the sighte* followed by *biseye*, “good-looking,” further underscores the people’s optical voracity for sartorial riches and novelty. Griselda, whose rude clothes are correspondingly described a few lines earlier as “yvel biseye” (*CT* 4.965), and who even in her former role as Walter’s wife displayed “[n]o pompe, no semblant of roialtee” (*CT* 4.928), cannot compare, in the public’s view, to “swich pompe and richesse” (*CT* 4.943), an exhibition so grand that, as the Clerk states, “nevere was ther seyn with mannes ye / So noble array in al West Lumbardye” (*CT* 4.944–45). Regardless of her dutiful and beneficial service as their marchioness, her promotion of the “commune profit” (*CT* 4.431) and her devotion to “[p]eple to save and every wrong t’amende” (*CT* 4.441), like the “olde” rags that she wears, Griselda is cast away by the fickle public in favor of the more visually stimulating “newe” array and *richesse*.

Moreover, just in case his audience missed the moral, the Clerk explicitly emphasizes the people’s fickleness in the following outburst about their changefulness and vulnerability to novelty, which does not exist in Chaucer’s sources:

‘O stormy peple! Unsad and evere untrewe!  
Ay undiscreeet and chaungynge as a fane!  
Delitynge evere in rumbul that is newe,  
For lyk the moone ay wexe ye and wane!’  
(*CT* 4.995–98)

It is in this turbulent fickleness that we find the closest correlation between the “peple” of the *Clerk’s Tale* and the social disruption that John M. Ganim
finds associated with the “peple” in Chaucer’s other work. Yet here the Clerk provides his statement with extra authority by placing it in the mouths of some of the “folk” themselves, thus dividing the public according to whether they are “[u]nsad” or “sadde” (CT 4.995, 1002), frivolous or serious, unstable or stable. While the “[u]nsad” people gaze voraciously “up and doun” at the “newe lady” (CT 4.1003, 1005), the “sadde folk,” like “sad” Walter earlier (CT 4.1002, 237), have the ability to see more clearly and thus avoid the allure of “noveltee” (CT 4.1004).

In this focus on the seductive powers of material novelty and its link to changefulness, the Clerk’s Tale suggests a more direct relation to contemporary discourses about clothing and consumption. As Stella Mary Newton has pointed out, one larger discourse that emerged in fourteenth-century England articulated courtly fashion as a choice between two aesthetics: that of the new style [de novo modo] and that of the old style [de antiquo modo]. Thus, like his use of richesse, the Clerk’s descriptions of Griselda’s clothes as either “al newe” (CT 4.378) or “olde” (CT 4.913), and his subsequent condemnation of “the peple” who allow their loyalty to be purchased by “noveltee,” work simultaneously as deceptively simple descriptions that correlate to his seemingly “pleyn” style and as phrases that would have carried strong moral and material resonance in Chaucer’s world.

Chaucer’s broader use of the word “newe” in his Tales underscores this ostensible purpose in the Clerk’s Tale and also suggests more specifically which Canterbury pilgrims the Clerk’s fickle, materially inclined “peple” most closely resemble. The word most often appears to describe the intersecting arenas of fashion and commerce. In the General Prologue, the “newe world” (CT 1.176) that the pleasure-loving Monk admires and the new style, or “newe jet” (CT 1.682) that the corrupt Pardoner thinks he performs is that embodied by the liveried guildsmen, with their instruments arrayed “[f]ul fressh and newe” (CT 1.365), and by the wealthy, cloth-making Wife of Bath in her “ful moyste and newe” shoes (CT 1.457). Such “newe” purchases resonate not only with English commercial enterprise but also with the uniqueness of foreign goods, for in the Man of Law’s Tale, it is the novelty of “newe” Eastern goods—specifically “[c]lothes of gold, and satyns riche of hewe” (CT 2.137)—that instills the Western desire for commercial exchange and that enriches Eastern merchants (CT 2.138–40). Such references to the desire for and the aesthetic of “newe” things can be found in various forms throughout the Tales; even Griselda, who verbalizes her opinion so rarely, declares, when Walter exiles her, that “‘[l]ove is noght oold as whan that it is newe’” (CT 4.857). Although many types of pilgrims wear fashions that can and should be perceived as novel, however—the Merchant and the Squire to name a
few—Chaucer’s specific use of the word “newe” in relation to material goods, like his use of sartorial descriptio, appears primarily in connection with the lower classes or the newly rich bourgeoisie such as the guildsmen and the Wife of Bath. Even peasants obtain cherished “newe” objects; in the Friar’s Tale for example, it is out of protection for her “newe panne” (CT 3.1614) that the old peasant woman finally curses (and thus condemns) the fraudulent summoner to his infernal fate. In this way the “newe” object, with its self-conscious link to purchasing, spending, and exchanging, can be seen to carry with it an oblique class indicator, or “distinction,” in Bourdieu’s sense, whether it implies a coveted necessity (the old peasant’s pan) or conspicuous consumption (the Wife’s shoes).

By specifically associating new fashions and other new objects with social classes other than the aristocracy, who were traditionally associated with vestimentary novelty and luxury goods, Chaucer appears to be responding in a particular way to the changing consumer habits of his culture. Consumer goods, according to Grant McCracken, work as “bridges to displaced meaning,” or as a way for consumers to recover both individual and cultural hopes and ideals: coveted goods represent, he says, “not who we are, but who we wish we were.” As medieval historians have pointed out, one curious aspect of medieval English merchants is that in this period of burgeoning mercantile growth, they allocated their newfound wealth toward consumption rather than investment, choosing to imitate the aristocracy rather than expand their commercial businesses. Thus, rather than use their newfound powers to create a new, mercantile identity, they attempted to purchase social status, to use their goods as a conduit to the social performances of the aristocracy. The typical complaint about this new kind of spending was that it confused social hierarchy, making it difficult for a person to distinguish social superiors from the middling and lower classes; at the heart of this discourse is the idea that all classes were wearing the same indistinguishable new styles. Chaucer appears to offer another kind of social commentary, displacing the cult of newness almost exclusively onto the mercantile and lower classes, and thus ascribing to them alone the troubling questions about aesthetic changeability and novelty as part of the larger problem of superficial social aspiration. In the same way that Durand attempted to isolate clerkly attire from the fashion system of lay culture, claiming for it a separate and stable aesthetic rooted in biblical directives, so Chaucer presents a discourse that attempts to distinguish aristocrats from the consumer-driven fashions of their social inferiors.

In this context Walter’s lavish production of his fictional marriage to a “newe lady” (CT 4.1005)—which the Clerk points out is “gretter of costage”
than his original marriage (CT 4.1126–27)—can be understood as a theatrical display of the emptiness of such material novelty; a revelation about the level of public seduction and deception that money and costume can accomplish. Once again, the Clerk ensures that Walter is the only one who knows the ostensible ‘truth’ behind the dazzling surface, behind the material dramatics of “pompe and richesse” into which the frivolous “peple” have bought. Ironically, his last-minute substitution of “povre” Griselda in her “rude” “olde coote” for the “newe lady” whose array is “so richely biseye” enacts the type of false advertising and bait-and-switch mercantile tactics deplored in Chaucer’s London. Yet unlike these commercial practices, the Clerk’s formulation of Walter’s manipulation of material goods strives not to fool the people into thinking that what is “olde” is “newe,” but rather once again to reevaluate the terms of their (visual) consumption, so that rudenesse supplants richesse as the figurehead of pomp and circumstance, and as the focus of spectacle and celebration. Just as the Clerk links new richesse with changeability, deception, and the fickleness of the commons, so he claims old rudenesse as a marker of the beauty, prosperity, and nobility of virtuous constancy.

In the end the Clerk’s inversion of the cultural categories of new and old, richesse and rudenesse in his tale does more than invoke the ‘poverty of riches’ theme of his Christian asceticism. In its aligning of material comprehension according to sociopolitical status—Walter’s superb insight regarding Griselda’s garments versus the people’s faulty sight, which is underscored by the larger divide between aristocratic and middle-class relationships to newness in the Tales—the Clerk’s Tale reveals a more particular investment in the material status of its listeners. We are invited to compare Griselda’s rude garments not only to her former richesse and to the richesse of Walter’s fictional new wife, but to the new richesse of the listening audience—Walter’s, the Clerk’s, and Chaucer’s. It is no accident, for instance, that the two pilgrims with whom the Clerk and his tale most closely interact are the nouveaux riches Merchant and Wife of Bath, whose own lavish attire proclaims their positions as the Tales’ most prominent representatives of England’s burgeoning cloth trade and rising mercantile classes. In direct opposition to the threadbare frugality of the Clerk and his povre Griselda, the General Prologue descriptions of the Merchant and the Wife, it is well known, are laden with references to sartorial wealth: in addition to her moist “newe” shoes (CT 1.457), at church the Wife wears many layers of “fyne” coverchiefs, and “fyn” red hose (CT 1.453, 456), while the Merchant wears a Flemish beaver hat, fashionable polychrome “mottelee” clothes, and “bootes clasped faire and fetisly” (CT 1.271–73). The Merchant’s lucrative financial dealings—his “bargaynes” and “chevyssaunce” (CT 1.282)—and
the Wife’s role as a rich widow and successful clothmaker tie their sumptu-
ary excesses to the expansive influence of mercantile wealth in fourteenth-
century culture.

To put it briefly, the connections between the Clerk and these two fig-
ures of mercantile riches go beyond simple contrasting aesthetics. In their
 corresponding themes of perspectives skewed by material wealth, penetra-
ting insight versus superficial sight, and the eroticization of newness—new
 spouses, new clothes, and even new bodies (in the case of the Wife’s old
 crone)—the three tales suggest a larger dialectic between the literary and the
 material, with the ultimate effect of unsettling the Clerk’s spiritual allegory
 of his tale and underscoring its more material themes. The desireless Griselda
 might be seen as the antitype to the appetitive May and Alisoun of Bath, and
to the more general bourgeois predicament of a husband not prepared for an
 equal partner who can both assert her own desires and manipulate her real-
 ity to satiate them, but she is also a comment on them, and thus cannot be
 understood, or arguably even exist, in isolation from them. As I will discuss
 in the next section, this is especially true for the mercantile, domineering
 Wife of Bath and her “secte” of material women.

APPETITIVE ARCHEWYVES

While throughout his tale the Clerk positions Griselda’s fluctuating sarto-
 rial symbolism more generally in relation to the shallow gaze of the “peple”
 and their implied pilgrim contingent, in the final words of his tale and in
 the subsequent Envoy he explicitly narrows the tale’s directive into a practi-
cal, material interpretation for a more specific type of practical, material lis-
tener: the Wife of Bath “and al hire secte” (CT 4.1170–71). Whether this
 “secte” carries its sexual or legal meaning, or whether it refers to the Wife’s
 materialist cause célèbre, it finally makes overt the heretofore veiled gender-
ing of the Clerk’s antimaterialism. This gendering is partly, but not wholly,
a response to the Wife of Bath and her particular form of bourgeois mate-
 rialism and marital economics. In a larger sense it taps into the moralizing
 sumptuary discourses of Chaucer’s world, in which the category of person
 most associated with changeability and material desires, and thus that most
 likely to be the implied target of these themes in the Clerk’s Tale, is the medi-
 eval woman or wife. Tellingly, as a temptation in the human stages in life,
richesse was thought to be especially pertinent for women—women being, in
 Diane Owen Hughes’s words, the “ultimate symbol of a too transitory mate-
 rial world, corrupted initially by Eve’s sin.”
The medieval tradition of seeing Griselda as a type of mirror for women underscores the Clerk's own possible objective in this regard. Roberta L. Krueger has recently outlined the trope of impossibility through which Boccaccio and Petrarch compare Griselda to contemporary wives, a theme reformulated into Griselda's role as a “biau mirror,” or beautiful mirror for wives in the French translations by Philippe de Mézières and the Le Ménagier de Paris, and then later challenged by Christine de Pizan in her Cité des Dames. Susan Crane has likewise pointed to the “reorientation toward exemplarity for women” in Chaucer’s own version and in his anonymous French source, Le Livre Griseldis, which states in its preface that it has been created “a l’exemplaire des femmes mariées et toutes autres” [as an example for married women and all other women].

When read with an eye toward the Clerk’s acknowledged female audience and within the larger context of the Griselda tale as a mirror for women, the Clerk’s use of sartorial symbols suggest even stronger comparisons to contemporary wives and their sumptuary excesses. In particular, his gendered allusions to attire highlight the substantial sumptuary component of marital conflict in this period. When placed in the context of contemporary women’s marital rights, for example, the “smok” that Griselda requests of Walter at the dissolution of their marriage can be seen as a barbed reminder to English wives of their absolute lack of personal property rights. On the one hand Griselda’s smock works as a moral exemplum against women’s attachment to their finery, the literal manifestation of the sartorial humility the Wife of Bath lacks: “In habit maad with chastitee and shame / Ye wommen shul appareille yow,” the Wife quotes one husband as saying, “And noght in tressed heer and gay perree, / As perles, ne with gold, ne clothes riche” (CT 3.342–45). On the other hand, the scene is steeped in a commercial rhetoric that locates the smock in the realm of marital, sexual, and economic exchange: Griselda pointedly returns to Walter “your clothynge . . . your weddynge ryng,” and “youre jueles,” and demands the smock in clear terms of compensatory payment “in gerdon of my maydenhede” and “to my meede” (CT 4.867–69, 883, 886; italics mine).

Importantly, while Chaucer in large part inherits these themes from his sources, he also enhances the material reality of the scene by adding Walter’s reply to Griselda that she may have “the smok . . . that thou hast on thy bak” (CT 4.890). In the same way that Italian audiences would have recognized the vesting and divesting of Griselda as part of the social practices around their marriage rituals, as Christiane Klapisch-Zuber has discussed, so English audiences would likely have recognized this sole garment “on thy bak” as the one personal item that a husband was legally required to bequeath
to his wife on his death.\textsuperscript{53} Despite Chaucer’s depiction of the widow of Bath as gaining much wealth through the gifts “yeven” to her by her rich old husbands (CT 3.631), according to English common law, the husband, who owned outright all of the couple’s personal property, was not legally required to return a woman’s dowry or any other private item, with one exception: according to the law of \textit{paraphernalia} rights, the woman had to be allowed one piece of “necessary” clothing—i.e., the clothing on her back.\textsuperscript{54} In stipulating that Griselda, like a “‘wydwe’” (CT 4.836), leaves the marriage with only the garment on her back and returns all other personal items to Walter, the Clerk emphasizes English women’s own meager legal status regarding the goods and clothes with which they adorn themselves.

Chaucer’s principal addition to Griselda’s wardrobe, the “clooth of gold that brighte shoon” (CT 4.1117) in which she is dressed after her third and final stripping, also extends the Clerk’s rhetoric against ostentatious wives. On the surface the garment represents the long-overdue end to Griselda’s suffering; after proving herself worthy, she, like Job, has her fortunes restored and receives her rightful place according to her \textit{gentillesse} and humility. In late-medieval Europe “clooth of gold” was a specific and highly coveted material good; the pinnacle of sumptuous display, it was usually worn and exchanged by nobility and the very elite of the social strata. By the late fourteenth century, however, sumptuary legislation barring such material from the lower and middle classes suggests that it had become problematically accessible.\textsuperscript{55} “Clothes of gold,” we remember, top the list of the “newe” vestimentary commodities that the wealthy Syrian merchants of the \textit{Man of Law’s Tale} bring for trading (CT 2.137). The immorality of such clothing became a favorite topic of sermonizers; the fourteenth-century preacher Thomas Wimbledon, for example, explicitly uses the Job passage referred to in the \textit{Clerk’s Tale} to condemn luxurious clothes and other riches: “For we beþ / nouȝt gete wiþ / riche cloþis, neiþer bore wiþ gold ne wiþ / siluer. Ynakid he bryngeþ vs in to þe world, nedy of mete, / cloþynge and drynke.”\textsuperscript{56}

Moreover, a few stanzas after describing Griselda’s superior garment, the Clerk offers a contrasting image in the impure metaphorical “gold” of contemporary wives, which, he says, would not hold up under testing the way Griselda did: “the gold of hem hath now so badde alayes / With bras, that thogh the coyne be fair at ye, / It wolde rather breste a-two than plye” (CT 4.1167–69).\textsuperscript{57} Griselda’s pure gold clothing works nicely to contrast the flashy but substandard gold of contemporary women, yet it still presents a problem with regard to the Clerk’s larger rhetorical project: that is, how can he reward Griselda’s humility with gold clothing without engaging in and encouraging the very artifice and covetousness that he shuns? Once again, the Clerk seems
to find an answer to this dilemma in the material consciousness of his ever-present, ever-watching—and this time, explicitly gendered—fictional audience. Until this moment in the text women have interacted with Griselda’s clothing only as vehicles for Walter’s power: Walter oversees the measurement of Griselda’s first set of clothes on a “mayde lyk to hire stature” (CT 4.257), and as we have seen, before his first marriage he orders “the women” to strip her of her rude clothes and dress her in riches. In regard to her gold clothing, however, for the first time Walter does not instigate Griselda’s change of clothes. The Clerk’s Tale makes no indication that Walter decrees or even knows in advance about Griselda’s final “clooth of gold”; rather, it is a group of anonymous watchful “ladyes” (perhaps the same aforementioned women) who discreetly take her away to strip and to reclothe her when they see the right moment in the festivities: “whan that they hir tyme say” (CT 4.1114). While, as Crane has pointed out, the women’s actions effectively condone Walter’s treatment of his wife and even “remake” their marriage, the implications of the scene also seem inherently to lessen and loosen Walter’s power over ritualized vesting. This text has gone out of its way to locate the power of women’s clothing symbolism in the hands of recognized patriarchal figures (husband, ruler, father), and thus also to keep true to its source texts, but now in its final hour it places Griselda’s ultimate sartorial transformation entirely in the hands of anonymous female revelers. It seems to be no accident that our first real glimpse at female agency in this tale concerns a socially savvy and upwardly mobile costume change, nor that this particular moment has been allocated as women’s “tyme” to step forward and intervene in the presentation of povre Griselda.

Despite his opening rhetoric of dismissal, the Clerkly narrator has repeatedly shown that sartorial symbolism holds immense social, political, economic, and even spiritual importance, and thus in the context of his own tale it would appear that the reveling women who dress Griselda of their own accord have either been given or usurped some control. This final and unusual scene of Griselda’s private stripping and public acceptance (versus her heretofore public stripping and private acceptance) gains more currency when we consider the subtext of marital ownership of material goods in this tale and Envoy, and also the lengths to which the Clerk seems willing to go here to conceal any potential for real resistance from his listeners. For, as if on cue, the sartorial transformation brought about by these women triggers the beginning of the end of the tale. The following stanza initiates a temporal and spatial retreat into rhetorical synopsis and completion: “Thus hath this pitous day a blisful ende” (CT 4.1121), concludes the Clerk, a remark that swiftly unites Griselda’s final clothing transformation, the joyful “murthe and revel”
(CT 4.1123) of the people, and the ensuing, two-stanza happy ending of his Griselda narrative. The actions of “thise ladyes” thus mark an important shift in the tale, for the Clerk’s apparent transfer of the sartorial matter from serious Walter to the reveling women, and his related move from “pitous” to “blisful,” foreshadow the larger shift that he makes in and around his Envoy a few stanzas later, when he loosens his formal structure and tone and appears to embrace the perspective of the Wife of Bath “and al hire secte”: “I wol with lusty herte, freshe and grene, / Seyn yow a song to glade yow, I wene” (CT 4.1173–74). Not surprisingly, however, his apparent (and, I might add, rather late) appeal to the pleasure of his listeners comes with its own inherent reproach, for in order to present this new song, he says, he must “stynite of ernestful matere” (CT 4.1175). Thus, as the Clerk constructs it, the Envoy in honor of all that is new, desirous, and entertaining, not to mention in honor of the “maistrie” of women (CT 4.1172), is frivolous and superfluous: an unnecessary, if popular and fashionable, new adornment to his heretofore “ernestful” tale.

As part of his strategy of undercutting the ornamental, the pleasurable, the popular, and the feminine, the Clerk situates his Envoy in the belief that men’s and women’s modes and materials of interpretation dramatically differ, for his shift from addressing “lordynges” (CT 4.1163) to addressing “noble wyves” (CT 4.1183) crucially coincides with his shift from insisting that the tale be read as allegory for the trials of the Christian soul (CT 4.1142–48) to his ultimate suggestion that the tale pertains to the material reality of contemporary “archewyves” (CT 4.1195). This is especially clear at the end of the Envoy, when the Clerk adopts the language of the Wife of Bath (who adopted the language of the Roman de la Rose) to advise women on how to manipulate their material performances for social gain: 59

If thou be fair, ther folk been in presence,  
Shewe thou thy visage and thyn apparaille;  
If thou be foul, be fre of thy dispence;  
To gete thee freendes ay do thy travaille;  
Be ay of chiere as light as leef on lynde,  
And lat hym care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille!  
(CT 4.1207–12)

This final stanza positions Griselda most clearly as the unstated counterexample to contemporary women’s production of self-presentation. While she was “ay oon in herte and in visage,” for example (CT 4.711), here we have the womanly manipulation of both “visage” and “apparaille.” Because visage,
from Latin *uisus*, “sight,” means both “face” (or “physical appearance”) and “to face” something, it is an apt word for Chaucer to explore how (male) seeing loses its power in the face of the female performance of being seen. Moreover, while Griselda exhibited no emotion when repeatedly stripped and dressed by her spouse, contemporary women almost inadvertently bring their spouses to dramatic displays of weeping with their consumption and ostentation. And finally, while Griselda worked untiringly with little interest in clothes or richesse, here contemporary women's work, or travaille, is their exuberant dressing and spending. This crucial troping of consumers as workers taps into what de Certeau has described as the active processes of consumption, by which consumption itself becomes not only a type of production, but also a practice or method of resistance for the repressed. This type of resistance informs the sum and substance of the Envoy, in which women's “work” of apparaille and dispence determines not only their marital relationships but also women's roles in the greater community and even their reception of fictional tales such as Griselda's.

The Envoy's anonymous arch wives obviously get much of their general momentum from their explicit association with the rebellious Wife of Bath. One specific and underexamined similarity is that Wife's Tale also ends in a fervent state of conflict between husbands' general niggardliness and wives' love of dispence. For while the Wife humorously draws her earlier tale to a close by imagining a world in which Christ sends to women “housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresh abedde” (*CT* 3.1259) with which to live their long, ever-joyous lives, she actually ends on a much angrier and arguably more revealing note, in which she curses “olde and angry nygardes of dispence,” asking God to cut short their lives with the “verray pestilence” (*CT* 3.1263–64). After the extended talk about sexual, rhetorical, social, and intellectual “sovereignty” throughout her Prologue and Tale, then, the Wife chooses as her ultimate word on the subject consumer sovereignty. Despite the Wife of Bath's jolly resistance to her various husbands' attempts to curb her sartorial spending and display in her Prologue (“Thou shalt nat bothe, thogh that thou were wood, / Be maister of my body and of my good,” she declares [*CT* 3.313–14]), it seems she cannot encompass these misers neatly into her fantasy of feminine dominance, and the undisguised resentment they bring out in the normally humorous if histrionic Wife lingers after her own formidable verbal presence has ended.

Considering the Clerk's larger rhetoric of sartorial richesse and rudenesse and his overt address to the Wife of Bath, it is no coincidence that this theme of dispence reemerges at the end of his Envoy. In fact, from its inception the Envoy seems implicitly to frame its marital concerns as sumptuary concerns.
The Clerk’s reference to Griselda at the beginning of the Envoy—his last mention of her—asks us to envision her not only “deed” and buried in Italy (CT 4.1177–78) but as the potential victim of a curiously literal mode of consumption—that is, in the entrails of that fabled ingester of patient wives, Chichevache:

O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,
Lat noon humylitee youre tongue nails,
Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence
To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille
As of Grisildis pacient and kynde,
Lest Chichevache yow swelwe in hire entraille!
(CT 4.1183–88)

This striking depiction of the public reception of stories as a female cow that eats patient wives has one target and one immediate parallel: the “noble wyves” to whom these words are addressed, and who have at this moment received the Clerk’s tale of Griselda. Yet this is not merely about a cannibalistic feminine that metaphorically consumes both masculine writing and a favorite subject of masculine writing, feminine patience. Rather, these lines form part of a greater context of consumption in the Envoy that harnesses more traditional misogynist themes of female oral rapaciousness and verbosility to contemporary material modes of consumption, women’s appareille and dispence. As I will discuss in the next section, these lines ensure that the figure of Griselda becomes inextricably connected with Chichevache and with the motif of female consumer appetite in later traditions.

Chichevache signifies one of the few fabled monsters of medieval origin—she emerges for the first time in fourteenth-century French and English texts—and she is a paradoxical figure: a beast both monstrous and pitiful whose only food consists of patient and virtuous wives, and thus who almost dies of starvation from lack thereof. While her gender is usually designated as feminine, a clear tradition of associating the beast with the abused husband exists; Jehan le Fèvre’s Lamentations de Mathéolus (a text Chaucer likely knew, and which may have been the model for Jankyn’s book of wicked wives) positions himself as the poor beast, monstrously shrunken and emasculated by his proud beast of a wife.64 The idea that Chichevache might represent piteous, feminized husbands starved of their capacity to ‘consume’ their wives, and the corresponding aesthetic of the emaciated miser-husband consumed by proud, horned, ostentatious wives (in the figure of Chichevache’s mate, Bicorn), fits very easily into the larger network
of sartorial discourses that underline the Clerk's dialectic of marital rivalry in his *Envoy*.

I have written elsewhere about the importance of the mythical Chichevache as a figure for consumer appetite in the late Middle Ages. Part of its cultural function is aesthetic. The obvious correlation to the emaciated creature would be the ascetic Clerk himself, who is described in the *General Prologue* as not merely “nat right fat,” but rather so thin as to look “holwe,” with a horse that is also “[a]s leene . . . as is a rake” (*CT* 1.288, 289, 287). Aesthetically contrasted to his bony frame is the bodily girth of the Wife of Bath to whom the Clerk’s envoy is addressed, with her “hipes large” (*CT* 1.472), and that of the other battle-ready “archewyves” of the *Envoy*, whom he describes as “strong as is a greet camaille” (*CT* 4.1196). But in fourteenth-century England Chichevache offered another important cultural function, the Middle English word “chinche,” or “chiche” referring not to a skinny person, as the usual translation of “skinny cow” suggests, but to “a person who is stingy, miserly, or greedy; a niggard, miser.” The closest synonym to our beast’s name, a word very close in spirit to *chincheface*, is “chinchehede,” which was used as a term for greediness. Commonly employed in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English texts, “chinche” is usually associated with avarice and *coveitise*. Chaucer’s Prudence, for example, uses the term several times to lecture Melibee on the proper way to use wealth. For instance, she quotes Cato as saying:

‘Use . . . thy riches that thou has geten / in swich a manere that men have no matiere ne cause to calle thee neither wrecche ne chynche, / for it is a greet shame to a man to have a povere herte and a riche purs. . . . The goodes that thou hast ygeten, use hem by mesure.’ (*CT* 7.1601–4)

Like Chichevache, misers and other avaricious figures were often represented as emaciated, such as Langland’s Coveitise, “[s]o hungrily and holwe . . . hym loked.” The miser constitutes one half of a twofold medieval understanding of avarice: on the one hand, as Chaucer’s Prudence states, avarice entails excessive hoarding or spending: “For right as men blamen an avaricious man by cause of his scarsetee and *chyncherie* / in the same wise is he to blame that spendeth over-largely (*CT* 7.1599–600; italics mine). On the other hand, as Chaucer’s Parson makes clear, avarice is “a likerousnesse in herte to have erthely thynges,” and entails simply coveting as well as actually purchasing material things: “Coveitise is for to coveite swiche thynges as thou hast nat; and Avarice is for to withholde and kepe swiche thynges as thou hast, with-oute rightful nede” (*CT* 10.740, 743). In addition to her appearance, then,
Chichevache could be said to embody both types of avarice in other ways: while her name seems to connote miserliness, Chichevache’s appetite—her desperate need to consume patient women, something she cannot have—seems to represent coveitise.

If, according to the Wife of Bath, among others, the stereotypically “bad” husband is the miser, a chiche, then according to the Clerk, the stereotypically “bad” wife is extravagant and wasteful. With the trope of gendered consumer habits already buried in the marital debate in this way, the introduction of Chichevache, a miser-cow that threatens to “swelwe” women like Griselda, serves the added purpose of associating physical with material consumption. As Chaucer’s Prudence states (quoting Augustine this time): “the avaricious man is likned unto helle, / that the moore it swelweth the moore desir it hath to swelwe and devoure” (CT 7.1616–17).

Even Chaucer’s changing of the name “Chicheface” to “Chichevache,” miser-cow, which adds a new level of comedic domestication to the beast, can be seen in terms of its connection to avarice. Chaucer’s exhortation to turn away from temporal goods in his popular Boethian poem “Truth,” for example, includes a telling pun on the word “vache” in the Envoy. Here the word can refer either to the prosperous courtier Sir Philip de la Vache, or to a more universal vache: the materialistic human as “beste” trapped in his worldly “wildernesse” (17) which is also his cage: “Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth beste, out of thy stal!” (18). In either case, Chaucer counsels the beste or vache in this poem to “look up” (19) from worldly distractions, to “[h]old the heye wey” (20) and “[d]istreyne thy lust” (27) and to turn instead to “hevenlich mede” (27). In this way the poem follows Boethius’s trope of moral vices (and particularly the love of material goods) turning the human into a beast: in the words of Chaucer’s Bœce, “he that forleteth bounte and prowesse, he forletith to ben a man; syn he ne may nat passe into the condicion of God, he is torned into a beeste” (4.pr.3.123–26).

Not only love of attire in general, but also specifically women’s love of attire in late-medieval Europe was said to metaphorically consume men in various ways, from the ravishment men experienced by looking at women’s clothing, to the entrapment of their souls by women “wanonly adorned,” to the ruination of husbands’ fortunes by wives’ lavish spending on attire. England’s own growing cultural concern about material property and subjectivity took on special meaning with regard to lower- and middle-class women for several reasons, among them, women’s symbolic status as commodities, their traditional role as figures for men’s adornment, and their new importance in post-plague market production, all of which played important roles in the cultural inscription of conspicuous consumption on the female body.
Indeed, although medieval European sumptuary laws show substantial variation in their targets and objectives, most sumptuary historians agree that the shift in regulation to focus more on women’s dress coincided with the growth of the urban mercantile class. In England in particular, legislation of women’s sartorial choices was tied closely to their subordinate cultural status. Following what Claire Sponsler has described as the imaginary patterns of social relations constructed by sumptuary laws, for instance, women’s attire and consumption privileges were governed almost completely by the socio-economic status of their father or husband. Related to this is the aforementioned matter of women’s paraphernalia rights, which was the subject of an ongoing dispute starting in the mid-fourteenth century between the ecclesiastical and secular courts in England about whether a woman’s clothing and jewelry were her very own (sua propria), or, like the rest of her land and goods, under the control of her husband. In Pollock and Maitland’s words in their eminent History of English Law, the “idea that the ornaments of the wife’s person are specially her own seems to struggle for recognition in England” in this period. Control over the resources of a woman’s appearance and self-presentation became central to late-medieval identity constructions, manifesting itself not only in sumptuary and property laws, but also in the performance of gender and marital subject positions. At its heart was a growing recognition among men that women could use the very material of masculine adornment to accrue their own material and symbolic capital; that is, that they could transform commodities to be their own and thus maneuver around the strategies of masculine disciplining forces.

Chaucer’s Clerk situates the disparity between his Tale and Envoy precisely in this site of contention. As we remember, Griselda’s marriage is based on her abdication of her right to choose: her choice is not to choose, her response is not to respond, and this lack of choice manifests itself in her vacillating sartorial richesse and rudenesse. In direct contrast to this, the Clerk positions the arch wives as rulers in the act of decision making: praising, albeit ironically, the women’s “heigh prudence,” and offering to “con-saille” the women’s “governaille” (CT 4.1183, 1200, 1192). Underlying these general themes of marital and political control are further examples of a concerted focus on economic control over commodities and consumption. For example, when the Clerk tells the noble wyves that in order to take on themselves the “governaille,” they must “evere answereth at the countretaille” (CT 4.1192, 1190), he alludes to wives’ general garrulousness, but also to their consumer profligacy. Literally the other half of a tally kept by the creditor and presented for payment, a countertally was often used as a pun that linked material and sexual debt, as in the Shipman’s Tale, in which
a wife explains how she will pay her merchant husband for the debt she accrued with her new clothing (“I am youre wyf’” she says, “score it upon my taille” [CT 7.416]). This pun also invokes a popular trope that portrays women as serpents or scorpions who flatter with their heads so that they can sting with their sexual and sartorial “tail,” a conceit that Chaucer elsewhere explicitly associates with the dangers of the “monstre” Fortune and her false goods.  

This association of a wife’s defiant reply to her husband with monstrous consumer resistance was part of the larger moral discourse in which fashionable women were identified as an army whose newfangled garments became their armor against their husbands. The Clerk taps into this discourse with his reference to archewyves who “stondeth at defense,” as “strong as is a greet camaille” (CT 4.1195–96). Here he appears to be using a pun on the word “camaille” as both the desert beast and a piece of knightly armor called a camel, thus implying that not only were these wives unnaturally strong in particularly alien ways, but that they were literally armored in response to the “housbonde armed . . . in maille” with which the word rhymes in the next stanza (CT 4.1202). These armored wives, moreover, use their “arwes of . . . crabbed eloquence” to pierce a husband’s “brest and eek his aventaille” (CT 4.1203, 1204). While the rhetoric of armored women or amazons that persisted as a popular image of female rebelliousness in late-medieval sermons and literature was in part informed by the ancient literary fascination with amazons, in the fourteenth century there were also new material considerations to bolster the association. As I discuss in my introduction, among the striking changes in attire in fourteenth-century Europe was a widespread shift toward a more militaristic appearance in both male and female dress, which not only imitated the cut-to-fit tailoring of knightly doublets or pourpoints, but also took on a distinctly armored aesthetic, with the surface of clothing, in Newton’s words, being “punctuated by decorative accents produced by pointed daggers, the sharp metal points of laces and conspicuous buckles.”

In addition to fictional women such as the Wife of Bath, who famously wears a hat “[a]s brood as is a bokeler or a targe” and “spores sharpe” on her feet (CT 1.471, 473), in the fourteenth century there were well-known stories about contemporary women publicly donning male attire or knightly armor. Henry Knighton’s Chronicon, for example, describes the growing problem of large groups of women attending tournaments dressed in masculine attire, with daggers slung low on their hips. Such stories have led at least one historian to surmise that discourses about women’s rebelliousness in attire might be indicative of a greater and recognized “feminist movement” in this period.
GRISELDA AS SUMPTUARY MODEL

The questions of materialism that develop in the *Clerk's Tale* and *Envoy*, and especially the sartorial particulars of these questions, leave us looking on some level for material interpreters. Chaucer offers two immediate examples in the Host and the Merchant, both of whom relate the tale, against the apparent directive of the Clerk, to their own wives. Looking beyond the pilgrim audience, however, one can see that while Chaucer’s Clerk addresses his own sumptuary reading of Griselda to contemporary “archewyves,” it is another avid clerkly reader who responds. Several decades after Chaucer’s death, John Lydgate invokes Griselda in two poems that explicitly address contemporary modes of consumption. One of a series of London poems that Lydgate wrote for Henry VI’s court and other powerful laypeople in the late 1420s and early 1430s, his poem *Bycorne and Chychevache*, commissioned, according to John Shirley’s rubrics, by a “werþy citeseyn of London” to be displayed on a painted or “desteyned” cloth and placed in a hall, chamber, or parlor, draws a clear connection between his text and that of the *Clerk’s Tale*, mentioning Griselda twice in his brief (133-line) ballad and seeming consciously to echo the Clerk’s language in several places. Most strikingly, the poem’s Clerk-like warning to women that Chichevache will “[y]ou . . . swalowe in hir entrayle” (77) was accompanied by a visual reminder of a woman stuck in the beast’s maw; as Shirley writes in his rubrics to Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.20, “þen shal þer be a woman deuowred ypurtrayhed in þe mouþe of Chichevache cryen to alle wyves.”

If Lydgate’s use of Chaucer’s Griselda in this poem roots itself in this absurdly literal form of consumption, repeatedly reminding the reader that Griselda was Chichevache’s one and only meal, its larger intention seems to be to meditate on the potential of such frivolous fables of beastly hunger to reveal a deeper cultural significance about appetite. Lydgate grounds his poem in an apparently ironic but persistent parallel between the beast fable as a commentary on worldly, material appetite and as a commentary on spiritual bounty. In a self-consciously sententious tone, his introductory stanza (with “an ymage in poete-wyse” accompanying it) not only asks his listeners to remember the story in their daily lives but also connects it to the larger cycle of life and death of which the quotidian is but a small part:

> O prudent folkes, takeþe heed  
> And remembreþe, in youre lyves,  
> Howe þis story doþe proceed  
> Of þe housbandes and þeyre wyves,
With a clever use of enjambment between lines 5 and 6, Lydgate seems to play with the idea that this is not merely a light, humorous poem about husbands and wives and their alternate harmony or discord with each other; it is also a poem about their “acorde” and “stryves”—their reconciliation and conflict—with mortality, with “lyf or deede.” The vague use of a demonstrative to introduce the two animals—“thee beestis tweyn”—in the final line further emphasizes the possibility that the “beasts” in this poem, not clearly identified as Bicorn and Chichevache until the following stanza, could easily refer to the husbands and wives themselves. Perhaps these creatures, then, like the “beste” and “vache” of Chaucer’s “Truth,” are merely metaphors for the mortal condition, the attachment to temporal goods in the face of the One Good.

Such “striving” with the daily vacillations of one’s immediate material circumstances as well as the more critical life cycles they invoke might be said to realize the conceptual playing ground of Chaucer’s Griselda. For arguably no medieval character exists whose costume changes—an inherently frivolous transformation, on the surface—became so legendary and illuminated in such a skillful, serious, and penetrating way the sinister ramifications of Fortune’s fluctuating wheel. Lydgate inherited the association between Griselda and Chichevache from Chaucer, and his poem carries a similar interest not only in exploring the boundaries of material appetite and transformation but also in exploring the Clerk’s particular problem of how one should speak about material desires without encouraging material indulgence. Lydgate makes clear his attempt to read decidedly secular material through a spiritual lens in the second stanza of his Bycorne and Chychevache, in which he tells his listeners:

Of Chichevache and of Bycorne
Tretē ē hooly ē pis matere,
Whos story ē hāpē taught vs here to-forne
Howe ē tēs beestis, bōpe in fere,
Haue ēeyre pasture, as yee shal here,
Of men and wymmen, in se[n]tence,
Thorough souffraunce or thorughge inpacience.
(8–14)
To speak of “hooly . . . matere” that has “taught vs”; of the corresponding “beestis” in their “pasture” (a term repeated four times in the poem); of men and women learning “in se[n]tence” and “[t]horugh souffraunce,” is undoubtedly, in Lydgate’s world as monk of Bury, to speak of the Christian experience. Lydgate uses the term “pasture” elsewhere, for example, to refer to Christ’s flocks as well as the spiritual sustenance he provides with the Eucharist. More directly, the biblical text of Ezekiel relies on the metaphor of God’s flock and pasture to explain his renewed relationship with his scattered followers after the “shepherds of Israel,” the princes and secular leaders, “fed themselves” instead of his sheep; he states, “As the shepherd visiteth his flock in the day . . . I will feed them in the most fruitful pastures . . . and I will feed them in judgment” (34:12–16). A few verses later God explicitly speaks of his herd of followers in terms of their relative strength or weakness, girth or leaness: “I myself will judge between the fat cattle and the lean” (34:20).

The biblical references certainly exist, therefore, to introduce a possible religious subtext for Lydgate’s beasts. But this is far from spiritual allegory; Lydgate’s instruction that his listeners should “[t]reteþe” the fable of Chichevache and Bicorn, with its contrary spouses, singing cows, and mock-moral warnings, as this kind of “hooly . . . matere,” is another subject altogether. While this type of inversion is certainly the domain of satire—the poem is still at its heart a beast fable that ridicules human failure—Lydgate’s preponderance of spiritual references at the head of the tale also seems to pose larger questions. What is “holy matter” after all, if not a didactic work on how to avoid a (or the) “Beast” bent on one’s destruction? If not an ostensibly “good” person literally or figuratively “consumed” by a monstrous appetite? The holy matter that needs interpreting here, in other words, is matter itself and how a good Christian (a patient Griselda) negotiates the innate human appetite that comes with a material body.

Much more than his precursor’s, Lydgate’s discussion of the beasts throughout the rest of his poem consists almost entirely of references to their quests for human fodder and their corresponding bodily appearance. Scarcely a single stanza (out of nineteen) fails to mention the food or the feeding of the beasts, or fails to contain words such as “foode,” “pasture,” “ete,” “vitayle,” “deuoure,” “swalowe,” or “feding.” In the few places where the poet puts aside the overtly alimentary to discuss bad women and their oppressed men more generally, his language and imagery still reflect what Freud would call ‘oral fixation’ in both its receptive and aggressive modes (clapping tongues; words and their relative forbearing or gainsaying, a woman who sings her ballad of warning while literally “in þe mouþe” of
Chichevache). The governing metaphor throughout is the trope of dearth and excess, famine and feast, and “lak or plente”:

For þis Bicorne of his nature
Wil noon oþer maner foode
But pacient men in his pasture;
And Chichevache eteþe wymmen goode;
And boþe þeos beestes, by þe roode,
Be fatte or leene, hit may not fayle,
Lyke lak or plente of þeyre vitayle.
(15–21)

“Lack” and “plenty” might be unstated moral keywords in Chaucer’s Griselda, but they were unambiguous moral keywords in the Middle Ages for a variety of social and cultural excesses, a subject that Lydgate, as a tireless champion of measure in all things (the poems “A Song of Just Mesure” and “Mesure is Tresour” are a mere sampling), touches upon often. The basic truth of Bycorne and Chychevache is that each beast lacks the necessary moderation; not only does each have an extremely restrictive diet for no apparent reason, but also one beast excessively fasts while the other excessively binges—practices, incidentally, expressly warned against in Lydgate’s well-known Dietary. This excess makes them both repulsive and attractive, both beastly and provocative—perfect fodder (so to speak) for the practiced “mesure” of Lydgate’s poetry.

Lydgate’s poem on the consuming beasts is the first extant poem to introduce Chichevache’s mate, Bicorn, or “two horns,” who shares a name with a distinctive piece of women’s fashions from Lydgate’s time: the horned head-dress, also known as “bicorne.” Lydgate condemns these headdresses in “Dyte of Womenhis Hornys,” a poem that he addresses to “[n]oble pryncessis” (41), and in which he uses very familiar language to implore women to “cast away” their unnatural attire:

Clerkys recorde, by gret auctoryte,
Hornes wer yove to bestys ffor dyffence—
A thyng contrarie to ffemynyte,
To be maad sturyd of resystence.
But arche wives, egre in ther vyolence,
Fers as tygre ffor to make affray,
They haue despit, and ageyne concyence,
Lyst nat of pryde, ther hornes cast away.
(33–40)
As this passage suggests, in this poem Lydgate effectively adopts the vocabulary of the Clerk’s Envoy and the Wife of Bath’s Prologue to explore the issue of women’s sartorial extravagance. In addition to hailing clerkly “auctoryte,” for example, Lydgate identifies “experyence” as the thing that proves beauty’s prevailing value in the face of elaborate fashions (7–8), and describes nature as having “souereynyte” over crafted appearance (2–3). As in the Clerk’s Envoy, Lydgate’s target appears to be the general population of “arche wives” that the Wife of Bath exemplifies; while Chaucer’s Clerk states “Ye archewyves, stondeth at defense, / . . . egre as is a tygre yond in Ynde” (CT 4.1195, 1199), Lydgate likewise declares them to be “arche wives, egre in ther vyolence, / Fers as tygre ffor to make affray.”

In addition to the overt linguistic borrowings from the Envoy, Lydgate invokes Griselda as the sartorial counterexample in various subtle ways. While Griselda remains “ay oon in herte and in visage” (CT 4.711) throughout all of Walter’s attempts to “assaye” her constancy (CT 4, esp. 449–62), Lydgate decries the “counterfet” (22) aspects of contemporary women’s attire, focusing on the “foreyn apparene” (2) of elaborate fashions and the accompanying implications of duplicity in the wearer. For example, like the attractive but impure gold alloy of the Clerk’s contemporary women (CT 4.1167–69), Lydgate declares that in the world of fashion “[t]hyng counterfeet wol fayllen at assay” (14). More specifically like the Clerk, Lydgate uses the metaphor of amalgamated gold to describe women’s deceptive appearance, stating that “[t]rewe metall requeryth noon allay” (6). Generally speaking, Lydgate addresses the pretences of high fashion directly, pushing his sartorial metaphors further than Chaucer’s Clerk, such as when he contrasts “pure” gold with the golden cloth that women wear: “Tween gold and gossomer is greet dyfference” (5). In these ways Lydgate formulates a sartorial dialectic from the vocabulary of the Clerk’s Tale and Envoy, and specifically from the contrasting attributes of the ostentatious Wife of Bath and naked Griselda: on the one hand are the “arche wives,” whose “counterfeet” fashions ally them with “Craftt” (2), “richesse” (22), “dyffence,” “vyolence,” “resystence,” and “thyng contrarie to ffemynyte,” and on the other are the “wyves trewe” (29), whose “natural” kerchiefs characterize their associations with “Nature” (20), God-given “beute” (24), “prudence” (26), “humylite” (49), “chast innocence” (28), and of course, “pacyence” (47). In the end, Lydgate summons this final and most famous attribute of Griselda to entreat women to strip themselves of their finery: “Vnder support of your pacyence,” he pleads, “[y] eveth example hornes to cast away” (47–48).

In addressing women’s horned headdresses, this poem tackles one of the most common and most dramatic examples of late-medieval women’s fashion rebellion, and one that certainly would have informed the sartorial sub-
text of the Clerk’s Envoy as well as that of Lydgate’s poems. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sermons and poems cite women’s horned headdresses as the epitome of fashion’s unnaturalness, violent disobedience, and ornamental extremes. The homiletic tradition associates a woman wearing a horned headdress with the violent ox of Exodus 21:28–29, who kills innocent people when its master fails to restrain it, and contemporary poems picked up on the same theme. According to the sermonizer John Bromyard (d. 1352), the way to counter this rebellion is to strip the women bald of their headdresses and other adornments in an Isaiah-like (and Walter-like) purging of prideful adornment. The biblical passage to which Bromyard refers was a favorite of moralists in this period, and it revels in the endless possibilities of stripping away women’s finery:

And the Lord said: Because the daughters of Sion are haughty, and have walked with stretched out necks, and wanton glances of their eyes, and made a noise as they walked with their feet and moved in a set pace. / The Lord will make bald the crown of the head of the daughters of Sion, and will discover their hair. / In that day the Lord will take away the ornaments of shoes, and little moons, / And chains and necklaces, and bracelets, and bonnets, / And bodkins, and ornaments of the legs, and tablets, and sweet balls, and earrings, / And rings, and jewels hanging on the forehead, / And changes of apparel, and short cloaks, and fine linen, and crisping pins, / And looking glasses, and lawns, and headbands, and fine veils. (Isaiah 3:16–24)

The allure of this biblical passage rests in the way it paradoxically animates the very ornaments it targets for removal, excessively listing and categorizing in the poetic realm the objects that are forbidden in the material one. In this way the passage enacts one of the inherent problems for medieval moralists writing about fashion and ornamentation, a problem, as I have discussed, with which Chaucer’s Clerk seems intimately concerned. On the surface the Clerk’s own antiamaterialism is steeped in this particular moral discourse about material goods, which, like the satirical poem “Song Upon the Tailors” in my previous chapter, targets the disparity between the spiritual abjection such goods expose and the cultural capital they bestow. As I have argued, however, even as the Clerk dismisses the frivolity of materialistic, bourgeois consumers in his dress and in his rhetoric, his extreme asceticism suggests an apprehension about and a fascination with their worldly, material aesthetics: his sartorial dialectic between richesse and rudenesse, his link between Griselda’s sartorial transformations and the worldly, changing “peple” around her,
and his final address to the consuming *archeryves* of the world, all suggest a suppressed interest in the matter of changing fashions and in the people who wear them. Lydgate’s subsequent incorporation of the Clerk’s *Tale* and *Envoy* into the fashion debates in his own culture indicates the widespread effectiveness of Chaucer’s sumptuary discourses, but it also attests to the moralized and popularized appeal among late-medieval English poets for women to ‘cast away’ their finery, and to the corresponding attractiveness of the figure of Griselda as a contemporary model for that appeal.